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Changing Landscapes

Land use planning curriculum for natural resource professionals

P rinciples, people, and policies
L and planning and pressures
A pproaches
N atural resource planning tools

L4: The Power of Collaboration in Community Planning

Involving diverse partners in the planning process results in greater buy-in and outcomes that address greater needs.

Overview

Collaborative planning means integrating ideas, opinions, and objectives to resolve common issues. It is a process of communication, problem solving, and decisionmaking. Involving diverse partners in the planning process results in greater buy-in and outcomes that address greater needs. This factsheet provides an overview of concepts and methods that resource professionals can use to ensure they are engaged early in the planning process, have a better understanding of the scales of planning, use science to build support, overcome barriers, and are aware of the skills necessary to collaborate effectively.

What is Collaboration?

Collaboration is what occurs when a group of people come together to deal with common problems, work through conflicts, and develop strategies and solutions to accomplish mutual goals and objectives. It is a process that works best when it is based on a specific place, cooperative in nature, includes multiple parties, and is grounded in highly relevant information. Successful collaboration must cross boundaries defined by geography, jurisdictions, organizational interests, and perceptions.

Collaboration involves building relationships among individuals and groups, agencies, and organizations. The roots of collaboration are based in the planning concept of neighborhoods and communities. Whether the process is one of private-public partnerships, alternative dispute resolution, collaborative stewardship, civic environmentalism, or sustainable development, collaboration creates opportunities for meaningful involvement. Resource management is improved because of the insight that can be gained by the diversity of relationships formed during collaboration.

Collaboration can provide the type of social interaction that often deepens learning while providing the support and synergy necessary to creatively solve complex problems. The presence of the government as a partner can provide resources, incentives, and opportunities that are important to the collective effort.

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How Collaboration Works

Building Support

Solutions to community-scale problems require a truly collaborative process. This process begins by building understanding through sharing information and engaging the public. Gathering input from participants is just as important as sharing scientific information. By providing information to political leaders and building relationships with key decisionmakers and stakeholders, the collaborative process builds public and political support, which is critical if the plan is to be successfully carried out.

Collaboration begins by sharing information and engaging the public.

Useful Tool

Collaboration is not the goal of successful planning but rather a useful tool in the process. It builds understanding by fostering the exchange of information and ideas, and provides mechanisms for effective decisionmaking. Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) describe eight keys they believe lead to successful collaborative efforts:

- Builds on common ground
- Creates new opportunities for interaction
- Employs meaningful, effective, and collaborative processes
- Focuses on problems in a new way
- Fosters a sense of responsibility, ownership, and commitment
- Recognizes that partnerships are made up of people, not institutions
- Moves forward through proactive and entrepreneurial behavior
- Mobilizes support and resources

The Challenge of Collaboration

Working Together

Collaboration requires individuals and groups to work, interact in human relationships, and spend limited energy and resources on activities that may not produce benefits. Dealing with human behavior is a fundamental challenge, so it is important to develop good people skills and to understand that it is okay to agree to disagree.

Collaboration requires people to interact with others and develop good people skills. (Photo: Eileen Hornbaker, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Barriers

Understanding the barriers to collaboration can help minimize problems. Barriers tend to fall into one of two categories: institutions and structures, or attitudes and perceptions.

- Institutional and structural barriers include legislative and judicial decisionmaking that can be competitive and adversarial. The fragmentation of power, authority, and interests, especially within government, can make collaboration particularly difficult. This may be compounded by conflicting goals, inflexible policies and procedures, and constrained resources.
- Attitudes and perceptions can create barriers when people are mistrustful, apply stereotypes to others, are afraid of commitment, and lack support. The public often has a general lack of trust in government that keeps

many people from participating. The use of stereotypes that leads to a lack of trust can prevent participation due to misconceptions about the purpose and goals of particular planning efforts or participants. Resource professionals are most impacted by fear of commitment and lack of support. Staffs within most agencies are strapped for time, and resources are stretched to their limits. As budgets are cut, so too is staff involvement in activities that may not be viewed as being directly tied to resource management.

