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Evaluating Community-Based Collaboration on Federal Lands and Resources

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Insights and Applications

Evaluating Community-Based Collaboration on Federal Lands and Resources

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The growing interest in community-based collaboration (CBC) has provoked both enthusiasm and skepticism. This article sheds some light on the claims of both proponents and skeptics by presenting data on nearly 50 cases of CBC on federal lands and resources in the Rocky Mountain West. The findings indicate that participants are generally satisfied with the process and outcomes of CBC; CBC tends to open and inclusive of all interests, viewpoints, and stakeholders; CBC fosters informed decision making; CBC is efficient in terms of time and money; CBC produces valuable outcomes; CBC is often better than its alternatives; and CBC is slowly realigning the roles of citizens and public officials. This article also offers some insights on evaluating collaboration.

Keywords collaboration, evaluation, federal lands and resources, Rocky Mountain West

As we enter the 21st century, the idea of collaboration is rapidly becoming one of the dominant ideas in natural resources policy and politics (Kemmis 2001; Brick et al. 2001; Keiter 2003; McKinney and Harmon 2004). This trend has provoked both enthusiasm and skepticism.

The proponents of collaboration claim, in part, that it allows participation by all interested and affected parties; takes less time and costs less than more conventional public participation and public dispute resolution processes; results in more informed, creative, and adaptive solutions; builds individual and social capacity to prevent and resolve public disputes in the future; and improves environmental outcomes (Susskind et al. 1999). The skeptics claim, among other things, that collaboration delegitimizes conflict; co-opts environmental advocates; excludes or disempowers national, urban, and other interest groups; and leads to compromise and lowest common denominator solutions (Kenney 2000).

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The objective of this article is to shed light on some of these claims by presenting evidence on the merits of CBC on federal lands and resources in the Rocky Mountain West. It also presents a low-cost, yet comprehensive and robust, method to evaluate the relative success or progress of any collaborative process and its outcomes.

Methods and Limitations

The literature on evaluating collaborative approaches to natural resources and environmental policy includes philosophical and conceptual critiques; case studies of particular substantive areas, such as watershed management, land use, and waste management; and assessments of particular agencies or jurisdictions (for a chronological history of evaluation efforts, see Bingham 1986; Susskind and Cruikshank 1987; Forester 1999; Innes 1999; Andrew 2001; Bourdeaux et al. 2001; O'Leary and Raines 2001; Beierle and Cayford 2002; Kloppenberg 2002; Leach, et al. 2003; O'Leary and Bingham 2003; Conley and Moote 2003; Coglianese 2003; Hibbard and Madsen 2003; Welsh 2004; Sturtevant and Bryan, 2004; Walker and Hurley 2004; Bryan 2004; Leach 2004; d'Estree and Colby 2004; Dukes 2004; Macfarlane and Mayer nd). Much of the literature has focused on case studies and used qualitative research, and with rare exception has not included evaluations of multiple cases using a common survey instrument (Susskind et al. 2003; Leach, et al. 2003). As demonstrated by the framework developed by the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (nd), evaluation methods are becoming more sophisticated.

This article provides empirical data on nearly 50 cases of CBC, defined as a multiparty public process that (1) includes diverse viewpoints and interests; (2) focuses on a particular place, region, or community; and (3) is designed to build knowledge, foster a sense of community or place, share resources, provide input and advice, and/or build agreement. It focuses on federal land and resource issues in the Rocky Mountain West, a region defined by the dominance of federal lands and home to a variety of collaborative experiments during the past two decades. The study used a survey instrument rather than in-depth, qualitative interviews as its primary source of data.

In addition to meeting the definition of CBC and focusing on federal land and resource issues in the Rocky Mountain West, the cases selected for this study were up and running for at least 1 year; governed by a well-defined process that included ground rules for participation, meetings, and decision-making protocols; convened by different entities, including but not limited to federal, state, and local governments, as well as citizens; and produced some outcomes relevant to their stated objectives, thus giving them something specific to focus on. Potential cases were identified through a literature review and by consulting with scholars and practitioners. The goal was to include a sample of cases that were completed less than two years ago; cases that were completed 3 to 5 years ago; and cases that were completed 6 or more years ago.

This evaluation of CBC is based on the premise that participants are in one of the best positions to evaluate the relative success of their effort (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987). To operationalize this premise, we developed a Participant Satisfaction Scorecard based on a review of the evaluation literature and the commonly accepted criteria for measuring success and/or progress (Macfarlane and Mayer nd; Leach 2004; Weber 2003). The scorecard includes a series of questions to clarify the perspective of each stakeholder, along with 26 indicators of success (see Figure 1). Participants check whether a particular indicator is important or unimportant,

and then circle the number that best matches their level of agreement with each statement (on a scale of 1–7, where 1 represents “completely disagree” and 7 represent “completely agree”).

