

## Collaborative Learning and the Development of an Off Highway Vehicle Strategy for the Colville National Forest

Collaborative learning is a recent innovation to gain meaningful public participation in planning. This relatively new process is being used in communities where public land management is highly contentious. Collaborative learning is useful as a public participation tool because it incorporates and involves individuals and groups from very different interests and provides a forum for them to interact and learn from each other, from experts in the field, and from the agency, and for the agency to learn from all of the above.

Currently, there are many reasons for conflicting interests in Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) management on the Colville National Forest. There are multiple parties interested in how Off Highway Vehicle travel is managed. Many are interested because they recreate with OHV's and many are interested because they would like to recreate *away* from OHV's. This creates a variety of issues. Many issues are created because of cultural differences, with many recreation users having deeply held values in the way they recreate. Additionally, many recreate in several different ways, crossing boundaries between motorized and non-motorized interest. There are also some strong lines drawn over expert knowledge, either for or against the use of OHV's on public lands. In addition, there are conflicting laws, regulations, and policies that make the management of OHV's even more confusing and contentious.

Given the complexity of the issues surrounding Off Highway Vehicle management, it is evident that "traditional" routes of "informing and educating" the public will not be sufficient to create an enduring Off Highway Vehicle strategy for the Colville. Creating a strategy is the art and science of employing the political and economic forces of the user groups to maximize support for agency policy on managing recreation, specifically Off Highway Vehicles. In addition, there are many aspects of a solid OHV strategy that are best provided by the user groups themselves, both to manage access and access restrictions. The best-case situation is where technical expertise and citizens' traditional knowledge can be integrated to provide an efficient, effective, and publicly supported set of alternatives.

There are several key notions that define collaborative learning which include:

- Redefining the task at hand not as solving a problem or resolving a conflict, but as improving a situation;
- Viewing the situation as a set of interrelated systems;
- Defining improvement as desirable and feasible change;
- Focusing on concerns and interests rather than positions;
- Encouraging interrelated systems thinking rather than linear thinking;
- Recognizing that considerable learning-about science, issues, and value differences-will have to occur before improvements are implemented; and

- Featuring communication and negotiation interaction as the means through which learning and progress occur.

Successful collaborative learning provides quality communication, which includes constructive discussion of ideas, collaborative argument, and interaction. Regardless of the setting or group size, collaborative learning encourages competent communication by implementing interaction guidelines (i.e. “ground rules” that value a diversity of opinions) and by emphasizing various interrelated communication skill areas. These include: listening; questioning and clarification; feedback; modeling; reframing the situation; dialogue; and collaborative argument skills.

With all new public participation efforts there will be a learning curve for participants, agency and citizens alike. All that is being asked of anyone choosing to commit time and energy to this process is to keep an open mind and respect others opinions. In other locations where collaborative learning projects have been done, initial evaluations from both agency and citizen participants have been favorable and constructive. Citizens felt they were listened to and that their knowledge and input were respected. Participants valued the emphases on basic learning, constructive communication, and generation of specific management improvements. Citizens appreciated the opportunity to interact with Forest Service personnel, and the Forest Service appreciated the productive interaction with citizens.

If you have any questions about this process or would like to talk with someone specifically about collaborative learning and what that means, please feel free to contact Debbie Wilkins at the Newport Ranger District at 509-447-7322 or Matt Carroll at Washington State University 509-335-2235 or Nick Sanyal at University of Idaho 208-885-7528.