

This article was downloaded by: [Colorado State University]

On: 05 March 2012, At: 10:35

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usnr20>

Perceptions of Success and the Question of Consensus in Natural Resource Collaboration: Lessons from an Inactive Collaborative Group

Aleta K. Rudeen ^a, Maria E. Fernandez-Gimenez ^a, Jessica L. Thompson ^b & Paul Meiman ^a

^a Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

^b Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

Available online: 05 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Aleta K. Rudeen, Maria E. Fernandez-Gimenez, Jessica L. Thompson & Paul Meiman (2012): Perceptions of Success and the Question of Consensus in Natural Resource Collaboration: Lessons from an Inactive Collaborative Group, *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal*, DOI:10.1080/08941920.2011.653518

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2011.653518>



PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings,

demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Perceptions of Success and the Question of Consensus in Natural Resource Collaboration: Lessons from an Inactive Collaborative Group

ALETA K. RUDEEN AND
MARIA E. FERNANDEZ-GIMENEZ

Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship, Colorado State
University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

JESSICA L. THOMPSON

Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, Colorado
State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

PAUL MEIMAN

Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship, Colorado State
University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

To better understand the relationship between collaborative process and results, we interviewed participants of an inactive collaborative group and analyzed their perceptions of success and the role of consensus in the group's process and outcomes. The main objective of the Intermountain Public Land Cooperative (IMPLC, a pseudonym) was to craft a consensus community alternative for the local Bureau of Land Management (BLM) resource area's Resource Management Plan. Participants perceived many benefits from collaboration, including improved communication and relationships, and high-quality input to the BLM planning process. However, the group was unable to reach consensus and one-quarter of those interviewed indicated that they were less likely to collaborate in the future due to their IMPLC experience. The IMPLC case highlights both benefits and costs of using consensus in collaboration.

Keywords conflict, consensus, evaluation, natural resource collaboration, social capital, success, trust

Received 9 March 2010; accepted 15 September 2011.

We thank the participants of the IMPLC for their participation in this research and three anonymous reviewers for their extensive and constructive comments. This research was supported by the Colorado Agricultural Experiment Station and the Center for Collaborative Conservation at Colorado State University.

Address correspondence to Maria E. Fernandez-Gimenez, Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship, Colorado State University, Campus Mail 1472, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1472, USA. E-mail: maria.fernandez-gimenez@colostate.edu

Multistakeholder collaboration has demonstrated potential value in resolving natural resource conflicts and creating and implementing management plans (Brunner 2002; Conley and Moote 2003; Daniels and Walker 2001; Innes and Booher 2010; Sabatier et al. 2005; Schuett and Selin 2002; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). In particular, collaboration has been advanced as a means to increase the social accountability and legitimacy of decisions (Daniels and Walker 2001; Weber 2003; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000), build trust and strengthen social networks (Paulson 1998; Pretty and Smith 2004; Schuett and Selin 2002; Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez 2008), and promote creative decisions that are more representative of stakeholders and their interests (Daniels and Walker 2001; Innes and Booher 1999; O'Leary and Bingham 2003; Susskind et al. 1999).

Increasingly, land management agencies are embracing collaborative approaches to natural resource management (Daniels and Walker 2001; Weber 2003; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). However, critics caution that collaboration can disenfranchise local (Lane 2003) and distant stakeholders (McClosky 1999), privilege local voices or certain resource uses (Hibbard and Madsen 2003), require unreasonable amounts of time, lead to compromise solutions (Kenney 2000), delegitimize conflict (McClosky 1999; Peterson et al. 2005), evade established environmental regulations, and weaken rather than strengthen the principles of democracy and democratic accountability (Brunner 2002; McCarthy 2005; Moote 2008; Weber 2003). While collaborative processes promote stakeholder engagement in decision making, these critiques point to potential shortcomings of collaboration. In this article, we focus on community-based collaborative resource management, which we define as a group of diverse stakeholders who convene voluntarily to work on natural resource policy, planning, or management issues specific to a particular location (Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez 2008).

This study of the Intermountain Public Lands Cooperative (IMPLC, a pseudonym), an inactive community-based collaborative group, provides the opportunity to learn from a consensus-building process that did not achieve its main goal. The objectives of this research were to (1) investigate how IMPLC participants defined success and perceived the outcomes of the process, and (2) explore the role of consensus decision making in relation to IMPLC outcomes and participants' perceptions of success-seeking and the outcomes of the process. To place our research in context, we first provide a brief synopsis of the IMPLC process, and situate our study within the literature on assessing success and using consensus in collaborative natural resource management.

Synopsis of the IMPLC Process

Prior to formation of the IMPLC, located in the Intermountain West of the United States, stakeholders in the region experienced a long history of entrenched conflict over land management. The IMPLC formed to deescalate these conflicts by identifying and addressing common interests among diverse and often adversarial stakeholders. The IMPLC was a self-organized group of citizens who had researched the benefits of collaboration. Early on, the group created a habitat improvement plan for one area of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. When the BLM began its Resource Management Plan (RMP) revision process, the IMPLC's goal became to craft a consensus community alternative for the RMP. Staff members

of the BLM's national partnership office were brought to the site to provide on-site training in collaboration to IMPLC members, and the BLM obtained a grant to fund a professional facilitator external to the agency and the group.

