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Looking Back to Move Forward: Collaborative Planning to Revise the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests Land and Resource Management Plans

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LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD: COLLABORATIVE PLANNING TO REVISE THE GREEN MOUNTAIN AND FINGER LAKES NATIONAL FORESTS LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLANS

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Abstract

The United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service (Forest Service) manages 154 national forests and 20 grasslands in 44 states and Puerto Rico. National Forest Land and Resource Management Plans (forest plans) form the basis for land and resource management of national forests in the United States. For more than a decade the Forest Service has been attempting to incorporate innovative, collaborative public involvement strategies into the process for revising forest plans. In 2012 and 2015 the Forest Service codified new regulations for developing, revising, and amending forest plans. Collaboration and public involvement are explicit goals of the new regulations. This paper briefly reviews the literature on collaborative planning on national forests and explores a successful collaborative planning process used by the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests, located in Vermont and New York respectively, to develop their 2006 forest plans. This paper shows how the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests developed parallel public and internal collaborative processes to build trust, relationships, and partnership, and discusses the implications for process design, capacity building, and facilitating agreements. By looking back at this successful case of collaborative forest planning, key lessons can provide ideas for developing collaborative processes for future planning efforts.

Keywords: collaboration, forest service, national forest planning, public involvement

Our organization and our methods must never be frozen, but always subject to change. Whenever and wherever experience brought better methods or better organization to light, we must be ready to throw off the old and take on the new.

- Gifford Pinchot, first Chief of the US Forest Service[1]

The US Forest Service (Forest Service) manages 154 national forests and 20 grasslands in 44 states and Puerto Rico (US Department of Agriculture, 2015). Management of each national forest and grassland is guided by a Land and Resource Management Plan (forest plans). Forest plans can be considered a formal, transparent agreement with the public; they determine allowable and prohibited uses and activities, and outline management goals and objectives. For more than a decade, the Forest Service has been working to revise their land use planning regulations. During this time, along with scientific and technical changes to improve national forest management, the agency has been attempting to codify collaborative public involvement strategies into the planning process. After extensive public comment, scientific input, and tribal consultation, the Forest Service finalized their new planning rule in 2012 and its operating directives in January 2015. The planning rule states that while the "Forest Service retains decisionmaking authority and responsibility for all decisions throughout the process… the [Forest Service] shall engage the public… using collaborative processes where feasible and appropriate" (US Forest Service, 2012). Collaboration is defined as: "[a] structured manner in which a collection of people with diverse interests share knowledge, ideas, and resources while working together in an inclusive and cooperative manner toward a common purpose", and participation is defined as "[a]ctivities that include a wide range of public involvement tools and processes, such as collaboration, public meetings, open houses, workshops, and comment periods" (US Forest Service, 2012).

Collaboration and public participation are also important foundations for the 2015 Forest Service planning rule directives. The directives state that the objective of

[1] (Pinchot, 1998) p. 287

forest planning is to "[p]romote the ecological integrity of National Forests and Grasslands through the collaborative, science-informed development, revision, or amendment of land management plans" (US Forest Service, 2015). They further state that it is "the Agency's policy to… [e]ncourage participation by Federal, State, and local agencies, and Tribes, as well as the public, and consider their public input in the planning process" and to provide "meaningful public participation opportunities early and throughout the planning process" (US Forest Service, 2015).

As the Forest Service and the public begin to implement the new planning directives, it is important to revisit previous planning efforts that were based on collaboration and partnership. Future collaborative planning efforts can benefit from past experiences by highlighting key lessons that support successful processes. This paper discusses several key components of a successful collaborative planning process used by the Forest Service in Vermont and New York to revise the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests Land and Resource Management Plans, respectively. The goal of this paper is to provide practical insights into a successful collaborative planning effort that can be used by the public and the Forest Service as they begin to implement the newly enacted planning rule and regulations. These insights are also applicable to any large institutional partnership and collaborative process engaging with multiple stakeholders both within their organizations and among their constituents.

