

Beyond "Scoping"

Citizens and San Juan National Forest Managers, Learning Together



exchanges on resource management issues. Topical working groups followed up with more detailed examinations to help ensure that the plan would reflect commitment to public land stewardship.

By Tim Richard and Sam Burns

Public participation in forest planning is receiving increased attention as many national forests prepare to revise their land and resource management plans. This upcoming round of revisions comes after a century of congressional mandates, but many have argued that laws don't meet the public's demands, citing the decisions that are so often settled in courts (Selin et al. 1997). Appeals of timber harvest decisions, polarized public debates over grazing on forests, and county supremacy movements indicate that current decisionmaking models are stalled by costly and uncompromising legal sparring. How can the national forests give citizens fuller access to the revision process, both to bypass the courtroom and to improve the resulting plan?

A period of transition in manage-

ment philosophies, policies, and practices seems to be emerging (Daniels and Walker 1996). Researchers are documenting efforts to address problems in management and decision-making. Yaffee et al. (1996) list 615 projects nationwide that involve communities, organizations, and agencies applying ecosystem management principles to environmental crises. Many seek to pull collaborative resolutions out of controversies long mired in antagonism and distrust (Yaffee and Wondolleck 1997).

In one study of 25 community action teams that have received rural community assistance funding, University of Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station researchers are examining relationships between communities and national forests. They hope to identify opportunities to strengthen the potential for long-term planning relationships (National Research Institute-USDA funded grant). Some efforts emphasize formal, technical, or advisory relationships and try to avoid "posturing, polarization, and differences" (Frentz et al. 1997), but others are more informal. One effort, the subject of this feature,

Phyllis Snyder, a rancher who holds a grazing permit, explains her perspective to San Juan National Forest archaeologist Bruce Ellis. Informal, onsite talks enabled participants in the study group process to understand how others use and value the forest. The information collected will help shape the forest plan revision.

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suggests an alternative model to polarization over forest use and management decisionmaking.

The Study Group Alternative

The San Juan National Forest initiative, a community study group process, lasted from April 1996 through May 1997 in southwest Colorado. Three groups were formed on principles of collaboration and partnership between rural residents and the Forest Service. A major goal was to offer alternatives that would address a broad range of ecological, economic, social, and cultural concerns. Participants identified issues, shared visions and values, learned Forest Service management practices, and expressed their perspectives on resource management issues. The intent was for everyone involved to have a greater understanding of issues, to learn something about working collaboratively, and to come closer to solving common problems.

The study group approach complements the more formal scoping period the Forest Service traditionally uses to register public opinion. "It expands to include people not normally involved, creating new opportunities and initiatives for local participation," explains Jim Powers, San Juan National Forest planner.

In scoping, the agency invites the public to comment on a range of potential alternatives. The agency then gathers the information, adds it to the biophysical assessment of the national forest's resources, and includes it in the draft environmental impact statement, where preferred alternatives are first published. The agency then invites public review of the draft.

Scoping is primarily a way to merely exchange information. The study group process, on the other hand, builds relationships and diversifies public information to include local individuals' knowledge of the land-

scape as well as their personal and cultural experiences. The study groups, moreover, began 18 months before the intent to revise the plan was to appear in the Federal Register.

The study groups served as a bridge between scientific research and the study of community needs and fostered relationships and common understanding within an educational framework (OCS 1995). The process emphasized regular informal conversations so that participants could become acquainted with one another and various issues. In a collaborative learning interaction, participants worked out problems posed by facilitators and USDA Forest Service and university scientists, with the aim of eliciting views and new ideas for solutions.