Not everyone agrees with the premise that participants are in one of the best positions to evaluate the relative success and/or progress of a collaborative process. Coglianese (2003), for example, argues that participant satisfaction is not an important or meaningful goal because not all of the people affected by a policy decision are included in the evaluation, and thus “participant” satisfaction provides only a partial representation of social welfare. He goes on to claim that participant satisfaction is a relatively meaningless measure of success because the fact that people are satisfied with a policy decision or outcome does not necessarily mean that it is a good one.

We agree that this approach to evaluation creates some selection bias because it does not include the views of people who are not part of a particular CBC, but who may nevertheless be interested in and affected by the outcomes. To mitigate this limitation, the scorecard includes several questions about the degree to which the process was open to anyone who wanted to participate, and the degree of accountability to the general public. The identification and selection of cases may have introduced some sampling bias in favor of successful cases, and/or participants that had more satisfying experiences. To mitigate the possibility of sample bias, the study included any and all cases that met the basic criteria, and was distributed to all of the participants within a CBC.

Another limitation of this approach to evaluation is that it does not attempt to evaluate the on-the-ground improvement of environmental or other outcomes—a common interest among some observers (Hibbard and Madsen 2003; Sturtevant and Bryan 2004). While the scorecard asks participants if they are satisfied with the outcomes of a collaborative process, it does not presume that one particular outcome, such as environmental protection or economic development, is necessarily better than another; that is a judgment to be made by the participants. CBC is a political process that tries to integrate multiple-objectives or interests, so it seems somewhat arbitrary to select one objective or interest as “the” measure of success.

Profile of the Study Population

One hundred and eleven CBC groups were initially identified. Sixty-seven agreed to participate in the study, and 48 groups completed the scorecard. Nine-hundred and nine scorecards were distributed, and 514 completed scorecards were returned, for a response rate of 56.5%. Several well-known, long-running CBC groups declined to participate, did not return telephone calls, or apparently disbanded. The absence of these cases limited the ability to examine the implementation of outcomes. Eleven of the 15 BLM-sponsored Resource Advisory Councils (RACs) in the 8 Rocky Mountain States completed the survey. The U.S. Forest Service RACs were not included in the study because they were just coming online and did not meet our criteria of being up and running for at least one year.

Colorado had the highest number of CBC groups in the study, with 19 (40% of the study population). Nevada had the second largest number of CBC groups in this study, which is not surprising because nearly 88% of the state’s area is federal land. Wyoming did not have any CBC groups in the study.

The primary affinity of the respondents is as follows: 27% government; 24% commodity; 19% conservation and environmental; 12% recreation; 2% tribal

government; 2% university; and 14% left the question blank. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents had been involved in their CBC group for over one year, and 47% had been involved for more than 3 years. Eighty-two percent had participated in other collaborative forums, and 37% said they had been involved in four or more collaborative processes. The substantive issues addressed by CBCs included—in order of most frequent—range management, endangered species, resource management planning, development and growth, recreation management, and water rights.

Sixty-one percent of the CBC groups used an impartial facilitator. Thirty percent of the groups used a professional facilitator, while 23% said a government official facilitated their CBC group.

Key Findings and Implications

The people who responded to the Participant Satisfaction Scorecard are generally satisfied with the use of CBC to address issues related to federal lands and resources. Seventy percent of the respondents said that all 27 indicators were important contributors to their satisfaction with the process and its outcomes. Eighty-six percent of participants stated they would recommend a CBC process to address a similar issue in the future, a strong indicator of people's satisfaction with the process and its outcomes. Participants tended to rank "working relationships" and "quality of the process" as more important than "outcomes."

Satisfaction did not vary significantly among different participants. People with diverse viewpoints reported about the same level of satisfaction with the process and its outcomes. There was some variation in satisfaction over time. Participants tend to report higher levels of satisfaction early-on in the process. Satisfaction falls after the first several months, increases again within a year or two, and then falls again after a few years.

How Did CBC Influence Working Relationships Among Participants?

One common claim of proponents of collaboration is that it improves working relationships. According to the results of this study, respondents overwhelmingly concluded that CBC helped build trust and improve communication among participants, and allowed participants to gain insights about others' views and values. Over 90% of the respondents claimed that these indicators were important to their satisfaction, and the median score ranged between 5 (agree) and 6 (strongly agree). More than 70% of respondents said that they would negotiate other issues with the same participants, and that CBC improved their ability to participate in collaborative forums. The median score of respondents on these two indicators was 5 (agree).