National Forest Planning and Collaboration

Forest Service managers and the public have cited numerous benefits to collaboration, including that a successful collaborative process facilitates a group's understanding of their community (Rolle, 2002). Other benefits include mutual learning, leveraging resources, and relationship building with the Forest Service (Cheng, 2006; Schuett, Selin, & Carr, 1998). Local communities are often empowered by collaborative processes to address social, economic, and natural resource issues affecting their communities (Rolle, 2002). Collaboration builds trust, a key component of engaging the public in natural resource management to protect natural areas and

provide public benefits (Davenport, Leahy, Anderson, & Jakes, 2007). Public trust is imperative for effective natural resource planning, decision making, and environmental conflict resolution (Daniels & Walker, 2001; Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). Building relationships between the Forest Service and local communities is another important related component of forest planning. Recommendations to foster relationship building include making relationship building a priority for all levels of Forest Service leadership; training for agency personal and the public; and recognizing and addressing the need to cultivate intra-agency and inter-agency working relationships (Frentz, 2000).

Collaboration is not a panacea, however, and there are barriers to effective collaboration. One major concern is ensuring that Forest Service collaboration incorporates broad representation from the public as well as within the agency. Other potential barriers include a lack of binding outcomes, bureaucracy, stakeholders' personal agendas, and limited time (Schuett et al., 1998). Another barrier to collaborative planning arises when agency personnel are intimately involved with a project and feel threatened when it is challenged (Manring, 1998). A lack of interest, differences in socioeconomic status, institutional constraints, and community's perceptions of their own limited power to influence agency decisions may also constitute barriers (Davenport et al., 2007).

Language and different ways of knowing can also be barriers to collaboration. Natural resource professionals often write forest plans using language and style that can augment differences and misunderstandings between professional agency employees and the public. For example, Forest Service planners may use numbers to refer to management areas instead of common words the public understands; the Appalachian Trail is referred to as Management Area 8.1, grassland managed for wildlife is referred to as Management Area 1.2, and northern hardwood forests are called Management Area 2.1. This can hinder communication and become a barrier to collaboration even if collaboration is a goal (Paretti, 2003). Finally, studies have shown that both the public and Forest Service employees view the agency's

organization and culture as the greatest barrier to collaboration due to perceived budget constraints for collaborative activities, perceptions that there are few rewards for engaging in collaborative processes, and regulatory constraints (Carr, Selin, & Schuett, 1998).

Despite the evidence that collaboration builds trust and reduces conflict, most agencies assume that the collaborative focus will be external by mainly working with the public and other affected agencies. Many Forest Service collaborative activities, for example, have focused only on public involvement and not on internal staff involvement. Experience working on the revision of the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests' forest plans suggests that it is also important to recognize internal dynamics within the sponsoring agency, since there may be a wide diversity of values and perspectives among staff. Thus, collaborative processes that include agency staff members as stakeholders can build trust within the agency and address one of the perceived barriers to collaboration—Forest Service organization and culture (Fisher, Saul, Dockry, Reichert, & Twarkins, 2005; Saul, Sears, & Dockry, 2006).

Case Study: Collaboration on the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests

The Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF) is located in southwestern and central Vermont and comprises more than 400,000 acres, the largest public land area in the state. This area formed the backbone of the Western Abenaki homeland before French, Dutch, and English societies disrupted their lifeways, territory, and ecology in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Today, the GMNF is located within a day's drive of more than 70 million people and is a tourist destination for visitors seeking a variety of recreation opportunities including nature watching, hiking, skiing, snowmobiling, driving, and camping. The Forest Service manages the GMNF for multiple uses including timber; recreation; wilderness; ecosystem services like clean water, wildlife, and plant habitats; maintenance of Vermont's rural character, a model of ecological and science-based stewardship; and environmental education (US Forest Service, 2006a).

