

1998

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Recommended Citation

Webler, Thomas and Tuler, Seth, "How To Do Environmental Decision Making: Varying Perspectives on the U.S. National Research Council's Understanding Risk Report" (1998). *Environmental Studies*. 9.

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How To Do Environmental Decision Making: Varying Perspectives on the U.S. National Research Council's *Understanding Risk* Report

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There are two reasons why public participation in decision making about risk and environmental management persists as an important, timely issue. First, people still disagree about whether lay people¹ should be involved in these decisions at all. This is the question of “why?” Second, there is uncertainty about how to best involve, meaningfully, diverse lay people and scientists in an efficient, effective decision making process. This is the question of “how?”

In 1989, Daniel Fiorino provided a wonderful approach to answering the “why” question when he outlined three kinds of reasons for involving the public in risk and environmental decision making:

Instrumental — reasons associated with people trying to achieve other, related goals. For instance, agencies promote participation because when people participate, costly legal challenges against the agency or industry can be avoided.

Substantive — reasons associated with the information or knowledge needed for the decision. For instance, lay people bring knowledge and experience relevant to the decisions that scientists might miss.

Normative — reasons associated with what is right and wrong. For instance, in a democratic society, it is proper to have all interested and affected parties involved.

Fiorino's observation does not resolve the continuing debate as to whether public participation should be pursued; in fact, opponents make instrumental, substantive, and normative arguments against public participation. However, Fiorino's approach helps give structure and organize arguments for and against participation. It also helps clarify the need for research on these topics.

Until recently, there had not been a lot of progress on the “how” question. Experiential knowledge from practitioners, lay people, and university participant-observers has been accumulating for some time, but there have been few attempts to create conceptual approaches to understanding “best practices” for public participation. A recent contribu-

tion has been made with the publication of a report by the United States National Research Council.

Understanding Risk: Informing Decisions in a Democratic Society was published by the National Research Council in June 1996. The report sees risk-policy decision making as combining two ways of knowing about the world: analysis and deliberation. It also asserts that, at least for some kinds of decisions, both lay people *and* scientists need to engage in analysis and deliberation in a manner that is iterative and that promotes learning. *Understanding Risk* has received a great deal of acclaim, but it has also sparked some provocative discussion. This Forum captures a slice of that discussion.

At the 1997 Society for Human Ecology meeting in Bar Harbor, we participated in a session on the National Research Council report. There, Carolyn Raffensperger presented a paper that constructively criticized the report. We vividly recall discussing these issues with Carolyn over a lobster dinner. One of the reasons why Carolyn's contribution is fresh and unexpected may be because she writes from the perspective of a scientist who works in the public interest. She considers herself a spokesperson for lay people affected by risk decision-making. It is not surprising, perhaps, that a thoughtful person with diverse such affiliations and interests would have something novel to say about a book, written by scholars, on the topic of involving lay people in environmental and risk decision making.

Our interest in assembling this Forum was to introduce Carolyn's arguments to a larger audience and to provide as many perspectives and opinions as possible on her paper. Toward that end we have sought commentary from activists, governmental officials, scientists, a member and chief staff officer of the National Research Council committee, as well as from scholars of public participation. We were astounded and pleased by the variety, richness, and depth of the comments we received.

Naturally, we would have liked to have heard from a greater number of people from affected communities. We also know how difficult it is to arrange a discussion involving scientists and lay people. Academic interchanges such as this Forum tend to occur in venues that exclude and disempower people without the “right” credentials or means of access. Bringing these new voices into such deliberative spaces is incredibly challenging. Moving the discourse to a more public space is arguably a better solution, if the goal is to engage all perspectives. We hope that this Forum serves as the seed for future discussions, among scientists, consultants, and members of affected communities, as we continue to wrestle with the “why” and “how” questions of public participation. All of us have much to learn from each other.

Endnote

1. One of the difficulties we encountered in editing this Forum was how to best refer to the different people associated with decision making

processes. Often, the terms “scientist” and “expert” are used interchangeably. Others point out that this discredits the expertise of people who are not scientists. Local knowledge of community members is also a kind of expertise. Thus, in this introduction, and in our own papers, we use the term “technical experts” as a synonym for “scientist.” (We did not ask the other authors to make the same commitment.) We also found it difficult to agree on how to refer to those people who are not scientists. Calling them “nonscientists” seemed discrediting. The term “publics” is somewhat satisfactory. But, we decided to use the term “lay people” to refer to community members who are not scientists with expertise in the topic associated with the decision. “Lay people” casts a broad net. And we use it in a sense that is respectful of the many different experiences, levels of education, and expertise that people have.

Reference

- Fiorino, D. 1989. Environmental risk and democratic process: A critical review. *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* 14, 501-547.