

# COLLABORATIVE NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO PROTECTED AREA PLANNING

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## Abstract

*As public demand for increased government accountability, fairness and transparency grows, many agencies are exploring the possibility of decentralized decision-making structures, including the growing field of collaborative natural resource management. Although the specific term “collaborative natural resource management” is not widely used within a Canadian context, or within the context of parks and protected areas, an examination of some of the current planning processes within Ontario Parks confirms that collaborative approaches already exist in protected area planning and management. This paper will examine models of collaborative natural resource management, and some of the criteria needed for its success. It will also stress the importance of literature on collaboration, as opposed to co-management, as collaborative natural resource management provides resource planners, including protective area planners, with tangible tools and a clear framework that describes the entire decision-making process, from inception to implementation.*

## Collaborative Resource Management

Natural resource management, including protected area management, is in a period of transition; old paradigms, old ideas and old practices are increasingly being contested. Some of these calls for change are based on the emergence of ‘new’ and ‘better’ science – yielding ‘new’ and ‘better’ ways to manage our precious natural resources – while others are based on demands for increased governmental accountability, fairness, and transparency. Such demands have translated into a call for increased public participation in natural resource decision-making and for the abandonment of the “command-and-control” approach, which is based on top-down decision-making and is seemingly unable to capture public values and the subtleties of individual communities. One of the ways in which government agencies are responding to such calls for increased public participation involves the growing field of ‘collaborative natural resource management.’

Yet, what exactly is meant by the term? Unfortunately a concrete definition is difficult to find, but drawing upon organization theory (a field of study that includes critical examination of the collaborative process, across a variety of sectors), a number of scholars interested in natural resource decision-making have been able to at least partially answer some of questions about the nature of collaborative natural resource management. Barbara Gray, an influential and often cited organizational theorist, defines collaboration as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited version

of what is possible" (Gray, 1989: 5). In an earlier work, she offered a slightly different definition and stated that collaboration is:

- 1) the pooling of appreciations and/or tangible resources, e.g. information, money, labour, etc.;
- 2) by two or more stakeholders; and,
- 3) to solve a set of problems which neither can solve on individually." (Gray, 1985: 140).

Such definitions form the basis of collaboration natural resource management, although Wondolleck and Yaffee (two scholars who have done extensive work on collaboration within the U.S. Forest Service) are quick to add that, within the context of natural resource management, collaboration also involves the ability "to cross the boundaries defined by organizational affiliations, interests, perceptions, geography or jurisdiction" (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000: xiii).

Despite the fact that such broad definitions effectively encompass a wide range of decentralized decision-making structures, the specific term, "collaborative natural resource management" is not widely used within a Canadian context, since Canadian resource managers and academics have tended to use words like "co-management" (Berkes, 1994 and 1991) and "co-stewardship" (OMNR, 1999). Nor has the term been applied to parks and protected areas, in either Canada or in the United States, and the vast majority of the existing literature and case studies relate to either forestry or watershed planning (Moote *et al.*, 1997; Schuett *et al.*, 2001). However, using Ontario Parks as an example, it becomes apparent that collaborative approaches to protected area planning can, and already do, exist.

For government agencies attempting to employ a collaborative decision-making model, one of the most commonly used approaches is the establishment of an advisory committee, and Ontario Parks is no exception. In fact, the appointment of an advisory or steering committee that is composed of various local and provincial interests is suggested, and perhaps even recommended, for more complex and potentially controversial planning processes (Ontario Parks, 2003). The highly publicized Ontario's Living Legacy Signature Sites provide a recent example of such advisory committees, since well over half of the nine signature sites have implemented a local advisory committee or on-going meetings and workshops with key local stakeholders (OMOE, 2003; OMNR, 2002). Of these signature sites, the Kawartha Highlands, which is located just north of Peterborough in a popular cottaging and recreational area, has one of the more developed advisory committees. Its Local Stakeholder Committee was given a large amount of responsibility and was mandated to work with Ontario Parks and the Ministry of Natural Resources to:

- 1) decide on the most appropriate designation for the area (provincial park or conservation reserve);
- 2) assist in the refinement of an appropriate boundary;
- 3) assist in the development of management policies for this area (permitted uses, access policies, etc.); and,
- 4) develop and implement a co-stewardship organization for management of this

area. (OMNR, 1999: 38)

Such increase in the number of advisory committees used in protected area planning, as well as the degree of responsibility given to these committees, suggests that adequate attention needs to be given to the development of tools that allow these committees to reach their full potential.