The Finger Lakes National Forest (FLNF) comprises more than 16,000 acres in the Finger Lakes region of New York. This was the territory occupied by the Seneca and Cayuga tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy before the United States became a country. Shortly after the American Revolutionary war, the Colonial army forcibly removed the tribes from their lands and partitioned the area as payment for soldiers' service in the war. The land was cleared and farmed until economic and social changes in the 1930s made it difficult for some to continue farming. Between 1938 and 1941 the federal government purchased more than 100 failing and degraded farms and named it the Hector Land Use Area. Initially, management focused on reforesting eroded areas and establishing sustainable grazing areas to demonstrate productive uses of the land. In 1983 Congress added the Hector Land Use Area to the national forest system and in 1985 officially named the area the Finger Lakes National Forest. The FLNF is an administrative unit of the Green Mountain National Forest and is managed for sustainable grazing, recreation, timber, wildlife, and ecosystem services such as clean water (US Forest Service, 2006b). Decision-making authority for national forests is held by district rangers, who are in charge of discrete districts within each national forest; forest supervisors, who are in charge of the overall national forest; regional foresters, who are in charge of multiple national forests; and the Forest Service chief, who is in charge of all of the national forests.

Both the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests (hereafter called GMFL) have a diversity of stakeholder groups that include motorized trail users, horseback riders, hikers, skiers, nature watchers, campers, educators, hunters, anglers, long-time rural residents, urban residents, tourism operators, the timber industry, ranchers, local government, state government, and various national interest groups including the Wilderness Society and the National Wildlife Federation. Stakeholders vary in education levels, professional fields, and life experiences. Many stakeholders consider themselves part of several groups. The Forest Service employees working on the GMFL also form a diverse group of individuals that mirrors public stakeholder groups. Federally recognized tribal governments are sovereign and not considered public stakeholders or interest groups. American Indian tribes were consulted

individually and separately on a "government-to-government" basis according to federal statute, regulations, executive orders and Forest Service policy (see http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/tribalrelations/ for more information about Forest Service tribal relations and consultation policy).

GMFL Land and Resource Management Plan Revisions

The GMNF and the FLNF have separate forest plans. The Forest Service is required to revise all forest plans at least every fifteen years (US Forest Service, 2012). In 1996 the Forest Service organized a team to begin the process of revising the GMFL forest plans that were developed in the 1980s. The planning team adopted a proactive approach to incorporate citizens' perspectives into the development of the revised plans. This approach was proactive in the sense that the public was engaged in a dialogue early in the process before any revisions were made to the forest plans. The planning process focused on partnerships and ecosystem management. Public involvement emphasized mutual learning, joint problem solving, dialogue, and information sharing. The Forest Service strived to work with the public as partners instead of only seeking their reactions to proposals (Twarkins, Fisher, & Robertson, 2001).

Proactive public involvement allowed for development of mutual definitions of the management issues to be addressed in the revised forest plans. Neutral third party facilitators engaged the public and Forest Service employees in a process that did not have predetermined results—an important element of the collaborative process. Early evaluations of this process identify a number of key lessons from this initial planning effort: partnerships are valuable; education and joint learning are critical; multiple methods for involvement facilitate greater participation; and it is important to have transparency, a wide inclusion of stakeholders, and flexible yet structured planning processes (Twarkins et al., 2001). Challenges included assuring balanced stakeholder involvement, integration with local and regional planning efforts, information management and sharing, and unpredictable national politics that affect forest planning (Carr et al., 1998). Finally, in order to improve partnerships and to move

towards collaborative management approaches, the Forest Service needed to change some long-held attitudes, values, and culture. To do this, the Forest Service would have to view public involvement as building partnerships to jointly develop management plans and not, as was the case in previous planning processes, view public involvement only as a way to get public reactions to plans proposed by the Forest Service alone. (Twarkins et al., 2001).