The best way to overcome the challenges and barriers associated with collaboration is to use processes that build trust, understanding, and relationships between disparate groups day to day as well as issue by issue. It is also beneficial to establish expectations and commitments up front. More information on breaking down barriers will be provided in the next section on Approaches to Collaboration.

Overcoming Barriers

"Just as the forest grows from one seed at a time, successful programs grow one recruit at a time. Each new recruit must be made to feel special, wanted, and important."

—Minority Outreach Guide, Western State Foresters

Approaches to Collaboration

Place-based Collaboration

Most people strongly identify with a geographical place, a community, or a neighborhood. This connection can be used to initiate discussions about problems, concerns, or important issues. By creating a sense of place, resource professionals can more readily establish the common ground necessary to begin the collaborative process. Another way to capture the public's attention is to provide a local focus that people can identify with and feel good about. Watershed groups have been successful in enhancing a sense of place by taking field trips or sponsoring community events such as water festivals and river cleanups.

Establishing common ground can also be achieved by finding a shared sense of purpose such as shared problems, fears, goals, or interests. Another method is to bring compatible interests together. When working with a diverse population that does not readily share common interests or issues, negotiation may be the most effective method of crafting solutions.

Creating a Sense of Place

The Project for Public Spaces is helping communities create a sense of place through "placemaking," a multifaceted approach to planning, designing, and managing public spaces.

Resource professionals can establish a sense of place by sponsoring community events such as habitat restoration efforts.
(Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The Process

It is important to understand that collaboration isn't just about the people involved; it is also about the process. Managing the process efficiently includes effective and efficient organizational structures. Make sure the process has sufficient time to allow participants to make decisions. Trying to rush the process is more likely to result in frustration and failure both in the short and long term and make participants reluctant to participate in future planning efforts. At the same time, the process must be sensitive to demands placed upon people's time.

Creating Neighbors

While many collaborative processes are initiated by adversarial situations, it is important to understand the need to transform people from enemies into neighbors, thus taking the process from a perspective of "us against them" to one of "us against the problem." Unified visions and goals provide guidance and focus and help facilitate the problem-solving process. Helping to develop these goals and interests is often one of the first steps in a collaborative process. Individual interests that are always part of any process are generally interconnected. Thus, in order for individuals to achieve their own goals and interest, they must work together to achieve a unified vision and goals.

Commitment

Ownership of the problem and commitment to the process are necessary for all successful collaborative partnerships. By establishing a direct and personal connection between individuals and the problem, people will pay attention and will be compelled to find resolution. Commitment is also key to a successful process. Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) found that "commitment stood out as the single most significant difference between successful and unsuccessful negotiations." Agencies can show commitment by having consistent staffing throughout the process.

Getting Started

Many tools can be used to enhance participation and collaboration. To effectively collaborate, it is important to find the right media, craft the right message that will resonate with the intended audience, and persuade people in the media to send the message out. Many communities and agencies have media specialists who can help with this process by helping to define the message and identifying the best media source for getting the message out to the public. Avenues for distributing information and initiating collaboration include traditional media (print, radio, electronic); social media (Facebook, Twitter); electronic networks; public meetings; workshops; special events; surveys, brochures, and interviews; advisory committees; focus groups; and special interest groups.

Natural resource professionals can hold workshops and special events to initiate collaboration.
(Photo: Steve Hillebrand, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

In this ever increasing age of electronic communication, social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are just a few examples of how people are using these sites to get the word out, initiate action, and document change. Developing a project Web site is another effective way to get the word out and keep people advised on the progress being made.

Successful collaboration also involves effective facilitation of the process. Facilitators are people who accept responsibility for helping the group achieve a common task. They are responsible to the group, not to the individuals, and their primary role is to help establish and maintain forward movement.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Developed by Everett Rogers, this theory describes the process by which an individual accepts or adopts an idea or product. The theory and associated model provide an initial way to identify target groups for communication purposes. For more information, see Rogers (2003).

