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# Public Participation: Relevance and Application in the National Park Service

Thomas Webler

*Western Washington University*, [thomas.webler@wwu.edu](mailto:thomas.webler@wwu.edu)

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# Public participation:

## Relevance and application in the National Park Service

By SETH TULER AND THOMAS WEBLER

Government agencies are under increased pressure to conduct policy planning and decision-making activities in more transparent and inclusive ways. The clear trend is toward broader and more frequent public involvement and collaboration. For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service organizes deliberation among stakeholders for endangered species recovery planning (Clark et al. 1994, Clark and Wallace 1998). The Army Corps of Engineers has experimented with a variety of collaborative problem solving and public participation techniques (Creighton et al. 1998). The U.S. Forest Service continues implementation of a variety of approaches to public participation, including "collaborative learning" and adaptive management planning (Gericke et al. 1992, Sarvis 1994, Shindler and Creek 1997). At its nuclear weapons production sites where cleanup is the major issue, the Department of Energy has set up site-specific advisory boards (Bradbury and Branch 1999). Throughout many parts of the federal government, and within state governments as well, involvement of stakeholders and citizens is becoming a priority issue.

To "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same" (NPS Organic Act, 1916, 16 U.S.C. sec. 1), the National Park Service must accommodate a multiplicity of values and interests among those who would use, enjoy, and protect park resources in much the same way as other agencies must accommodate diverse values and interests in their decision making. In fact, enabling legislation for new parks, such as Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area and Death Valley National Park require involvement of major stakeholders in park management decisions. Park and resource management planning as well as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process are other areas where parks are increasingly incorporating participatory activities. Voyageurs National Park has used extensive public involvement activities to develop a new gen-

eral management plan. Opportunities for public involvement include, for example, public hearings, advisory committees, and working groups.

Responding to these new demands presents important challenges, including how to run processes that: (1) make use of the best science available; (2) are widely seen as fair and legitimate by all involved; and (3) use financial and staff resources in a responsible manner. In this article we review the reasons why public participation should play a growing role in National Park Service activities as we enter the next century. We also describe how recent social science research can provide lessons to guide managers' efforts to design and implement public participation.

### Rationales for participation

In the past decade, social science research has made a great deal of progress on two questions:

(1) *why* public participation should occur. For example, people still disagree about whether lay people should be involved in agency decisions at all.

(2) *how* to best design and implement a participation process. For example, there is uncertainty about how to best involve, meaningfully, diverse lay people and scientists in an efficient, effective decision-making process.

In 1990, Daniel Fiorino provided a wonderful approach to answering the "why" question when he outlined three kinds of reasons for involving the public in decision making: instrumental, substantive, and normative.

### Instrumental reasons for public participation

These reasons are associated with achieving program goals. For example, a park may promote participation by recreation interest groups in management planning because it helps ensure that resource use guidelines are followed. In some instances self-enforcement may be the only option available to parks. Instrumental reasons for public participation are that it helps achieve mandate

and goals, reduces legal challenges, enhances legitimacy and trust, reduces costs, and reduces conflict.

Participation can enhance legitimacy and build trust (Renn 1998, Tuler and Webler forthcoming). They can help an agency or organization achieve programmatic goals when people are more likely to defer to decisions that are viewed as being legitimate and when the decision maker is trusted. Recent social science research has revealed that important attributes leading to trust are how much an organization is seen as caring and committed to the people affected by it (Kasperson et al. 1992; Peters et al. 1997).

Finally, public involvement can reduce costs and conflict associated with a decision. Although participation can be costly in terms of staff effort and time, it is not as costly as the legal challenges and delays that can come about from inadequate involvement. Parties who feel included in the decision making may be less likely to see legal action as necessary. Conflict reduction is another benefit. Some groups or individuals opt to intervene through external political means such as protests, backdoor politics, or public confrontation. Experience has shown that these strategies can be disabled by offering these parties a meaningful role in the process (Bleiker and Bleiker 1995). If they refuse to participate, the group can lose its public legitimacy. For instance, many believed that northern New England avoided a spotted owl-type controversy because of the extensive, inclusive process undertaken by the Northern Forest Lands Council (McGrory-Klyza and Trombulak 1994).

