

# Meaningful Community Involvement in Protected Area Issues: A Dialogue Session

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**Abstract**—The current effort to rethink public involvement in decision-making processes for federal lands is gaining momentum. Advocates of alternative decision-making processes seek to involve communities in more meaningful ways than traditional NEPA-style public participation. These new processes take the form of citizen monitoring, partnerships, and most often, collaboration, and focus on dialogue, mutual understanding, and common ground. The following dialogue session explores the potential benefits of more participatory approaches, the challenges of conducting such processes, and their possible drawbacks and shortcomings. The trend toward collaboration has important implications for wilderness management, and wilderness science should be carefully documenting the outcomes of these new decision-making processes.

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There is a growing interest in the quality of public involvement in natural resource decision-making. In the United States, the contentious, debilitating and polarized environment in which many public land management decisions occur has inspired efforts to experiment with alternative forms of public participation. However, attempts at meaningful community involvement are controversial, raising a number of questions about who participates, who decides and what gets taken into account. The fact that a little-known collaborative, the Quincy Library Group, in Plumas, California, sparked a national controversy and congressional deliberation demonstrates the timely and relevant nature of this discussion.

Many public participation processes, which too often pass for real community involvement, are being critiqued more frequently and more openly. Managers and community members are experimenting with alternative decision-making processes that might involve communities in more meaningful and democratic ways and produce better land management plans, for wilderness as well as nonwilderness public lands.

Experimentation with alternative forms of decision-making has implicitly and, at times, explicitly challenged traditional planning processes. Public participation in wilderness management decisions, mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act (1969) and the National Forest Management Act (1976), has evolved to include scoping, public hearings or meetings, written and oral comments, Environmental Assessments or Environmental Impact Statements, and decisions. Traditional public participation, where

the public comments on agency decisions, is essentially public input, with little public involvement in data collection, decision-making, and implementation (Crowfoot and Wondelleck 1990). While procedures like scoping or written comments might be necessary for effective community involvement, they may not be sufficient to truly account for community concerns. Because decisions about wilderness and protected areas occur in a highly politicized setting, characterized by diverging values and scientific uncertainty, traditional protected area planning, with its focus on expert knowledge and top down decisions, may not be ideally suited to wilderness decision-making. Fortunately for critics of traditional planning, the NEPA and NFMA mandates for public participation are sufficiently vague as to allow for flexibility for agencies and publics to experiment with different types of processes.

In the U.S., these community-based conservation and management initiatives have been focused on a number of areas, including watershed, timber and recreation management. Throughout the West, alternative decision-making processes are increasingly emerging. According to Coggins (1998) “devolution, collaboration, community, dialogue, and consensus are the latest buzzwords in federal land management policy circles.” Federal land management agencies, including the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, have seen a series of mandates from Washington instructing them to pursue more participatory forms of public involvement. While these processes might take the form of citizen monitoring, consensus groups, partnerships and transactive planning, the emphasis has been primarily on collaboration or “collaboratives.” Collaboratives focus on dialogue, cooperation, civility, mutual understanding, common ground and consensus (Coggins 1998; USDA Forest Service 1993). Advocates of collaboration contend that

meaningful involvement in decision making by diverse interests can produce more effective and more widely supported outcomes. Collaborative efforts that focus on a relatively small, specific landscape tend to break down ideological differences, mistrust, and other barriers to decisions while fostering plans that are based on a shared passion for a landscape. (Propst 1999)

Proponents also argue that collaborative planning “can tap an enormous reservoir of collective energy, talent, and inspiration,” diffuse conflict, improve the working relationship between agencies and communities and provide a viable alternative to traditional top down planning (Frentz and others 1999; USDA Forest Service 1993). The idea is that collaboration might result in management plans that meet the needs of the community as well as the ecosystem. Because communities feel a sense of ownership, plans generated through collaboration might be more enduring when compared with traditional plans.

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Critics have argued, however, that these processes are not a panacea (Coggins 1998), and raised questions about the nature of communities, as well as the quality of public participation. How agencies should deal with communities of place, which are situated in a particular geographic locality, and communities of interest, who have common values and goals, has not been adequately explored. There are also lingering questions about how expert and nonexpert knowledge is legitimated by the process, how to account for the national interest in federal lands and who retains decision-making authority.

The following summarizes a dialogue session focusing on these very questions. It provides an introduction to some of the issues and questions about community involvement in protected areas. The session was opened with an introduction by the moderator and short statements by academics, agency staff, and community members with experience in public involvement processes. Their statements are followed by a summary of the ideas and challenges discussed during the remainder of the session. Because these reflect the myriad of experiences and perspectives of session participants they are necessarily contradictory in some areas. It is my hope that this dialogue session raises important questions about the nature of public participation in wilderness decision-making, and informs further experimentation, dialogue and research regarding meaningful involvement of communities.