The Process

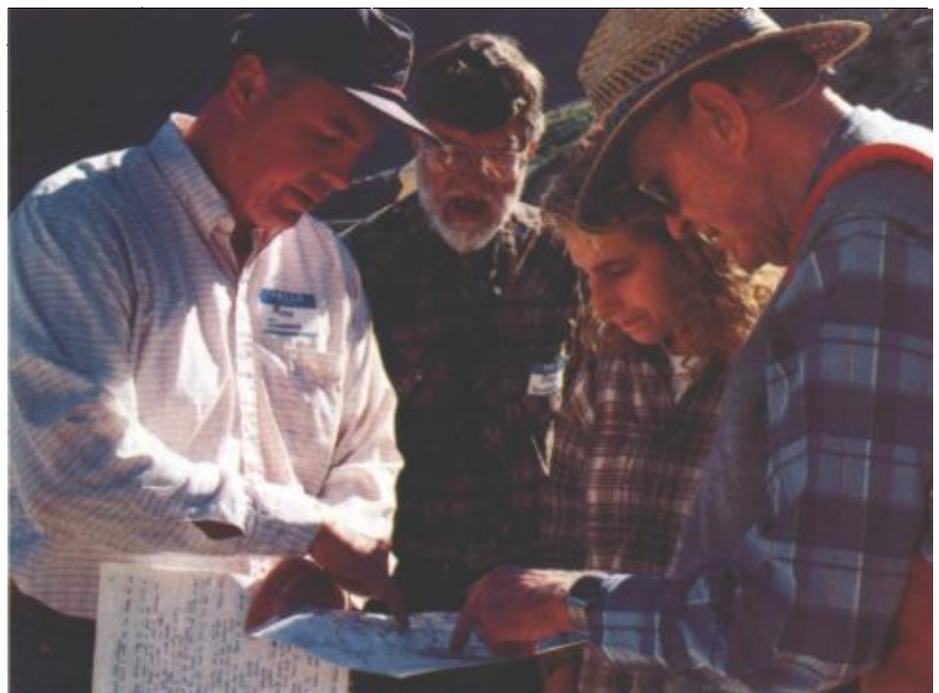
The Office of Community Services (OCS), a community development program at Fort Lewis College in Durango, and the San Juan National Forest entered into a challenge cost-share agreement in 1994 to design the approach for the forest's upcoming plan revision. The Forest Service's Rural Community Assistance program initially funded the agency's share, reflecting agency leaders' strong interest at local, regional, and national levels.

A core team of four OCS staff mem-

bers and the San Juan National Forest planner and plan revision team leader prepared meetings on issues generated by study groups. The team recruited interdisciplinary team specialists to make educational and interactive presentations to the study groups.

The OCS facilitated meetings, documented discussions, and managed communication among the study groups, the agency, and the public. Because the OCS had provided assistance to regional communities for years and was familiar with social, cultural, and economic differences (Preston 1997), it could help bridge the knowledge gap: the Forest Service needed social information, and citizens needed to understand forest science and regulation.

In March 1996, newspaper and radio announcements publicized the upcoming revision and study process and invited citizens to join study groups. To ensure a broad representation of community perspectives and knowledge, the announcements encouraged individuals who wore "more than one hat in the community"; there were no other guidelines or requirements (OCS 1995). Three study groups were formed, one for each ranger district on the San Juan. All meetings and field trips were open to the general public, and many were attended by interested people.



District Ranger Mike Johnson (left) pinpoints a location for Columbine District study group members Breck Glascock, Emily Rubenstein, and Ray Putman. Interdisciplinary collaboration helped the study group members learn about resource management.

Tim Richard

Of 106 initial signups, 56—including retirees, newcomers and long-time residents, recreation and commodity industry workers, writers, business owners, educators, activists, and natural resource managers—participated regularly during the year. Some had already been active in environmental and natural resource issues, but many were new to civic dialogue. Some said they joined to learn about the forest and related issues rather than argue single issues. Some said they became involved to protect their rights. Some were optimistic about this new alternative to traditional scoping and public review (OCS 1997).

All three San Juan district rangers became study group members, providing a visible commitment to shared learning and its anticipated contributions to future management actions. Many other managers and specialists attended discussions as presenters and to answer technical or regulatory questions.

Each group focused on district-specific issues. During initial meetings, each group crafted a vision statement—a sense of desired future conditions. The visions modified existing statements gathered a year earlier by an AmeriCorps member during nearly 100 interviews with residents in five southwest Colorado counties.

To further identify issues, the OCS distributed a one-page informal public survey with four questions designed to gauge respondents' sense of their relationships with forest landscapes, the Forest Service, their communities, and issues. The survey provided information not only to the Forest Service, but also to communities and community organizations outside the study group process. Some information, for example, is enabling community leaders to assess trends in the region's economic, social, and environmental health.