### Substantive reasons for public participation

These reasons are associated with making better decisions. For example, when Rocky Mountain National Park wanted to improve the scenic experiences of visitors, social science researchers handed out returnable cameras to visitors, asking them to photograph positive and negative scenes. This provided direct access to visitor pref-

erences (Taylor 1998). Substantive reasons for public participation included more knowledge, new ways to define the problem, new ways to envision solutions, and solutions that are more acceptable.

While technical experts can generate sound alternatives, they can also miss important information or suggest options that are not acceptable to the public. The following illustrations from transportation planning and public health protection illustrate how public participation can improve the quality of decision making:

- In Holland, when faced with a number of unacceptable alternatives, citizens brainstormed a solution that experts missed—using the breakdown lane—to solve a temporary traffic problem (Pestman 1998).
- On Cape Cod, Massachusetts, conservationists and fishermen are collaborating to design gill-net breakaway devices that meet the needs of fishermen while also ending incidental takings of endangered right whales (Wiley 1998).
- In western Nevada, Department of Energy scientists ignored a key pathway of exposure to Shoshone Indians from nuclear weapons testing fallout because they failed to recognize that the Shoshone eat wild hare, including the hares' thyroid gland, which increases the exposure to radioactive iodine (Frohberg 1999).

### Normative reasons for public participation

These reasons are associated with concepts of right and wrong. In a democratic society, we assume that citizens should have some say in decisions that affect them (Cvetkovich and Earle 1994, Rosenbaum 1978, Wellman and Tipple 1990). Some social science researchers have linked this to the idea of informed consent—that government has the responsibility to obtain the consent of the governed (National Research Council 1996, Shrader-Frechette 1993, Bleiker and Bleiker 1995). Normative reasons are extremely important to members of the public, while agency staff may be more focused on instrumental or substantive reasons. Normative reasons for public participation are respectful of the individual, give people a chance to be heard, and involve citizens in governance.

### Applying social science research to public participation

Now we turn to the “how” question: how should public involvement be done? Recently, this has been the subject of some interesting social science research. Foremost is the publication of a report by the National Research Council called *Understanding Risk: Informing Decisions in a Democratic Society* (1996). While the report is about risk decision making, it is widely applicable to a range of issues, including park management.

The committee that wrote the report stressed the need to distinguish between two fundamentally different ways of making sense about the world. They called these *analysis* and *deliberation*. Analysis includes science, but also systematic investigation and reasoning by citizens or stakeholders. Deliberation includes political debates about preferences, but also the talk that goes on among scientists as they evaluate each other's work or design studies. Both citizens and experts need to participate in analysis and deliberation (Webler and Tuler 1998). It is important to understand that the report does not make and less legitimate the importance of science and technical analysis in policy making. Rather, it sees analysis and deliberation as equally important and mutually supportive ways of building understandings.

Many of the activities conducted by the National Park Service, such as developing resource management plans, are appropriate for an analytic-deliberative process. In a recent article in *Bioscience*, Dietz and Stern (1998) argued that broadly based deliberative processes to guide and interpret scientific analysis are appropriate for situations characterized by:

- *Multidimensionality*. For example, park management plans can have many effects on local communities, park resources, and visitors' experiences. The benefits and costs of different decisions are not equally shared by all.
- *Scientific uncertainty*. For example, there are many uncertainties associated with ecosystem functioning, wildlife population dynamics, and visitor behaviors and preferences. Parks must address such uncertainties and find ways to cope with them.
- *Value conflict and uncertainty*. For example, people differ in the importance they attach to the outcomes of decisions. Some

people wanted Olympic National Park to maintain exotic populations of mountain goats, while others were more concerned with the impacts of the goats on native wildflowers.

- *Mistrust*. For example, local communities may not trust a park if they perceive it to have been established through an illegitimate taking of private lands.
- *Urgency*. For example, it is often not feasible to wait for additional scientific certainty or resolution of value conflicts.

The challenge, of course, is to find the right combination of analysis and deliberation at each step of a decision-making process. Conducting competent science is clearly a key part of a successful process, but so is getting the relevant science. Even the best analysis may be useless if it does not relate to what people care about. Getting the participation right means doing the outreach correctly, so that the appropriate parties are involved. Getting the right participation means finding the appropriate way to involve stakeholders and citizens in the process. The National Park Service and individual park units will not be served well by dedicating all resources and staff to public participation. Rather, we suggest that NPS managers should consult with a wide range of affected parties. Together they can best decide when and how to conduct a participatory process. Certainly, caution must be exercised to avoid implementing an elaborate process when a more simplified (and less costly) one will suffice, and vice versa.

