



Finding Common Ground: Montana Forest Restoration Committee

Sharon Ritter, Research/Management Coordinator and ECO-Report Editor, BEMRP and the Human Dimensions Science Program, RMRS, Stevensville, MT

What in the world made Brian Kahn think he could get consensus among 34 people representing timber, environmental, government, and off-highway vehicle groups—especially when the topic was forest restoration? “Actually,” he said, “I didn’t believe we could get 100% consensus. But we did.”

Brian is the head of Artemis Common Ground in Helena, Montana. He hosts the weekly Yellowstone Public Radio show, “Home Ground: Changes and Choices in the American West,” and is skilled in working with community-based conservation efforts.

In 2006, Dave Bull, Supervisor of the Bitterroot National Forest, hired Brian to assess whether mediation could resolve objections to a controversial fuel reduction and forest restoration project. Brian conducted individual interviews with representatives of the various sides, and concluded that things were too far gone for mediation to work. However, according to

Brian, “I heard through that experience that there **was** common ground. I felt that if you start with an agreement that our public lands are in trouble, if you took restoration as the issue, there was a shot that you could get broad agreement on what it should look like on the ground. That’s why Artemis proposed the initial meeting.”

Brian approached Mary Mitsos of the National Forest Foundation and in August 2006 they convened a small group representing timber industry, conservation groups, national forests, and state forestry. He chose the National Forest Foundation because it was a neutral party that understood the issues, and collaboration is a big part of what the Foundation does.

It takes some groups years to make agreements through collaboration. This group did it in nine months.



Restoration Principle #5. Reestablish fire as a natural process on the landscape. Old growth pine stand after understory burn, Swan Valley, MT. (Photo by Dave Powell, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org)

The group modeled their work after successful collaboration efforts elsewhere, including the Front Range Fuels Treatment Partnership Round Table in Colorado and Tongass Futures Round Table in Alaska. Mary said, “What we wanted to do was develop a vision for western Montana.”

The small group sought wider representation, eventually agreeing on 34 people who, according to Mary, “were knowledgeable, had a long-term involvement with the National Forest System, were considered key players, and

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Restoration Principle #8. Improve terrestrial and aquatic habitat and connectivity. Elk. (Photo by Terry Spivey, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org)

Montana Forest Restoration Principles

- 1) Restore functioning ecosystems by enhancing ecological processes.
- 2) Apply adaptive management approach.
- 3) Use the appropriate scale of integrated analysis to prioritize and design restoration activities.
- 4) Monitor restoration outcomes.
- 5) Reestablish fire as a natural process on the landscape.
- 6) Consider social constraints and seek public support for reintroducing fire on the landscape.
- 7) Engage community and interested parties in the restoration process.
- 8) Improve terrestrial and aquatic habitat and connectivity.
- 9) Emphasize ecosystem goods and services and sustainable land management.
- 10) Integrate restoration with socioeconomic well-being.
- 11) Enhance education and recreation activities to build support for restoration.
- 12) Protect and improve overall watershed health, including stream health, soil quality and function and riparian function.
- 13) Establish and maintain a safe road and trail system that is ecologically sustainable.

had the ability to listen, hear, and learn.” This group became the Montana Forest Restoration Working Group.

The group published the “vision” that Mary spoke of in September 2007 in a report that can be found at www.montanarestoration.org. The group agreed on 13 principles of Montana forest restoration (see Sidebar) and an implementation plan.

Where did these principles come from? “We started by brainstorming what Brian called ‘restoration vision categories,’” said Marnie Criley, representing a group called Wildlands CPR and chair of the Vision and Principles subcommittee of the Montana Forest Restoration Working Group. “We came up with 60 of these and we wanted to be sure to address all of the ones brought up by the group.” The group then referred to other similar lists and used them to refine its list, select language already working for other groups, and be sure all possibilities were covered.

Marnie estimates they spent 44 hours in subcommittee meetings working on the vision and principles, coming back to the full group for approval throughout the process. They started with the easiest ones to give people a chance to have success early on and get to know and trust each other before tackling harder ones. For them, the easiest were adaptive management and monitoring (#2 and #4). “The fire ones, numbers 5 and 6, were hardest,” she said.