More than 1,000 copies of the survey went out; about 100 were returned. From the responses came a list of issues, concerns, and suggestions. Study group members reviewed it and added and defined issues. They chose eight major forest-management topics to evaluate in monthly meetings: timber, prescribed fire, old-growth, recreation manage-

ment, travel management, wildlife, range, and aquatic resources.

Seven summer field trips served as crash courses on Forest Service management practices. They were the first opportunity to begin merging community perspectives with forest science. Participants were exposed to issues they wouldn't get sitting at a table and talking.

During fall and winter of 1996–97, Forest Service specialists gave more presentations on each issue, followed by small-group exercises and discussion of questions posed by staff and facilitators. Here the groups fell to the task of fine-tuning the issues and suggesting solutions. Forest maps spread out on tables allowed participants to circle important areas, draw corridor lines, and record community and ecological values. Long-time residents drew on their familiarity with landscapes. Newcomers shared their own experiences.

Recorders chronicled the range of perspectives, later transcribing them into a computer database with as much detail as possible to avoid misrepresenting participants' statements and to provide accurate documentation. Several lists of recommendations, meeting notes, newsletters, and a summary report register the range of values, ideas, suggestions, and recommendations that emerged.

The study process continues for a second year as topical working groups more closely examine specific issues raised by the study groups. Whereas the study groups considered a full range of issues specific to their districts, the working groups discuss single issues on a forestwide scale. This shift in focus has created an opportunity for new members to join the process begun by the study groups. Six working groups comprising 70 individuals are studying wildlife, timber and fire, travel and recreation, special management areas, special water concerns, and range and riparian areas.

The next step is for the San Juan National Forest to invite all former and current participants to review materials generated so far and discuss how the study process can continue.

The Characteristics of Success

Five interdependent principles guided the community study group process.

Leadership. It takes a combination of willing personalities, ability, and skill and tolerance of individuals and leaders in the agency and the community to find and link resources to affect change (Cortner and Shannon 1993). For example, San Juan National Forest planners and Rural Community Assistance program staff used the plan revision cycle to create a new avenue for public participation by leading the initiative within their agency and giving it credibility and momentum.

Revision team leader Thurman Wilson said, "We don't want to put a lot of work into revising the plan based just on what the Forest Service thinks needs changing, and then have the public tell us we focused on the wrong issues. We would rather have that conversation up front" (Richard 1996).

Dolores District Ranger Mike Znerold has described leadership in a collaborative effort as "sharing power"; in this environment the Forest Service and the community share responsibility for community and ecosystem stewardship and sustainability.

Planner Jim Powers says "the need for a process change" led him to tap into local experience in developing partnerships and sharing resources to integrate community needs with those of the forest and the agency. Two factors led to success, he explains. First, the collaboration, particularly between the San Juan and Montezuma County, arose from needs that all parties recognized—the forest needed an economic development action plan, and the county needed an overall economic development plan—and both needs were eventually met through the partnership. Second, Montezuma County approached the Forest Service in a positive way to discover what they could agree to do together.

Relationship building. A history of positive agency-public collaboration in southwest Colorado is commonly credited with making the study group process possible. The development plans were just the beginning. In 1992 the commissioners of Mon-

tezuma County, which is about two-thirds public land, proposed to the OCS a program to address federal land issues. (Note that this was at a time when ecosystem management was becoming Forest Service policy and the West rang with news of county supremacy movements.) The Montezuma County Federal Lands Program was formed, and a pilot project, the Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership, produced results on which Forest Service leaders and community members could base their support for the study group initiative (Larmer 1996; Preston 1997).

The Weminuche Wilderness Study Group further tested the concept of collaboration between the Forest Service and the public. That group of about 20 regular members met for two years (1993–95) to help provide a range of use and overuse indicators for a wilderness amendment to the San Juan's current plan.

These examples bred trust and confidence among Forest Service resource managers. Although their authority and expertise might have been challenged by the study groups (Johnson 1997), many believed the long-term benefits would be worth the time and commitment required. They wanted to better understand how forest planning, rural community development, and ecosystem management could overlap.

Common values. During field trips and group discussions, participants talked about future desired conditions and possible management solutions. Their basic values—expressed in such terms as beauty, solitude, accessibility, freedom from regulation, calving areas, scenic corridors, public education, and so on—informed their recommendations. As participants willingly articulated their values and interests and heard others voice theirs, common ground emerged. Governing the discussions was a tacit understanding that you had to respect others' values if you wanted yours respected, too. Participants saw the ecological and social picture from different perspectives and gradually built a common experience and could therefore share responsibility for solutions.