IMPLC's mailing list included 150 people, of whom 30–60 were active participants. Members included local elected officials, state and federal agencies, energy industry representatives, off-highway vehicle and recreation interests, local citizens, ranchers and farmers, wild horse advocates, conservationists, and wilderness and environmental advocates. The main issues at stake involved competing proposals for wilderness and energy development in the same location, as well as broader concerns about wildlife habitat and travel management throughout the resource area.

Prior to beginning work on the community alternative, IMPLC members participated in several days of BLM-sponsored training on collaboration, and hired an external evaluator to conduct a situation assessment. Group members then interviewed and selected (by unanimous agreement) a professional facilitator, a Harvard-trained mediator with extensive experience in high-profile conflicts. With the facilitator's guidance, IMPLC members developed ground rules for participation. As part of this effort, the participants insisted on a consensus decision rule, believing that consensus would create a level playing field, promote more creative decisions, and lead them to a community alternative they all could support. Neither the facilitator nor the local BLM staff explicitly recommended consensus as a decision-making standard. However, according to national BLM policy, should a community alternative be developed by full consensus during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, that alternative, if appropriate, should be the BLM's preferred alternative (Taylor 2003). Consistent with this policy, IMPLC members understood that if they came to consensus, the BLM would likely adopt their alternative as the preferred alternative in the RMP. IMPLC participants' interpretation of national BLM policy was a strong incentive for many to insist on a consensus decision rule.

The IMPLC protocols described consensus as follows: "For the purposes of IMPLC decision-making, all of the following definitions will be considered 'consensus': There is unanimous agreement among all participants present. All IMPLC members present are willing to 'live with' the proposal. One or more members present may register dissent, but do not wish to block IMPLC from action or agreement that would otherwise be possible except for their dissent."

The IMPLC met 23 times as a full group between 2002 and 2006, with the most intensive meeting period during 2004–2006. Meetings often lasted 4–8 hours, and many stakeholders travelled up to 10 hours round-trip to attend. The facilitator used many strategies to help IMPLC members develop empathy and respect for one another, articulate their interests, learn collaborative communication skills, assemble needed technical expertise and information, and seek opportunities for constructive bargaining among interest groups. The group reached agreement on several smaller issues, but was unable to come to consensus on the major issues in the RMP. The IMPLC stopped meeting in 2006 when funding for the facilitator ceased after BLM and IMPLC members realized that the group would not achieve its goal of a consensus community alternative for the RMP. The final BLM RMP and associated environmental impact statement (EIS) do not include a community alternative, but do incorporate many of the concerns articulated through the IMPLC's public collaborative dialogue.

Success in Collaboration

When assessing the performance of community-based collaboration, it is important to consider how and by whom “success” is defined. Success can be defined in terms of process (inclusiveness, fairness, and legitimacy), outputs (agreements, plans, activities), and outcomes (changed social, economic, and ecological conditions) (Koontz and Thomas 2006; Mandarano 2008). Success may be evaluated relative to a group’s own goals or by applying independent criteria, and can be assessed based on participants’ perceptions of and satisfaction with the process and outcomes, or by using more objective measures. Much of the research on consensus building focuses on qualitative assessment of process and outputs, based on case studies (d’Estree and Colby 2004; Forester 2009; Gray 1989; Innes and Booher 2010; O’Leary and Bingham 2003; Susskind and Cruikshank 1987), although quantitative assessments have been attempted (Margerum 2002; Schively 2007).

The literature is replete with evaluation criteria, which build upon metrics proposed in the early work on consensus building, such as fairness, efficiency, wisdom, and durability of agreements (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987), and include both participants’ subjective perceptions of process and objective evaluations of criteria such as procedural fairness (Gray 1989). The conflict resolution literature often emphasizes outputs as primary evaluation criteria—specifically, the achievement and quality of agreements (d’Estree and Colby 2004). Weber (2003) proposes democratic accountability as a criterion for evaluating grassroots ecosystem management initiatives. As new ideas of complexity, resilience, and adaptive governance influence the field, several scholars suggest that a broader and longer term metric of success is the degree to which a collaboration results in multiple-loop learning, system adaptation, and diffusion of institutional innovations (Brunner et al. 2005; Fernandez-Gimenez et al. 2008; Innes and Booher 2010; Steelman 2010).

Fewer studies have documented the social, economic, and environmental outcomes of natural resource collaboration. Social outcomes, such as changes in relationships and social capital, have been assessed using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Leach et al. 2002; Mandarano 2008; Mandarano 2009; Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez 2008), and existing research suggests that collaboration can increase social capital but does not always result in increased trust (Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez 2008). Environmental and economic outcomes are challenging to track and may take longer to develop (Koontz and Thomas 2006; Mandarano 2008; Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez 2008), and establishing causal relationships between collaborative planning and community-level economic or environmental change may be difficult (Conley and Moote 2003; Koontz and Thomas 2006).