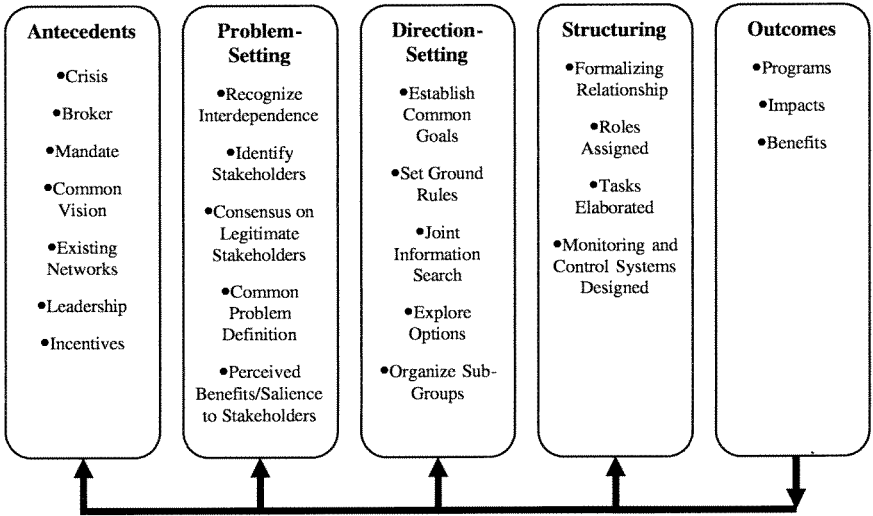
Yet, it needs to be acknowledged that the intent of situating such local advisory committees within the context of collaborative natural resource management is not to suggest that these committees are not also vivid examples of co-management or co-stewardship, but rather that there is a significant overlap between all of these terms. Such overlap is clearly depicted in the work of Canadian scholar, Fikret Berkes (1994), who places local advisory committees within the upper reaches of his "levels of co-management," and in the work of the American author, Sheila Foster (2002), who suggests that local advisory committees are one of the two primary strands of devolved collaboration in natural resource decision-making. So then, is the difference between collaborative natural resource management and the perhaps more familiar terms, co-management and co-stewardship, merely a question of syntax? Even a preliminary analysis of the body of literature available on both of these subjects suggests the answer to this question is a whole-hearted "no."

Although a comprehensive analysis of the literature on co-management and collaborative natural resource management is well beyond the scope of this paper, the very real differences between these two approaches become evident through an examination of a few key studies. In terms of co-management, two studies, which were published by Berkes in the early 1990s, provide a snapshot of the types of discussions that occur within the North American literature on co-management. In both of these articles, Berkes (1994 and 1991) struggles with developing a comprehensive definition for the term, which is not a problem in itself (as those who write about collaborative natural resource management have encountered the same problem), but what is more troubling is that Berkes seems disinterested in providing resource managers with tangible tools or a framework to make co-management work. For although, he suggests that "*co-management created the potential for some healthy synergy between the kinds of knowledge held the two solitudes [i.e., local-level and state-level actors]*" (Berkesy, 1994: 20), he provides very little guidance or recommendations for how this "healthy synergy" might be achieved.