These results suggest that CBC can improve working relationships among participants. The deliberative nature of CBC seems to not only build social and political capital (trust, communication, and insights about each other), but also improve the ability of people to participate in collaborative processes. Improved working relationships presumably endure beyond one issue or situation, thereby increasing the capacity of the community of participants to address future issues in a more collaborative and less adversarial way.

How Satisfied Were Participants with the Quality of the Process?

The scorecard includes 13 indicators and a series of other questions to address this topic, which is perhaps best summarized according to three distinct variables—participation, information, and cost.

Is CBC Open and Inclusive of all Interests, Viewpoints, and Stakeholders? Ninety-three percent of the respondents said that CBC allows everyone who wants to participate to do so. The median score for this indicator is 6 (strongly agree). Respondents also concluded that CBC facilitated respect of each other's concerns (91% said this was important, with a median score of 5 [agree]); provided a way to address participants' concerns about the process (87% said this was important, with a median score of 5 [agree]); and allowed for public review, comment, and accountability (84% said this was important, with a median score of 5 [agree]). Respondents said that participants kept their constituents informed and effectively represented their constituents (85 and 86%, respectively, said these were important indicators of satisfaction, with a median score of 5 [agree] for each).

These findings suggest that—at least for the CBC processes included in this study—all stakeholders had an opportunity to participate, and that participants were accountable to their constituents as well as to the general public. The interest and commitment to open, inclusive, and transparent processes suggests that the nature of the process used to shape natural resource policy is, in and of itself, a valuable outcome of natural resources decision making. While this observation may not be earth shattering, it provides empirical evidence to suggest that public officials and decision makers should place a premium on designing and facilitating better public processes. The quality of public processes—measured along variables such as openness, inclusive, transparency, and so on—should be an important benchmark in evaluating the performance of public officials and decision makers.

Does CBC Foster Informed Decision Making? Eighty-nine percent of respondents said that participants had access to the information needed to make a good decision; 88% said that the process fostered information gathering as a group; 87% said the process fostered learning as a group; and 90% said that their group considered different options to address the issues under consideration. Each of these indicators had a median score of 5 (agree).

These results support the claim that CBC promotes and supports more informed decision making. This suggests that, at a minimum, these elements of CBC should be integrated into more conventional approaches to natural resources policy and management.

Is CBC more Efficient in Terms of Time and Money? On the front page of the Participant Satisfaction Scorecard, participants identify their best alternative to CBC and are then asked to compare CBC to their most likely alternative in terms of which process would most likely result in (1) a more effective, stable outcome; (2) improved communication; (3) more or less time invested; and (4) cost effectiveness. Seventy-two percent of respondents said that CBC would produce a more effective, stable outcome over their next best alternative, while 79% said that CBC would be more likely to improve communication over their next best alternative.

The findings are a bit more mixed on the issues of cost-effectiveness and the amount of time required for collaboration compared to the alternatives. Forty-nine percent of respondents thought that CBC “costs less” than their next best alternative, while 29% thought that their alternative was less expensive. The respondents were equally divided—at 39%—over whether CBC or their next best alternative would take less time to address their issue. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents, however, claimed that CBC was efficient, that is, was time well spent. Likewise, 81% said that the process was cost-effective, that is, was money well spent. It is important to note that people who recommend CBC in the future agreed that the process “was time well spent,” while people who would not recommend CBC in the future generally concluded that it was not time well spent. This finding implies that while participants appear to place a high value on a quality process, they are still predisposed (at least to some degree) to measure the satisfaction of the process by its outcome—something along the lines of “My interests were satisfied, and thus it was a worthwhile process,” and “I did not satisfy my primary interests, so it was not time well spent . . . even though I benefited in other ways.”

By comparison, a comprehensive study on land use dispute resolution found that 81% of those interviewed thought that assisted negotiation both “costs less” and “took less time” than their best alternative (Susskind et al. 2003). Other empirical studies have likewise concluded that people can save time and money when they engage in more cooperative processes (Taylor et al. 1999; Oregon Department of Justice 2001). Since the findings in the CBC study vary considerably in terms of time and cost relative to alternative processes—particularly when compared to these other studies—this suggests that conveners and practitioners of CBC should experiment with different ways to implement the values and best practices of CBC in a more time-sensitive manner . . . if possible.

How Satisfied were Participants with the Outcomes of CBC?