Leach et al. (2002) suggest that multiple success measures are necessary because collaborative partnerships take on “multiple goals simultaneously,” but Pagdee et al. (2006) caution that achieving all facets of success is a complicated and difficult task, and Innes and Booher (1999) suggest that not all outcomes must be achieved in order for a process to be considered successful. Some scholars have suggested that collaborative processes that do not reach their goals can still have positive effects (Conley and Moote 2003; Innes and Booher 1999). However, when goals are not reached, collaboration may come at a cost, including social capital that is “consumed rather than built” (Conley & Moote, 2003, 373). For example, Margerum (2002) found that failure to reach consensus on a key issue in one case, “has had a lasting impact on the efficacy of planning” (183).

Evaluation of collaborative processes should help increase our understanding of the limits and potential of collaboration (Conley and Moote 2003). To make recommendations on collaborative process design, we must also identify, measure, and analyze the process and contextual factors that influence success, and the relationship between these factors and the group's outputs and outcomes. Logic and experience suggest that a well-designed and well-implemented collaborative process that produces desired outputs will lead to long-term improvements in social and potentially environmental conditions. Similarly, we expect that a poor process with no or few desired outputs will not lead to positive changes, and may have negative consequences. What happens, though, when the process meets both subjective and objective criteria for success, but the desired output is not attained? Can beneficial outcomes still be achieved? If there are both positive and negative outcomes, what are the implications for collaborative process design?

This research explores participant perceptions and interpretations of success in the IMPLC, addressing our first research question: How did IMPLC participants define success and perceive outcomes of the collaborative process? We do not aim to measure success, but rather to understand how IMPLC participants perceived success, especially in light of their inability to reach consensus.

Consensus Decision Making

Collaborative natural resource management does not require consensus decision making (Daniels and Walker 2001). However, consensus-building processes and the use of a consensus decision rule are distinguishing characteristics of many natural resource collaborations. Because IMPLC adopted a consensus decision-making rule, its collaborative process was a consensus-seeking process, and thus we use the terms collaborative process and consensus-seeking process interchangeably in referring to the IMPLC's deliberations.

In consensus-building processes, participants strive to create agreements that all members can support, or at least not actively oppose, and that provide participating interests with better options than they could otherwise achieve (Daniels and Walker 2001; Mansbridge 1980; Straus 2002; Susskind and Cruikshank 1987). Consensus building is thought to lead to more creative and durable solutions that are more readily implemented than those made through adversarial legal or administrative processes, majority vote, positional bargaining, or individual decision making (Fisher et al. 1991; Straus 2002; Susskind et al. 1999), while fostering mutual respect, learning, and improved communication and relationships (Innes and Booher 1999). Recognized obstacles to consensus include deeply held value, ideological, or cultural differences, insufficient incentives, and historical relationships, although these challenges are not always insurmountable (Daniels and Walker 2001; Forester 2009; Gray 1989). Consensus-seeking approaches may be counterproductive when diverse views are sought or it is important to recognize and honor participants' different value systems (Daniels and Walker 2001; Peterson et al. 2005), or when an adversarial decision-making approach is appropriate (Mansbridge 1980). When interdependence of parties is low and there is little potential to identify common interests, consensus building is unlikely to succeed. When poorly implemented or inappropriate to the situation, consensus building may result in false consensus, where internal social pressure (intimidation)

or external forces lead participants with minority views to withhold their opposition to a proposal (Daniels and Walker 2001; Mansbridge 1980; Toker 2004). Such situations result in reinforcement of power disparities instead of leveling the playing field (Mansbridge 1980; Toker 2004).

In this study, we sought to understand the relationship between the goal of reaching consensus, the process of consensus building, and participants' perceptions of the IMPLC's success, leading to our second research question: How did the goal of consensus affect the collaborative process and participants' perceptions of IMPLC's success?

Methods

Data Collection

We interviewed 20 IMPLC participants between August and November 2008, using semistructured, in-depth interviews. Participants were identified using a networking method, and sampling continued until nearly all recommended participants had been interviewed and at least one participant was interviewed from each stakeholder group.

Interview questions covered a range of topics, including communication, conflict, trust, collaborative process, consensus, and success in the IMPLC. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours in length and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

In fall 2009, we conducted two meetings with local community members to present research findings and get stakeholder feedback. These meetings allowed us to cross-check our results and interpretations with both IMPLC participants and other community members. In addition, members of the research team observed many of the IMPLC meetings between 2004 and 2006 as participant observers, and notes from these meetings were used to validate interviewees' retrospective perceptions of changes in communicative capacity and relationships among participants.