As the GMFL plan revisions continued, the planning process goals of building partnership and ecosystem management were expanded to explicitly include collaboration and conflict resolution. The Forest Service believed that a collaborative planning process would lead to better forest plans and to broad public support that would facilitate management toward the revised forest plan goals. To these ends, the Forest Service convened a plan revision team that consisted of more than eight full-time employees with varying specialties including planning, forestry, ecology, geographic information systems, recreation management, wildlife biology, transportation planning, and communications. A member of the GMFL leadership team, the team of Forest Service managers in charge of making decisions for the GMFL, also participated as a member of the plan revision team.

The plan revision team was responsible for the revision of both the GMFL forest plans. In order to develop strategies that would work well for each national forest's unique public, one team of neutral third party facilitators was hired to design and lead the public involvement process in Vermont, and another team was hired to do the same in New York. These public involvement processes happened simultaneously and the plan revision team worked with both groups of facilitators, shared information, and refined many ideas between both national forests to address local situations in Vermont and New York. Collaboratively, the Forest Service and the public participants identified five major issues to be addressed in the revised GMNF forest plan: ecosystem management and biodiversity; recreation management; wilderness designation; timber management; and socio-economic concerns (US Forest Service, 2006a). Three of these issues were selected to be addressed in the revised FLNF plan: ecosystem

management and biodiversity; recreation management; and timber management (US Forest Service, 2006b).

The ultimate goals of the GMFL collaborative planning processes were to improve forest management, decision making, scientific information, and understanding of stakeholders. The rest of this paper describes four key aspects of the GMFL collaborative process: process design, capacity building, facilitating agreements, and merging the public and internal Forest Service collaborative processes.

Process Design

In the first part of the process design, the teams of neutral facilitators interviewed key stakeholders and then asked each interview participant to identify other stakeholders who should be interviewed. This went on until no new stakeholders were suggested by participants. Information derived from the interviews was used to draft "situation assessments." The situation assessments outlined stakeholder perspectives, issues, and goals for the plan revision process for each national forest (US Forest Service, 2006c, 2006d). The assessments also provided several options and strategies for public involvement. These assessments were shared with the public and were used to agree on the most appropriate public involvement process. Thus, the public was involved not only in identifying the issues to be addressed in the revised forest plans; they were also involved in developing the actual public involvement process.

Open public meetings were held on a regular basis, typically monthly. The meeting dates and topics were scheduled and announced several months in advance. Every meeting included a timeline of the plan revision process and an overview of forest planning and issues that would be addressed in the plan revision process. Meetings were designed to promote transparency, dialogue, and collaborative learning. To do this, the planning team presented information on a specific topic, recorded all comments on flip charts, provided written notes from comments recorded at all previous meetings, provided all handouts and slide presentations, and posted all of this information on the GMFL websites. Furthermore, at every meeting the public was

told by the planning team that no decisions were being made at the meeting and that the purpose was mutual learning and to gather public comments on the meeting's topic. Finally, the public was told that their input would be used to draft a revised forest plan and alternatives required by the National Environmental Policy Act (1969); however, the Forest Service regional forester had the legal responsibility to decide on the revised forest plan. In other words, Forest Service leadership was legally required to make a decision themselves but the public would collaboratively develop the suite of management alternatives representing various stakeholder and public perspectives from which to choose. Management plan alternative development was an iterative process that lasted over a year in which the public and Forest Service worked together to define issues, draw lines on maps, and integrate scientific research to build several final alternatives that reflected the stakeholder and public perspectives voiced throughout the process. Public comments during meetings and throughout the process indicated that they were able to see their comments and perspectives reflected in some of the management plan alternatives.