It takes some groups years to make agreements through collaboration. This group did it in nine months. The group’s Code of Conduct was important to its success. It included individual commitments such as “help create a respectful and productive working climate” and “value one another’s experiences.” The group also committed to making decisions by consensus, defined as “I can live with it.” If someone couldn’t live with it, she or he had to come up with something that would help the group make progress toward a solution that **would** work. Sometimes, the two strongest opposing voices met separately to work out a solution.

Mary stated that “people put in a heck of a lot of time and effort to get a product that everyone could agree

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Editor/Writer: Sharon Ritter

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on.” Bob Ekey, representing The Wilderness Society, agreed and expressed his appreciation that “a lot of people really rose to the challenge to stretch themselves. Many of them had never really sat down at the table together before.”

Brian said that dealing with hard issues like reintroducing fire requires focusing on areas of agreement, not disagreement: “Think of two overlapping circles, with the overlap representing areas of agreement. The more people **talked** and really **listened**, the more they found that the overlap, the area of agreement, was bigger than they thought.”

“Where the rubber hits the road,” said Mary, “is the implementation, what it looks like on the ground.” The next step will be to apply the collaborative model and principles on some actual projects. They want to replicate the diversity of their group within local working groups, and find projects that will show results fairly quickly.

Julia Altemus, representing the Montana Logging Association, said that getting a project in its early stages will be the key to success. That means “bringing an area that is ‘out of balance’ to the Forest Service as a project, an area that hasn’t already started in the NEPA process.” Julia said that a bundled project is preferable—for example, one that combines fisheries improvements, has some timber harvest, and improves roads and trails.

The group selected the Lolo and Bitterroot National Forests for pilot projects. According to Mary, “The time is right. People are willing to come to the table to find solutions.” Brian, Mary, Julia, and Bob agree that success in these forest-level efforts would be getting good

projects designed and implemented on the ground. That includes finding funding to get the work done. Nonprofits and the Forest Service’s Regional Office are interested in providing some funding, but eventually they would like Congress to step up to the plate to provide serious support on a much broader scale.

Mary feels that success at the local level will come because there is a high level of trust in the representatives that were on the original working group. Thanks to them, she expects a high level of buy-in to the forest restoration principles. The group, now called the Montana Forest Restoration Committee, will oversee these local efforts. They hope to see their hard work pay off, and because they set the example on collaborating and have provided a carefully designed framework, it just might.



Restoration Principle #9. Emphasize ecosystem goods and services and sustainable land management. Stream improvement, Kootenai National Forest. (Photo by Paul Hooper, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org)

Beyond the Bitterroot . . . (from page 3)

BEMRP-funded social science research has focused on understanding how people interact with the Forest Service and how the agency can more effectively communicate with the public. Research that started in the Bitterroot Valley on understanding the meanings people place on public lands has since expanded to the Flathead and Blackfoot Reservations, the Kootenai National Forest, and will appear in a textbook for land managers elsewhere interested in using this methodology. Similarly, BEMRP work to develop a toolkit for off-highway travel planning was circulated nationally by our Washington Office and a paper summarizing findings on the historical, ecological and social implications of dams in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness was presented at an international conservation congress.

Research on invasive weeds and biocontrol impacts on small mammals has documented previously unrecognized side effects of biological control in natural

systems, examined ways to reduce those nontarget effects in biological control programs, and illustrated how to mitigate this problem within knapweed-infested systems in the West. This information is applicable to the practice of biological control worldwide.

Other research showed that spotted knapweed has very significant impacts on native ecosystems by reducing abundance and richness of native plants and invertebrates and by reducing recruitment of native songbirds. Information gained is directly applicable to grasslands and savannahs of the northern Rocky Mountains but has generic ramifications for understanding how invasive weeds impact native systems across North America.

The Bitterroot Ecosystem Management Research Project is more than its name implies. We are proud of the quality of multi-disciplinary research we have produced by focusing research locally but with an eye to widespread applications, by taking advantage of long-term study sites, and by fostering relationships with our partners.