Data Analysis

Interviews were coded using NVivo and Microsoft Excel. We used a modified grounded theory approach (Fendt and Sachs 2008) to understand respondents' perspectives on success, failure, consensus-based decision making, and the value of the collaborative process, using a combination of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Starks and Trinidad 2007; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

First we coded the IMPLC interviews broadly for general themes, and then we selected relevant sections for further analysis. We used open coding to categorize portions of responses related to our research questions. We conducted a second round of coding to make distinctions between perspectives on the IMPLC process, consensus, and trust. Finally, through selective coding, recoding, and constant comparison, themes were created to relate to the overall phenomenon. We also identified emergent code categories, and compared interviews to identify themes and variations within and among respondents and stakeholder groups. Indicators of success, trust, and the role of consensus were compared with past research to determine whether this case confirmed or contradicted current theory and past research.

Findings

Research Question 1: IMPLC Participants' Perceptions of Success and Outcomes

Our findings revealed two distinct ways of thinking about “success” in the IMPLC articulated by nearly all respondents. First, success described whether or not goals were reached. Second, success was defined in terms of other benefits of collaboration, revealing the widely shared perception that the group’s inability to reach its main goal did not necessarily mean that it failed.

Respondents agreed that the IMPLC was unsuccessful in achieving its self-imposed goal of crafting a community alternative for the RMP. However, indicators of success included improved communication, understanding, and relationships; the opportunity to provide better and more comprehensive input to the BLM; and better representation of community and stakeholder interests in a public forum resulting in a more carefully considered and well-informed RMP revision. While some participants deemed the IMPLC a failure because it did not reach its goal, all respondents described benefits from the process and most felt that these were sufficient to consider the IMPLC simultaneously successful and a failure.

Participants often used the word “success” to describe the IMPLC in a way that reached beyond the group’s primary goal, referring to increased understanding, communication, and in some cases trust. As one participant stated;

I have a positive view of the [IMPLC] and part of that is because I really enjoyed it. And I really enjoyed it because I got to know so many people from so many different backgrounds and interests and values and I really understood, most of the time, where they were coming from. And so from my point of view . . . that’s a success because we did build trust, we did open lines of communication that weren’t open before.

While most participants did not say they enjoyed the process, many shared the view that the outcomes from the IMPLC’s deliberations were enough to consider the group a success despite lack of agreement on the RMP revision. In response to the question “Was the IMPLC successful?” another participant replied:

Definitely. I think it made for a better plan. . . . And then I think that the relationships that we built . . . relationships and communication and trust and that type of thing. So I think in both those regards they were successful.

All but one of the 20 interviewees found the IMPLC process useful and beneficial. Of these, 16 gave an unqualified and enthusiastic response to the question of whether the process was useful, and three felt it was useful but were less enthusiastic or expressed some reservations. One respondent did not answer the question.

A couple of participants acknowledged the benefits but questioned the value of the process, suggesting that the process may not have met the criterion of efficiency:

I do think that we’ve benefited from doing it. Now, was it worth it, well, it’s hard to say In terms of time, in terms of the expense, we put a lot of BLM expense and time into it, other stakeholders and participants put a tremendous amount of time and expense into it. I mean, all the trips

and traveling and money spent on that kind of stuff, geez, you know. And I don't know how you measure that. Was it worth it? I don't know.

Another participant stated that the IMPLC was able to come to agreement on many smaller issues, but could not agree on the core topics for the RMP revision.

But there were three main [issues] that really didn't get consensus, the hardest ones consensus wasn't achieved. So, [the IMPLC] was phenomenally successful at giving BLM upfront opinion[s] on a plan. Hands down, in this nation, there's not a BLM plan that will come out as well vetted as this draft does. And . . . there will be less controversy over this BLM plan's draft, than any other plan in the nation because of it. There are still core areas that we didn't work through. But the organization is a huge success, because it gave BLM community perspectives on topics that . . . [the] BLM would have never even thought of that this group brought forward Hugely successful when it came to BLM doing an RMP [revision].

This participant uses both meanings of success by stating that IMPLC was not successful in reaching consensus on the core issues (energy development, wilderness, and wildlife), but the group was successful in achieving high-quality conversation. Others shared this view:

[There were areas where we] didn't reach consensus, and that doesn't matter. Let me be clear about that. What matters, is BLM heard the differing views. They would never have heard those views without [the IMPLC]. So it doesn't matter that we didn't agree on things. The point is when BLM . . . went back to write that plan, they knew where every side was coming from, and they had the knowledge to make the best balance they could.

While the IMPLC was generally considered successful in improving relationships and a failure in accomplishing goals, questions remain about how participants will apply what they learned from the IMPLC to future collaborative efforts. In many cases, participants reported that they would participate again if given the chance. Although respondents also related feelings of frustration, loss and anger about the IMPLC, most believed they got something out of the process, and that they or the larger community benefited from the IMPLC. In the words of one participant, "I'm sure I gained more than I lost personally."