Shared knowledge. Through the

study process, science and values can inform each other to build a common base of knowledge and a framework for a continuing partnership. Knowledge gained through a shared learning experience can help to resolve the problem of arriving at different conclusions from the same data, based solely on one's values and interpretations. For the study groups, informal dialogue was guided by an analysis process, not hard-and-fast positions. For the agency's interdisciplinary team, collaboration revealed new insights and partners for future stewardship initiatives.

As study group members learned about resource management, they contributed their own experiences. For example, a construction worker estimated fence-building costs, enabling the group to proceed without stopping for research. Two California natives, on hearing how a logger and a grazing permittee used the forest, offered their own experience from their home state, which has faced challenges relatively new to southwest Colorado. A wilderness enthusiast had special interest in timber issues because he was building a cabin with local logs and had become involved in a startup horse-logging cooperative.

Constructive action. Constructive action results from the other principles. Both the study groups and the working groups are actions resulting from building relationships through collaborative learning, sharing values, and the committed leadership of community members and agency personnel. But they make more action possible as the plan revision process is completed and community members can participate in implementation and monitoring.

Conclusions

The southwest Colorado effort demonstrates that a community study group approach holds promise for increasing collaborative ecosystem stewardship and offers lessons as well:

- By learning together, Forest Service and community members can build higher levels of trust and solve problems more efficiently.

- Agency employees and managers must engage the public by translating planning language and procedures into productive civic discourse.

- The community study group approach to forest planning cost about \$611,000 of local and state funds USDA Forest Service dollars and in-kind donations were contributed to the partnership agreement over four years. Many see the process as an investment in long-term community and ecosystem sustainability, rather than a mere record of decision of a forest plan. In addition, the study process can be improved and costs cut. A Ford Foundation-funded research project is now under way to model the study approaches and disseminate the findings.

- Rural Community Assistance funds can supplement normal planning resources to foster social, economic, and cultural knowledge about communities and regions.

- Qualified, neutral facilitators or coordinators are essential.

Can the learning model be extended from the local study process? Regional and national interest groups participate less effectively at a local level, but nevertheless, opportunities for expanding the relationship are coinciding with the study group process. Seminars and conferences in southwest Colorado have been attended by regional and national interests (Vital Links, May 1995; Growing Sustainable Forest Enterprises, October 1995; Open Decisionmaking, September 1996; Stewardship Contracting, spring 1997).

The study group process improves on past public involvement practices, such as open houses, scoping, NEPA review periods, and mail-in responses, by more than complementing them. The vision statements, recommendations lists, newsletters, maps, and summary reports are available as tools to representatives of regional and national interests who can't attend local gatherings.

Last summer, members of Colorado Front Range environmental groups met for a day with San Juan National Forest managers to exchange information and perspectives. A more local group, Citizens' Management Alternative, presented work-to-date on its preferred alternative and discussed with the Forest Service where further work was needed and how resources could be shared to produce a

comprehensive alternative; a few members have joined the working groups.

Study group members have expressed both optimism and skepticism toward the Forest Service's willingness and ability to recognize their perspectives in the revised plan, but many also say the agency and community have each contributed to strengthening relationships. Although it's too soon to see their work reflected in alternatives, both they and Forest Service participants have at least dedicated themselves to sharing responsibility for forest stewardship.

The future role of study groups is being explored. Echoing others in the Forest Service, San Juan planner Powers says an obvious role for study groups will be plan implementation and monitoring. Rather than imposing automatic closures, Dolores District Ranger Znerold and local residents are cooperating to reduce motorized vehicle damage to an archaeological site near a forest road. Residents have volunteered to monitor damage, and indicators have been set up to temporarily close the area during wet weather conditions when necessary to protect the site.

The Appropriations Act rider that has stopped funding of Forest Service planning, including revisions, until new regulations are written also has affected how the San Juan National Forest can support and participate with study groups. It may be years before the forest can resume its plan revision. But gains toward collaborative stewardship have not been lost. New relationships have been established that can help make needed changes in management and perhaps even amendments to the current San Juan National Forest plan. The promise of the study group alternative is already being fulfilled.

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