While there was a lot of emphasis on developing and implementing a collaborative public involvement strategy, initially there was no systematic process developed for GMFL employee or internal agency involvement. In the beginning of the plan revision process, the planning team thought that professional and scientific neutrality would allow GMFL employees to work together toward the common goal of revising the forest plans. The GMFL planning team, the GMFL leadership, and the neutral facilitators realized after several internal and public meetings that because GMFL employees had different values, professions, and educational levels, there needed to be a more formal internal agency collaborative involvement process. Revising a forest plan could be done collaboratively with the public; however, on-the-ground implementation of the plan would be difficult if the employees charged with using the plan were not substantially involved in the collaborative process. Additionally, because the Forest Service employees worked with the management plan on a daily basis, they were in a unique position to provide keen insights into the plan revision process.

As such, two parallel processes were developed, one with the public and one with the GMFL employees. The GMFL plan revision team and the third party neutral facilitators served as the intersection between these two processes by sharing information between the two groups and by facilitating the processes. Both the public and internal processes were beneficial in revising the forest plans. In retrospect, the planning team should have developed a formal internal involvement plan from the beginning of the process.

Capacity Building

The GMFL planning team and the neutral facilitators viewed collaborative learning as an important component of the public and internal involvement processes. Training and learning were explicitly incorporated into the plan revision process and meetings. The GMFL plan revision team received meeting development, facilitation, and conflict resolution training from the neutral facilitators. Furthermore, training and education on collaboration skills, scientific information, forest plans, and Forest Service regulations were integrated into all public and internal meetings. The most successful training was integrated into meetings rather than as a stand-alone topic. For example, active listening techniques were taught and then used in small-group discussions during public meetings discussing timber harvesting. This type of capacity building helped both the public and the GMFL employees build trust and gain the skills they needed to resolve future conflicts.

Facilitating Agreements

A goal of collaborative processes is to facilitate agreements. The GMFL plan revision strategy incorporated transparency, collaborative learning, and process design to facilitate agreements for both the public and internal processes. First and foremost, the public was told that they would help develop the management alternatives collaboratively but that the Forest Service had the legal responsibility to pick one of the alternatives for the final forest plan. Second, regular public meetings started by discussing the least controversial topics first, building relationships among

stakeholders, and then moving on to more controversial issues. This helped build trust.

A third component of the process that facilitated agreements was the production of accurate and user-friendly maps. It is hard to overemphasize the role good maps have in a public planning process. Good maps allow people to visualize how they interact with the national forest—they can see the road they use to get to a favorite fishing hole, a trail crossing close to their home, or a patch of old forest visited for generations. Good maps can foster community around a concrete sense of place rather than dividing people through difference in abstract values (see Goldstein & Butler, 2010 for a discussion of the importance of developing communities of practice for collaborative planning). On the other hand, poor quality maps can have the effect of eroding public trust, because they could appear intentionally misleading or vague. Multiple collaborative opportunities and techniques were used to produce maps that eventually formed the basis for the forest plan alternatives. Collaborative mapping built trust and transparency and fostered mutual learning. The real collaborative decision was the collaborative development of alternatives. This was one of the unique ways the GMFL was able to incorporate public collaboration into the laws and regulations requiring the Forest Service to make the final decision.

Since the public could see their perspectives within some of the alternatives and they understood that the Forest Service legally had to make the decision, the public generally viewed the process as successful. For example, one person involved in planning said that the collaborative planning process was "something that has to be developed a little bit at a time with individual contacts and interactions that allow common interests to surface, to institute and overcome that… suspicion that the a citizen has of the government. So it's a tough job from [the Forest Service's] perspective… but I think in the long run [collaborative planning is a] useful and probably [an] essential way of developing a better plan" (first participant, personal communication, May 25, 2010). For this participant, collaborative planning was seen as a way to develop a better forest management plan. Another participant in the

planning process said, “I feel like above and beyond the public input process the… collaborative interest that the community and the agency [Forest Service]… helped to build [a forest] plan that we had a lot more consensus on.... We don’t have the need to be involved in conflict with the Forest Service anymore” (second participant, personal communication, May 25, 2010). For this person, the collaborative process was a success because it went beyond the public input, facilitated consensus, and reduced conflict.