However, this response was not universal, and some participants expressed significant misgivings about engaging in future collaborative efforts. Many participants believed that while transparency, friendships, and sometimes respect for other participants grew out of the process, trust in other participants, and particularly in the interest groups they represented, did not. The following quotations illustrate these feelings of distrust:

I'd say, for me, I probably had more trust in the beginning than I did towards the end. . . . I went into it open, willing to collaborate.

For me, [trust] decreased. I started out trusting people more than I do now . . . because I feel that people were not honestly there to compromise on points.

I think in some cases [participants] did find that they could at least communicate with each other but I don't think they ever trusted each other and I don't think they do today. You know I think if anything, what it did was show them they were right . . . not trusting.

The group's inability to reach consensus combined with distrust about the motives of other stakeholders undermined some participants' confidence in collaboration as an effective approach to addressing conflict: "It burned me out on trying to work with people is what the IMPLC did to me." The IMPLC process discouraged this respondent from participating in future collaborative efforts. The same participant went on to say that one thing he learned from the IMPLC process was to identify deal-breakers early on. He applied this lesson by not attempting collaboration on another natural resource issue in a different setting:

It educated [me] as to what to watch out for in the future. And that saved our tail . . . on [the other collaborative effort] because we knew right up front, "alright, let's find out the deal breakers upfront where [we] can't go through this." And it was actually thanks to [another participant, who] said, "alright, we'll be collaborative, but only if right up front, you identify your deal breakers or things you won't give on," and that was awesome because . . . we realized we were not going to agree on a couple key issues for [that group] and we just abandoned the meetings, and agreed to fight.

This comment raises questions about the long-term outcomes of collaborations that do not reach their goals. Several respondents felt that their major lesson from the IMPLC was to opt out of collaboration, because it cannot meet their needs. At least five participants (25% of interviewees) stated that their experience in the IMPLC would make them more cautious about participating in future collaborative efforts. In the words of another participant: "We got nowhere. . . . In my opinion, it certainly put [a] cautionary tale on any future collaborative efforts."

In sum, the IMPLC consensus-seeking process encouraged participation and helped participants to appreciate and respect one another. Individual relationships improved; participants better understood others' perspectives and were able to communicate more effectively. The BLM also received extensive and high-quality input on the RMP revision. The influence of the process on interpersonal trust and trust among stakeholder groups was mixed and difficult to interpret. For at least a quarter of the participants, the failure to reach consensus exacerbated mistrust among some stakeholder groups and led to a more negative attitude toward collaboration and a diminished likelihood of participating in future collaborative efforts.

Research Question 2: The Role of Consensus in the IMPLC

IMPLC participants chose and were committed to consensus-based decision making. After the process, all but one participant agreed that consensus probably was not

possible, given the group's composition and goals. However, despite the agreed-upon definition of consensus in the group's ground rules, participants' understanding of consensus varied. Some IMPLC participants contrasted consensus with voting systems, while others believed that a consensus process gave participants veto power, which made it a nonmajority process, and therefore a safer way to participate. These differences of perception are important to understanding how participants evaluated the consensus process, as well as their knowledge of alternative decision-making systems.

To assess the role of consensus in the IMPLC, we asked participants two questions: (1) Was a consensus community alternative possible? (2) Was consensus decision making required to achieve a useful and productive process?

Was Consensus Possible? The IMPLC's goals, core controversies, and membership were the primary hurdles to reaching consensus on the RMP. Only one of the 20 interviewees thought that, given more time, a consensus agreement would have been possible. Fifteen respondents stated that the IMPLC definitely would not have been able to come to consensus on the core issues for the RMP revision. Four respondents thought consensus was unlikely, and probably would never have occurred. That fact that a majority of respondents believed that the IMPLC would never have reached consensus suggests that a consensus community alternative for the RMP was an unrealistic goal for this group. Participants gave a variety of explanations for why the IMPLC was unable to achieve consensus. Participants from all stakeholder groups believed they would never be able to agree on the core issues before the IMPLC, energy development and wilderness designations. At least half of those interviewed observed that consensus was not possible given the group's size, diversity, polarized views on these issues, and open process, which allowed new members to join at any time.

The core issues in the RMP revision were associated with incompatible values about and goals for natural resources, grounded in a highly utilitarian view on one hand and a strongly preservationist perspective on the other. The IMPLC experienced entrenched conflict as a result of these fundamentally incompatible value sets. One participant highlighted the intensity of the issues and the improbability of consensus:

We weren't able to collaborate. In general...I mean,...we have our locked-in positions and people were not willing to, they say you don't use the word compromise in collaboration, but a reality is you do have to compromise. If you want one hundred percent of the land to be grazed, anything less is a compromise, and just the opposite if you want one hundred percent preserved, anything less would be compromise and most people were not willing to compromise on any of the key issues.

Participants were skeptical about others' incentives to reach agreement on key issues:

It changed over time. I think people were more willing to look at compromise solutions over time. [But] overall, people went into it thinking, "I'm going into this process, either because I'm going to get what I want out of this process, or I'm going to make damn sure they don't get what they want out of the process."