As mentioned earlier, 72% of respondents said that CBC produced a more effective, lasting outcome over their next best alternative. In terms of how important different indicators are to participants satisfaction with the outcomes of CBC, 74% said that the outcome is better than what they could get from another process, while 75% said the outcome satisfied their basic interests. Eighty percent concluded that an agreement was reached to resolve key issues, while 76% said that the agreement was ratified by everyone needed to implement it; 81% trusted that the agreement would be implemented in good faith; 77% anticipated that the agreement will be responsive to new information, interests, and ideas. Seventy-seven percent concluded that the situation surrounding the issue is better than before, and 70% believe the underlying issue was resolved and will not likely recur. The median score on all of these indicators is 5 (agree), except for the last one, which is 4 (indifferent).

These findings are consistent with the results of other empirical studies that conclude participants are satisfied with both the process and outcomes of collaboration (Bingham 1986; Resolve 1999; Susskind et al. 1999; Leach et al. 2003; O’Leary and Husar 2002; Susskind et al. 2003). This evidence seems to support the claim that collaboration, when effectively designed and supported, can improve the outcomes desired by participants relative to other political processes to pursue their interests.

Conclusions

This study provides much needed empirical data to clarify some of the claims of proponents and skeptics of collaboration. Along with the growing number of stories reported in the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation, regional newspapers such as High Country News and Headwaters News, and web-based resources such as the Red Lodge Clearinghouse, this study suggests that CBC is a valuable way to supplement the formal processes for shaping and implementing federal land policy and management. That said, it is equally important to emphasize that it is not a panacea. There is still significant and legitimate debate about when, where, and how to use collaboration, and whether it produces the most desirable outcomes. Fortunately, there are a number of “best practices” for determining when, where, and how to use collaboration (see, for example, the Western Collaboration Assistance Network at www.natlforests.org).

There are also a growing number of methods to evaluate the success and/or progress of collaborative processes and the outcomes they generate. The Participant Satisfaction Scorecard is one cost-effective approach that allows participants to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts relative to the goals they set for themselves. It can help ensure accountability to funders, decision makers, and ultimately to citizens. It also allows people to observe what worked, what didn't, and why, thereby improving both the theory and practice of CBC.

One question that was included in this study—but is not part of the scorecard *per se*—focused on who sponsored or convened a CBC. Some observers of collaboration and similar “movements,” such as civic environmentalism, suggest that these processes constitute a realignment of politics (Kemmis 2001; Sirianni and Friedland 2001). One author has suggested that these movements constitute a revival of Jeffersonian democracy, where citizens play a deeper, more meaningful role in convening public forums and making public decisions (Snow 1997).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that citizens are playing a more active and participatory role in the management of federal lands and resources (Brick et al. 2001). While citizens seem to be taking the initiative now more than they were 10 to 20 years ago to convene public forums to discuss federal land and resource management issues, the results of this study suggest that governments still play a critically important role in promoting and supporting such forums. Government agencies “sponsored”—that is, convened and supported—86% of the 48 CBC groups included in this study; citizens and nongovernmental groups convened and supported only 14% of the CBC groups. Of the 67 CBC groups that were part of our initial survey population, government agencies sponsored 72%. These results suggest that, at least when it comes to issues involving federal lands or resources, the primary sponsor of CBC appears to be one or more levels of government.

These findings are consistent with other empirical studies. In a study of land use dispute resolution, researchers discovered that government officials initiated and supported 78% of the cases. Likewise, a study of watershed councils in the American West concluded that those lamenting the involvement of federal agencies in community-based resource management should recognize that, in most cases, the federal agencies themselves remain the primary source of financial resources, technical support, and implementation authority (Kenney 2000).

These studies seem to suggest that, once citizen-driven forums get up and running, the initiators realize that they must create some type of partnership with the

responsible agency if they hope to influence policy and management. One of the basic lessons from the theory of multiparty negotiation is that if you intend to influence public decisions, you need to link ad hoc collaborative processes to the formal decision-making process. Agencies also tend to have financial and technical resources that are necessary to sustain CBC efforts. For their part, public officials seem to be increasingly open to redefining their roles, moving away from the simple

Name of Collaborative Forum

1. What primary interest do you represent on behalf a stakeholder group? (Please check only one)

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ranching/farming | <input type="checkbox"/> Wildlife/fish | <input type="checkbox"/> Local gov't |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Timber | <input type="checkbox"/> Wilderness | <input type="checkbox"/> State gov't |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mining (incl. oil & gas) | <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation | <input type="checkbox"/> Federal gov't |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Motorized recreation | <input type="checkbox"/> Non-motorized recreation | <input type="checkbox"/> Tribal gov't |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outfitting/guiding | <input type="checkbox"/> Hunting | <input type="checkbox"/> Water-right holders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Utility company | <input type="checkbox"/> Tourism industry | <input type="checkbox"/> University/college |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other. Please describe: | | |