Facilitated agreements played a more important role in the internal Forest Service involvement process. The first internal agreements made had to do with identifying the myriad decisions that would be made during the entire plan revision process. For example, decisions included what to call Management Areas, how to incorporate current science into the revised forest plan standards, who would be involved in writing specific technical sections of the forest plan, and what would happen if consensus could not be reached on which forest plan alternative to select. The GMFL planning team developed a list that identified each decision and who would make the decision: the planning team, an extended interdisciplinary team comprising program managers and district rangers, the entire Forest Service staff, or the Forest Service leadership. Then the decision-making mechanism was agreed upon. Typically, decisions were made by employee consensus on the GMFL, which was implementing a novel team-based consensus management structure at the time. Because of the complex and controversial nature of some plan revision decisions, some decisions were made by what the Forest Service termed “considerable agreement” meaning that a majority of employees could live with the decision. Employees agreed that if neither consensus nor considerable agreement could be reached, the forest supervisor (the senior administrator charged with the decision-making authority for the GMFL) would make the final decision. The extended interdisciplinary team (GMFL program managers and district rangers) reviewed all the planning documents drafted by the planning team. This provided a geographic and resource-based perspective on all elements of the planning process. Since all of the decisions, large and small, were

transparently outlined and agreed to before any decisions were made, employees were supportive of the eventual outcomes of the planning process.

The GMFL employees also engaged in similar alternative plan mapping exercises as those held with the public. These meetings tended to be longer and more heated than the public meetings, in part because of the level of expertise with the land base and the level of familiarity with the other staff members. The internal discussions proved invaluable and helped refine some of the ideas that were first developed during the public meetings.

The final internal decision was the selection of the preferred forest management plan alternative to forward to the Forest Service regional office for signatures. One forest management alternative was to be selected for each national forest, and these decisions were made separately based on the internal agency and public involvement processes that occurred in Vermont and New York. Employees agreed that the decision-making mechanism to be used was "considerable agreement" (as opposed to consensus), but if that could not be reached the forest supervisor would make the decision. At the end of the planning process employees reached considerable agreement on which alternative to select for the FLNF, but could not reach considerable agreement for the GMFL. Therefore, the forest supervisor made the final recommendation for the GMNF based on the cumulative public and internal input.

Conclusions

A logical question to ask is, why have two separate collaborative processes? Would it not have been easier to focus on just one? Both the internal and the public collaborative processes led to a shift in relationships and built trust. The two separate but parallel processes allowed for honest discussions and made it easier to merge the results. Transparency in decision making and pre-established decision criteria were reasons for the success of the public and internal processes.

Another success was the ease with which maps were shared across the two processes. In reality, the creation of alternatives was an iterative process that lasted several months and consisted of several public and numerous internal meetings. Finally, the focus on collaborative learning paved the way for both processes to succeed and helped the GMFL planning team effectively manage both processes.

Was the GMFL collaborative planning process a success? The goals of the GMFL collaborative planning process were to improve management, decision making, scientific information, and understanding of stakeholders. Decision making was improved by increasing internal trust and relationships through the internal collaboration. The public also began to understand how the Forest Service was required to make decisions and how their input could be incorporated into those decisions. Participants in the public process indicated that collaboration was successful in working with the government, building a better management plan, and reducing conflict. The plan revision process also allowed for the compilation of ecological, social, and economic information. The public planning meetings allowed the GMFL employees to share their professional knowledge and experiences from many parts of the United States and allowed the public to share their own local knowledge and personal experiences. Relationships and trust were built as stakeholders and Forest Service employees began to understand each other's values and how their perceptions affected their ideas for GMFL management.

Time will tell if the trust and relationships built through the parallel collaborative processes will lead to improved management of the national forests. Relationships and trust, both internal and with the public, require constant attention. If collaborative processes continue to form the basis of management planning within the Forest Service, as the 2012 and 2015 planning regulations require, there is reason to believe management will improve and there will be increased support and understanding for management decisions from the public and within the agency.

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