Three-quarters (15) of the interviewees cited participants' lack of willingness or incentive to collaborate as reasons for the failure to reach consensus. Most of these perceived themselves as willing to compromise and collaborating in good faith, but others from opposing stakeholder groups as disingenuous. Regardless of value orientation or stakeholder group, many participants distrusted others' intentions.

Was the Goal of Consensus Required to Achieve a Useful Process? Fifteen of the 20 respondents understood and answered this question. Of these, four stated a definite "yes," that in order to attain the benefits of the process, consensus decision making was required. Six respondents said "yes, probably," expressing agreement with the statement but without complete certainty. Three people said "no," they did not think consensus was required for the process to have been beneficial, and two respondents said they were unsure. Overall, nearly all participants felt the process was beneficial to some degree and that consensus was not possible. Of these, nine also thought, to varying degrees, that the goal of consensus was needed in order for the process to have the benefits it did.

One participant articulated what they learned from the IMPLC process and consensus this way:

If someone came up to me and said, "Should we go through this in our community?" I'd say "Yes, it was worth it." But I'd advise somebody: "you got your tough areas, don't expect consensus on them." I expected consensus on those tough areas, and I was wrong . . . I think I'd do what we did on [another more recent collaborative effort]. I'd say "okay, raise your hand if you're never going to give on this subject and give me a justification why." And I'd just avoid them.

Another participant explained that the goal of consensus was initially necessary to get participation, but later became an obstacle to reaching their goals:

I think [the goal of consensus decision making] was necessary. It ultimately prevented [the IMPLC] from reaching its success, but given that I don't think it could have ever reached that success, I'd say it was a good thing to do process-wise.

A different participant stated:

You couldn't have one without the other. I mean, without consensus-based decision making we had no reason to be together. So it helped, because it helped keep, you know a civil discourse . . . without [consensus] you have no basis for discussion.

Yet another stated that they only participated because of the commitment to consensus, saying, "Well I don't think we [would] have come to the table . . . if it wasn't consensus-based." This participant, like others, felt that consensus was the only way to ensure a fair process and manage the power inequalities in the IMPLC. Participants who expressed this view felt they would have been marginalized in a majority-vote decision-making process.

All of these participants voiced the common sentiment that consensus-based decision making helped the group to continue a productive conversation and attempt

to maximize everyone's gain. However, commitment to consensus also made it impossible to achieve their goal of a community alternative for the RMP.

Discussion

In the introduction, we posed the question: What are the outcomes of a consensus-seeking process when the process is well implemented but the desired output (a consensus decision) is not achieved? Existing theory and empirical work suggest that collaboration can yield many benefits even if it does not achieve all of its goals (Conley and Moote 2003; Innes and Booher 1999, 2010), and successful collaborations can lead to system-wide changes in governance and resilience (Innes and Booher 2010), but that "failed" collaborations sometimes exact a high cost in terms of future collaborative relationships (Conley and Moote 2003). Our results suggest that a process that participants perceive as legitimate and beneficial may have both positive and negative outcomes. In the IMPLC, the group's commitment to the shared goal of reaching consensus and, consequently, to consensus-seeking as a process for achieving that goal, made the perceived benefits possible, but also undermined the group's ability to craft a community alternative for the RMP. Thus, while consensus seeking lent legitimacy to the process, kept participants motivated and engaged, and created opportunities for increased learning and mutual understanding, it also contributed to unrealistic expectations and ultimately disappointment and disillusionment among participants when agreement was not reached. This disappointment, in turn, discouraged some participants from investing in future collaborative efforts. In the IMPLC, short-term social outcomes did not translate into future collaborative capacity or diffusion of collaboration as an institutional innovation, as others have predicted or observed (Brunner et al. 2005; Innes and Booher 1999, 2010; McKinney and Field 2008; Steelman 2010). It is still early to assess the long-term outcomes of the IMPLC, but our results from 2008, two years after the group ceased to meet, support Conley and Moote's (2003) hypothesis about the potential costs of failed collaboration. The IMPLC was a case in which participants holding opposing views were unable to reach consensus, because they perceived that there was no meaningful agreement they all could support without compromising their core values and interests (Paulson 1998; Rasmussen and Brunson 1996).

If the IMPLC consensus-seeking process met objective and subjective criteria for success, why was the desired output—consensus—not achieved? Participants were largely satisfied with the IMPLC process, even when they found it frustrating. The process met typical objective criteria of success: The full range of stakeholders participated and the process was open, inclusive, and transparent; it was professionally facilitated with clear and unanimously supported ground rules devised by the membership; members agreed on their shared goal; and participants engaged in extensive mutual learning, education, and information exchange.