2. How long have you participated in this particular forum? (Please check only one)

- ☐ 3 months or less ☐ 4 – 12 months ☐ 1 – 2 years ☐ 3 years or more

3. Have you participated directly in other collaborative processes? (Please check only one)

- ☐ No ☐ Yes, 1 – 3 processes ☐ Yes, 4 – 6 processes ☐ Yes, 7 or more processes

4. What process would you have used to address this situation if a collaborative forum weren't available?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No action | <input type="checkbox"/> Direct pressure on decision maker(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Litigation | <input type="checkbox"/> Lobbying |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Proposed legislation | <input type="checkbox"/> Citizen initiative |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Citizen petition | <input type="checkbox"/> Other Please describe: |

5. Compare this collaborative process to your next best option (from #4 above). In your opinion, which of the two would most likely:

- | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| Cost less? | <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration | <input type="checkbox"/> other option |
| Take less time? | <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration | <input type="checkbox"/> other option |
| Improve communication among participants? | <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration | <input type="checkbox"/> other option |
| Produce a more effective, lasting outcome? | <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration | <input type="checkbox"/> other option |

8. Would you recommend a collaborative process to address similar issues?

- ☐ Yes. ☐ No. Please explain:

9. How could this process be improved?

For each statement, please check whether you think that aspect of the process is important or unimportant. Also circle the number that best matches your level of agreement with each statement. 1=completely disagree, 2=strongly disagree, 3=disagree, 4=indifferent, 5=agree, 6=strongly agree, 7=completely agree.

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS	<u>Important</u>	<u>Unimportant</u>	<u>Circle One</u>
The process helped build trust among participants.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The process improved communication among participants.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
I gained insights about others' views and values.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
I would negotiate other issues with the same participants.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The process improved my ability to participate in collaborative forums.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Figure 1. Participant satisfaction scorecard.

QUALITY OF THE PROCESS			
Everyone who wanted to participate had a fair chance to do so.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Participants' concerns were respected.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The process fostered information gathering as a group.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Participants had access to the information needed to make good decisions.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The process fostered learning as a group.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The group considered different options for resolving the issue.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Participants kept their constituents informed.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Participants effectively represented their constituents at the table.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
There was a way to address participants' concerns about the process.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Gains and losses were fairly distributed among all participants.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The process was efficient. It was time well spent.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The process was cost effective. It was money well spent.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The public was able to review and comment on the process.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
THE OUTCOME			
An agreement (Recommendations, MOUs etc.) was reached to resolve key issues.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The agreement was ratified by everyone needed to implement it.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
I trust that the agreement will be implemented in good faith.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The agreement will be responsive to new information, interests and ideas.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The outcome satisfies my basic interest.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The outcome is better than what I could get from another process.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The situation surrounding this issue is better than before.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The underlying issue was resolved; it will not likely recur.	0	0	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

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Figure 1. Continued.

roles of technical expert and decision maker to a richer, more useful set of roles as convener, stakeholder, and partner (Wondolleck and Ryan 1999).

In the future, scholars should work with participants, conveners, and process managers to develop a more refined research agenda on evaluating CBC and other public processes (see the Community-based Collaboratives Research Consortium at www.cbcr.org). To begin, there is a need for more aggregate studies to compliment and reinforce the lessons learned through case studies and comparative assessments. Another theme for future research is the degree to which the substantive outcomes of CBC are implemented and have the desired effect on the ground. Given the multi-objective nature of most CBC processes, more robust and comprehensive metrics are needed to evaluate the outcomes of CBC, which frequently include some combination of promoting livable communities, vibrant economies, and healthy environments. A number of additional evaluative questions might be addressed along these lines, including: Are outcomes implemented as intended? What happens to outcomes when the world changes around them? Are they adapted to new information

and ideas, unforeseen consequences, and the like? Are outcomes produced through CBC easier to implement than outcomes produced through other public processes? What is the impact on the ground? Is it consistent with the objectives of the participants?

Another important theme for future research on evaluation is to compare the effectiveness of CBC to other processes for public participation, public decision making, and public dispute resolution—using the same criteria or metrics of success. Assuming for the moment that there is agreement on the criteria for evaluating public processes, the question is: Which process tends to produce better results and under what circumstances?

Future experiments in collaboration, as well as evaluation of such experiences, will help determine the appropriate place of collaboration among other public processes to prevent and resolve natural resource disputes.

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