Collaboration, on the other hand, is a term that is increasingly being employed across a variety of sectors and disciplines, providing a much wider array of resources and expertise. Such diversity has resulted in a rich understanding of the steps and stages of the participatory decision-making process, as well as the criteria needed its success. For example, drawing upon Gray's work, Selin and Chavez (1995: 190) proposed a '*collaborative model for environmental planning and management.*' Their model (Figure 1) is composed of five distinct stages: antecedents (or the environmental context from which the collaborative process emerges), problem-setting, direction-setting, structuring, and outcomes. It also includes also includes a number of feedback arrows, drawing attention to "*dynamic and cyclical nature of collaboration*". Although the various steps and stages of Selin and Chavez's model are fairly self-explanatory, it should be noted that the model places as much, if not more, emphasis on the process of collaboration as it does on the causes and

outcomes of the process. Such an emphasis is significant in that it corresponds with the general theories of collaboration, as it highlights what Wood and Gray have termed the “three critical issues in collaboration: the preconditions that make collaboration possible and motivate stakeholders to participate, the process through which collaboration occurs, and the outcomes of the collaboration.” (Wood and Gray, 1991: 140) In other words, collaborative natural resource management encompasses the entire decision-making process, from inception to implementation.

**Figure 1.** A model of collaborative natural resource management (Selin and Chavez, 1995: 191).



In addition to developing models to help explain the collaborative process, in all its stages, those working in collaborative natural resource management have also focused their attention on identifying and categorizing the criteria for success. For example, in their 1997 article, *Theory and Practice: Applying Participatory Democracy Theory to Public Land Planning*, Moote and others identify five public participation issues and evaluative criteria (Table 1). Through these criteria, it becomes evident that collaborative natural resource management is not just about the development of a more participatory decision-making process; it is also about ensuring that public participation in that process is meaningful.

Similar sentiments are expressed in a study that was conducted by Schuett and others (2001). By interviewing over 600 people, who had participated in 30 different collaborative initiatives, they are able to determine how the participants, themselves, conceptualize the keys to successful collaboration. The participants' responses are grouped into six different categories: development, information exchange, organization support, personal communication, relationships/team building, and accomplishments. With respect to these categories, the authors found that some of the most important components of successful collaboration were information exchange among the various stakeholders, goal setting at the development stage, participation of all the stakeholders, and communication. They

also found that the participants stressed the importance of relationships and team building, as well as the need for tangible outcomes or accomplishments.

The commonalities between these two studies are quite clear; both stress the importance of representation, information exchange and shared decision-making, suggesting that a clear framework and a comprehensive model for participatory decision-making is beginning to emerge. It is within this model that natural resource (including protected area) planners will find relevant and applicable tools that will help them to develop local advisory committees that are both functional and successful in achieving their goals. Although co-management and co-stewardship have a certain appeal, due to their familiarity, collaborative natural resource management provides more guidance and practical advice for those working on the ground. So, as the agencies that are responsible for our parks and protected areas are increasingly engaged in more participatory approaches to protected area planning, the growing literature on collaborative natural resource management will undoubtedly prove to be a valuable tool.

**Table 1.** *Public participation issues and evaluative criteria (Moote et al., 1997: 878).*

ISSUE	EVALUATIVE CRITERIA
Efficacy	Groups and individuals interested in or affected by public land-use decisions report that the resultant plan addresses their needs, concerns, and values, and they will not appeal it.
Representation and Access	Everyone who might be affected by or have an interest in the plan is involved, particularly non-activist, non-aligned members of the public. Access is provided through informal forums that give everyone an opportunity to voice their needs and concerns. Agency representatives strive to make people feel comfortable and respected.
Information Exchange and Learning	All interests are encouraged to discuss their needs, concerns and values in informal, multi-directional exchanges. Active dialogue improves everyone's understanding of the range of values, interests, and concerns. Collective revision and refinement of goals, objectives, and decision-making criteria is encouraged.
Continuity of Participation	The public is involved continuously throughout all stages of planning and decision-making.
Decision-making Authority	Decision-making authority is explicitly shared among all participants, with agencies holding no exclusive decision-making authority.

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