One possible explanation is that participants' interests and underlying values were at odds, and despite gaining empathy, understanding, and respect for one another, they never achieved a sense of interdependence sufficient for them to identify a mutual-gains solution. Members found it impossible to arrive at creative solutions that would "expand the pie" when their desired futures for a specific piece of land were fundamentally different. There was no space for interest-based

bargaining because there was nothing for them to trade. IMPLC participants were overly optimistic about each other's willingness or ability to negotiate, and their inability to find a mutual gains solution undermined trust in one another and confidence in collaboration as a means to overcome natural resource conflicts. If there was a flaw in the IMPLC process, it was that the primary facilitator was not hired in time to conduct the conflict assessment. Had she done the assessment herself, the facilitator, group members, and the BLM might have realized at the outset that some interests' best alternatives to a negotiated settlement (BATNAs) were more attractive to them, despite the risk entailed, than agreements that other parties could support. Instead, these parties' BATNAs remained undisclosed until collaboration broke down, leading to feelings of mistrust and betrayal on the part of participants who believed everyone was negotiating in good faith. Yet if the group had not aspired to consensus and their primary shared goal, many of the participants would never have come to the table or stayed there as long as they did, and other benefits of the process, including a well-informed BLM decision and agreement on smaller issues, would have been foregone. IMPLC participants viewed the consensus rule as essential to a legitimate process and hence their participation, but also recognized, in hindsight, that this goal led inevitably to gridlock.

Implications for Collaborative Practice and Research

The IMPLC's experience suggests that proponents of and participants in natural resource collaboration should carefully consider the potential costs and benefits of committing to a consensus-based decision-making process, and especially using achievement of a consensus decision as a primary standard for success. While the IMPLC's goal of consensus helped cultivate a process that was perceived by many as successful due to improved communication, relationship building, extensive deliberation, and high-quality input to the BLM, costs were also accrued. Commitment to an unrealistic goal led to failure in attaining the group's major objective. Further, the inability to reach consensus resulted in participant burnout and reluctance to collaborate on other projects. As Mansbridge (1980) suggests, consensus may be appropriate at some points in a collaborative process, but it may be necessary and even desirable to alternate consensus with other decision-making strategies, depending on the context. Greater transparency among participants, or a more thorough situation assessment, might have helped the group see, earlier on, insurmountable obstacles to agreement.

In the case of IMPLC, reaching consensus on a community alternative was a self-imposed standard of success. In similar situations in the future, it may be helpful for the natural resource agency to clarify its own standards for the group's success, which may not require consensus. Similarly, facilitators can assist a group to set realistic expectations for outputs and outcomes, and help them value progress made on smaller issues, as well as the process of distinguishing among issues on which consensus is feasible from those where an alternative decision process or rule is required.

From a research perspective, this case study suggests that more nuanced examination of collaborative processes would be useful, particularly studies that compare the process, outputs, and outcomes of consensus and other decision-making approaches. In addition, research that explores the causal links among collaborative

process, outputs, and outcomes over longer time spans would improve understanding and practice of natural resource collaboration.

References

- Brunner, R. D. 2002. Problems of governance. In *Finding common ground: Governance and natural resources in the American West*, ed. R. D. Brunner, C. H. Colburn, C. M. Cromley, R. A. Klein, and E. A. Olson, 1–47. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Brunner, R. D., T. A. Steelman, L. Coe-Juell, C. M. Cromley, C. M. Edwards, and D. W. Tucker. 2005. *Adaptive governance: Integrating science, policy and decision-making*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Conley, A., and M. A. Moote. 2003. Evaluating collaborative natural resource management. *Society Nat. Resources* 16:371–386.
- Corbin, J., and A. L. Strauss. 1990. Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qual. Sociol.* 1:3–21.
- d’Estree, T. P., and B. G. Colby. 2004. *Braving the currents: Evaluating environmental conflict resolution in the river basins of the American West*. Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic.
- Daniels, S. E., and G. B. Walker. 2001. *Working through environmental conflict: The collaborative learning approach*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Fendt, J., and W. Sachs. 2008. Grounded theory method in management research: Users’ perspectives. *Organizational Research Methods* 11(3):430–455.
- Fernandez-Gimenez, M. E., H. Ballard, and V. Sturtevant. 2008. Adaptive management and social learning in collaborative and community-based monitoring: A study of five community-based forestry organizations in the Western USA. *Ecol. Society* 13(2):4. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol13/iss2/art4> (accessed 21 December 2011).
- Fisher, R., W. Ury, and B. Patton. 1991. *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*, 2nd ed. New York: Penguin Books.
- Forester, J. 2009. *Dealing with differences: Dramas of mediating public disputes*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gray, B. 1989. *Collaborating: Finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hibbard, M., and J. Madsen. 2003. Environmental resistance to place-based collaboration in the U.S. West. *Society Nat. Resources* 16:713–718.
- Innes, J. E., and D. E. Booher. 1999. Consensus-building and complex adaptive systems: A framework for evaluating collaborative planning. *Am. Plan. Assoc. J.* 65(4):412–423.
- Innes, J. E., and D. E. Booher. 2010. *Planning with complexity: An introduction to collaborative rationality for public policy*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Kenney, D. 2000. *Arguing about consensus: Examining the case against Western watershed initiatives and other collaborative groups active in natural resource management*. Boulder, CO: Natural Resources Law Center, University of Colorado School of Law.
- Koontz, T. M., and C. W. Thomas. 2006. What do we know and need to know about the environmental outcomes of collaborative management? *Public Admin. Rev.* 66(6):111–121.
- Lane, M. B. 2003. Participation, decentralization and civil society: Indigenous rights and democracy in environmental planning. *J. Plan. Educ. Res.* 22:360–373.
- Leach, W. D., N. W. Pelkey, and P. A. Sabatier. 2002. Stakeholder partnerships as collaborative policymaking: Evaluation criteria applied to watershed management in California and Washington. *J. Policy Anal. Manage.* 21(4):645–670.
- Mandarano, L. A. 2008. Evaluating collaborative environmental planning outputs and outcomes: Restoring and protecting habitat and the New York–New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program. *J. Plan. Educ. Res.* 27:456–468.
- Mandarano, L. A. 2009. Social network analysis of social capital in collaborative planning. *Society Nat. Resources* 22:245–260.