### Lessons from prior research

The *Understanding Risk* report offers some initial guidance for matching policy problems with process designs through a diagnostic activity. Just as a medical doctor diagnoses a patient's condition, staffers can diagnose a policy environment and propose an appropriate policy making instrument. As with medicine, “cookbook” clarity is impossible (National Research Council 1996, see also Earle and Cvetkovich 1991, Webler 1997). On the other hand, we do not need to reinvent the wheel every time.

During the past 10 years social science researchers have learned much about how to do public participation better. Lessons can be learned from prior experiences, including those of other federal agencies such

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as the Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Forest Service, Army Corps of Engineers, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Department of Energy. These experiences can help NPS and park managers make judgments about the appropriate amounts of analysis and deliberation throughout a process. Like any judgment, a number of needs must be balanced. Among them are: How to gather and use the best information? How to ensure broad and meaningful participation? How to make a decision with available—but limited—resources? And how to reduce the uncertainties inherent to a tolerable level?

For example, a key lesson from prior research is that everyone measures success differently, both in regard to process *and* outcomes—and not everyone may agree with each other (Carnes et al. 1998, Landre and Knuth 1993, Lauber and Knuth 1997, Moore 1996, Shindler and Neburka 1997, Tuler and Webler 1999). Thus, conveners of a process should identify the ways that different participants define success. While "success" can be defined in many ways, in the context of federal and state agency efforts the definition should at least in part be related to the need to show that resources (e.g., funding, staff time) are being used effectively and that the greatest amount is being done for the least amount of effort.

Other lessons have to do with the opportunities for participation and the forms of interaction that are created among the participants. For example, to effectively ensure that participation is meaningful for all, convening organizations must do more than focus simply on balanced representation and opportunities for participation. They must also *support* participation and the *balancing* of influence, so that prejudice, preferential treatment, or imbalance in resources necessary to participate effectively are eliminated (Kasperson 1986, Renn 1992, Renn et al. 1995). The best processes ensure proactive outreach to those who may be affected by a decision (Bleiker and Bleiker 1995, Tuler and Webler forthcoming). Conveners of a process should conduct a preliminary investigation into their expectations and find a way to involve at least the most outspoken of these parties in the design of the process. This can require that agencies learn who they need to talk with about a decision (e.g., Force and Williams 1989). Agencies are often judged for their respon-

siveness and accountability on the basis of how well potentially affected parties are kept informed of activities and decisions. Lastly, participants care about the quality of their discussions and interactions, including being treated respectfully and being heard or listened to (Becker et al. 1995, Bradbury and Branch 1999, Hartley 1998, Tuler forthcoming, Tuler and Webler 1999). Because of their pivotal role, facilitators should ask that participants agree to basic ground rules about how questions are asked and information presented.

### Conclusion

Social science research offers a tremendous resource to NPS managers as they engage in participatory planning and decision-making activities. Both planners and participants will benefit by developing greater familiarity with the participation techniques and resources that are available. Public participation consultants offer courses and training in these areas. Some offer "coaching" to help planners work through problems that arise. In addition, there is a wealth of case studies describing innovative and exemplary participation processes. Familiarity with that literature will enhance the ability of NPS managers to think creatively about how to design processes. They should adapt what is known to the specific needs in the National Park Service. For example, the National Park Service could benefit from developing its own diagnostic guidelines for matching process features with problem types.

At the same time, the National Park Service may face constraints that others have not, and careful attention will need to be given to which lessons are relevant. The Park Service has a narrow mission as defined by the Organic Act to conserve resources and provide for their enjoyment. Thus, for example, the lesson that a process should be inclusive of all concerns may not always be possible. Public participants may want to include issues that are outside of this mission.

Yet, the National Park Service cannot hide behind its narrow mission. The political culture is evolving toward greater public accountability and participation in governance. As the National Park Service responds to this change, it can find much usable knowledge from social science research. **PS**

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