Tips for Getting Started

- Research the community where the project or activity is planned.
- Engage a strong and involved local partner.
- Make personal contacts to get people to participate.
- Listen without being defensive.
- Follow up and meet citizen's needs. Follow through with tangible results.
- Keep good records from meetings and/or events, and be sure to keep track of new contacts.

Case Study — Chicago Wilderness Project

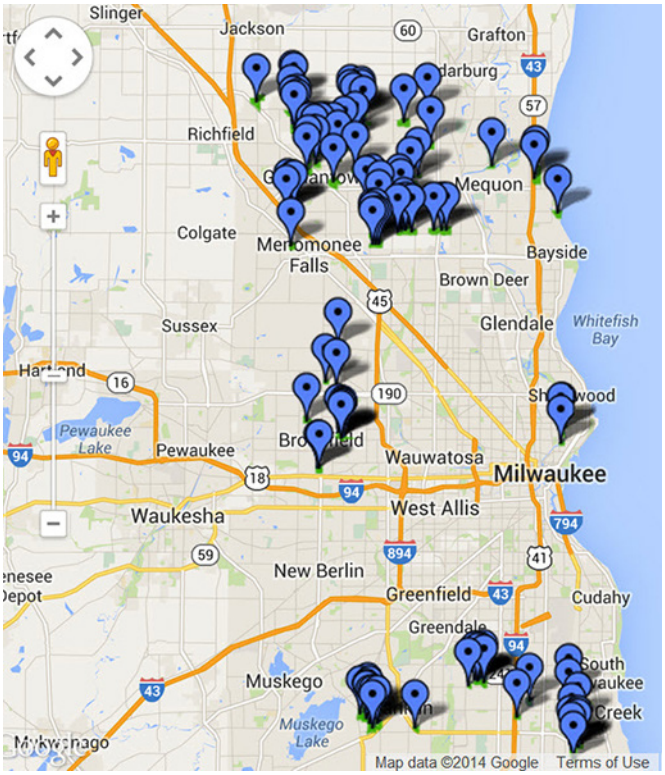
The Chicago Wilderness project is an excellent example of cooperation among Federal agencies to engage regional, State, county, and local jurisdictions and planning authorities and facilitate public-private partnerships with not-for-profit and for-profit organizations to conserve open space and involve urban residents in Forest Service programs. The Chicago Wilderness consortium consists of over 190 public and private organizations. The nature reserve is a system of forest and grassland preserves, State parks, Federal lands, county preserves, and private conservation lands that covers more than 225,000 acres in the greater Chicago region.

Chicago Wilderness: http://www.chicagowilderness.org

Case Study — Milwaukee's Greenseams® Program

The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) provides wastewater and flood reduction services to 1.1 million customers in 28 communities. For more than a decade, the region has invested in a massive labyrinth of deep tunnels to hold overflowing sewer water during storms so that homes stay dry and water quality remains high. The Greenseams® Program reduces future flood risk and protects water quality by purchasing and conserving properties with hydric soils near major waterways. All property sales are voluntary and all land remains as open space. Greenseams is enthusiastically supported by many of Milwaukee's civic leaders, utility customers, government officials, landowners, and conservationists in MMSD's 28 communities.

Greenseams® Program through The Conservation Fund: http://www.conservationfund.org/projects/greenseams-green-infrastructure-milwaukee/



Map showing locations of Greenseams® properties in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. (Map: ©Google)

Relevant Factsheets

P3 – *The Role of the Natural Resource Professional in Planning* – Discusses the role resource professionals play in providing scientific information in the planning process.

L5 – *Participation with Conflict in Mind* – Once the professional is involved with various groups, this factsheet can help him or her avoid creating and/or participating in conflicts.

A4 – *Using Science to Substantiate Natural Resource Planning* – Helps resource professionals understand how science can be used to validate planning that addresses natural resource issues.

N4 – *Nonregulatory Approaches to Natural Resource Conservation* – Makes resource professionals more aware of the tools that may be available to communities and organizations.

Resources

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