- Mansbridge, J. J. 1980. *Beyond adversary democracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Margerum, R. D. 2002. Evaluating collaborative planning: Implications from an empirical analysis of growth management. *J. Am. Plann. Assoc.* 68(2):179–193.
- McCarthy, J. 2005. Devolution in the woods: Community forestry as hybrid neoliberalism. *Environ. Plan. A* 37:995–1014.
- McClosky, M. 1999. Local communities and the management of public forests. *Ecol. Law Q.* 25(4):624–629.
- McKinney, M., and P. Field. 2008. Insights and applications: Evaluating community-based collaboration on federal lands and resources. *Society Nat. Resources* 21: 419–429.
- Moote, M. A. 2008. Collaborative forest management. In *Forest community connections: Implications for research, management, and governance*, ed. E. M. Donoghue and V. E. Sturtevant, 243–260. Washington, DC: Resources for the Future.
- O’Leary, R., and L. Bingham, eds. 2003. *The promise and performance of environmental conflict resolution*. Washington, DC: Resources for the Future.
- Pagdee, A., Y.-S. Kim, and P. J. Daugherty. 2006. What makes community forest management successful: A meta-study from community forests throughout the world. *Society Nat. Resources* 19:33–52.
- Paulson, D. 1998. Collaborative management of public rangeland in Wyoming: Lessons in co-management. *Prof. Geogr.* 50(3):301–315.
- Peterson, M. N., M. J. Peterson, and T. R. Peterson. 2005. Conservation and the myth of consensus. *Conserv. Biol.* 19(3):762–767.
- Pretty, J., and D. Smith. 2004. Social capital in biodiversity conservation and management. *Conserv. Biol.* 18(3):631–638.
- Rasmussen, A. G., and M. W. Brunson. 1996. Strategies to manage conflicts among multiple users. *Weed Technol.* 10:447–450.
- Sabatier, P., W. Gocht, M. Lubell, Z. Trachtenberg, A. Vedlitz, and M. Matlock, eds. 2005. *Swimming upstream: Collaborative approaches to watershed management*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schively, C. 2007. A quantitative analysis of consensus building in local environmental review. *J. Plan. Educ. Res.* 27:82–98.
- Schuett, M. A., and S. Selin. 2002. Profiling collaborative natural resource initiatives and active participants. *North. J. Appl. For.* 19(4):155–160.
- Starks, H., and S. B. Trinidad. 2007. Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis and grounded theory. *Qual. Health Res.* 17(10):1372–1380.
- Steelman, T. A. 2010. *Implementing innovation: Fostering enduring change in environmental and natural resource governance*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Straus, D. 2002. *How to make collaboration work: Powerful ways to build consensus, solve problems and make decisions*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Strauss, A. L., and J. Corbin. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Susskind, L., and J. Cruikshank. 1987. *Breaking the impasse: Consensual approaches to resolving public disputes*. New York: Basic Books.
- Susskind, L., S. McKernan, and J. Thomas-Larmer. 1999. Introduction. In *The consensus building handbook: A comprehensive guide to reaching agreement*, ed. L. Susskind, S. McKernan, and J. Thomas-Larmer, xvii–xxii. London, UK: Sage.
- Taylor, W. R. 2003. *Procedures for implementing consensus-based management in agency planning and operations*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Interior Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance.
- Toker, C. W. 2004. Public participation or stakeholder frustration: An analysis of consensus-based participation in the Georgia Ports Authority’s stakeholder evaluation group. In *Communication and public participation in environmental decision-making*, ed. S. P. Depoe,

- J. Delicath, and M.-F. A. Elsenbeer, 175–200. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wagner, C. L., and M. E. Fernandez-Gimenez. 2008. Does community-based collaboration increase social capital? *Society Nat. Resources* 21:324–344.
- Weber, E. P. 2003. *Bringing society back in: Grassroots ecosystem management, accountability, and sustainable communities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wondolleck, J. M., and S. L. Yaffee. 2000. *Making collaboration work: Lessons from innovation in natural resource management*. Washington DC: Island Press.