## Evolving Models of Public Participation in Wilderness and Protected Area Planning

Steve McCool

*Steve McCool is a Professor of Recreation Resource Management, School of Forestry, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. He is currently involved in a number of research and application projects that concern relationships between people and their natural environments, in particular the appropriateness of various approaches to natural resource planning and public participation. Many of these applications have used the Limits of Acceptable Change planning framework.*

The notion of public participation in wilderness and protected area planning has come a long way since the Wilderness Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and other legislation mandating public involvement in protected area decisions passed in the United States. The idea of public participation that moves beyond what is formally required is firmly rooted, and the benefits and rationale are clearly articulated, in the literature. However, administrators of public land managing and regulatory agencies continue to have difficulty implementing credible public participation programs. One recent Forest Service administrator stated, "I don't think any of us have a clue how to do public involvement" (McMillion 1999).

The issue is exacerbated by the lack of a coherent, widely shared terminology that describes varying styles of public participation. Terms such as participation, involvement, collaboration, power sharing, consensus building and consulting are used to describe many of the same processes and

objectives, and are often used with little regard for their precise meaning. Further complicating the issue is the evolving nature of public land planning. Often, public participation is viewed as distinct from the planning process itself, and as an added cost. Yet, these perceptions have changed as notions of wilderness and protected area planning themselves have evolved.

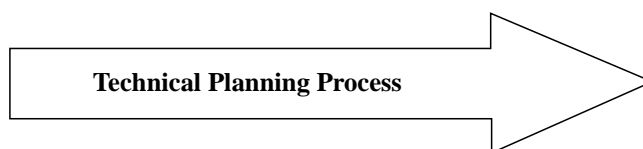
In this paper, I briefly typologize how models of public participation have evolved over time. This may aid understanding of how the character of participation and planning have changed, but also have tended to overlap.

## Models of Protected Area Planning

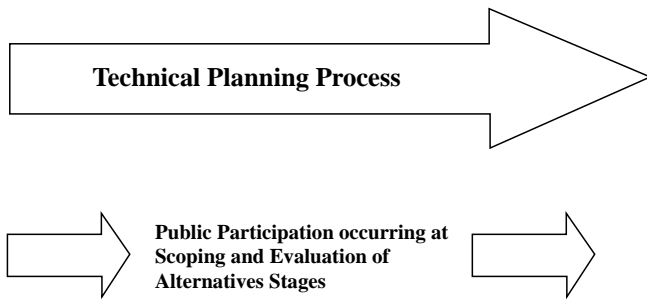
Public participation in wilderness and protected area planning can be viewed as evolving through four distinctive stages, with the fourth stage only now emerging. These models may be briefly described as "Expert Only," "Expert Driven," "Collaborative" and "Transactive."

The "Expert Only" model (schematically represented in fig. 1) is derived from the traditional rational-comprehensive approach to planning (Hudson 1979). In this approach, planning is perceived solely as the responsibility of experts in wilderness and protected area planning, where the public has no formal or informal role. Experts are viewed as having the only legitimate knowledge about the topic. While political processes may have driven the need for the planning, the public was excluded from the planning process, and only informed of the outcomes. Because of NEPA, this model should no longer be practiced in the U.S. However, discussions concerning a Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy in the Yellowstone Ecosystem suggest that the inclination, if nothing else, still exists. One National Forest Supervisor was quoted as stating that it was "inappropriate, in my view, to involve the public" in the development of the strategy (McMillion 1999).

The "Expert Driven" model (fig. 2) shows public participation as mandated by NEPA. The public is included, by legislative fiat, only in the scoping and release of draft alternative stages of the planning process. In this model, the public contributes to identification of important issues, and identifies the social and political acceptability of alternatives, but it is still viewed as having little substantive knowledge to contribute to the process. It represents only a refinement of the previous model and maintains, in Yankelovich's (Yankelovich 1991) terms, the "culture of technical control" in protected area planning. Such approaches tend to be formal, divisive and disjointed (in the sense that the two stages are not specifically connected). In these two models, the planner is a technically skilled



**Figure 1**—*Expert-Only* model schematic representation of traditional rational-comprehensive planning process. No public participation in the process is envisioned.

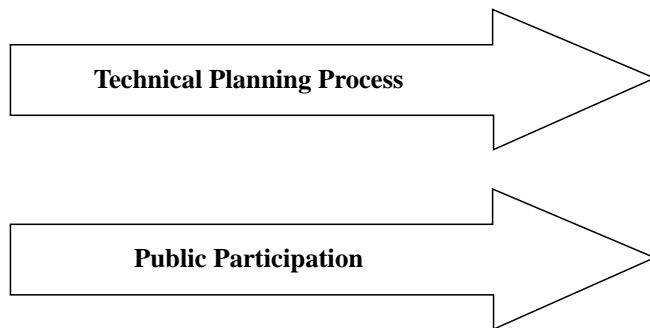


**Figure 2**—*Expert-Driven* model, based primarily on minimal requirements of NEPA model. Public is formally involved only at two points in the process, and those points are not necessarily connected. Agency planners remain responsible for planning process.

bureaucrat whose focus is development of technically appropriate and effective alternatives.

The first two models may have been acceptable in an era when there was often consensus on goals and scientists agreed on cause-effect relationships. These situations may be termed tame problems. However, the growing complexity and diversity of expectations of what wilderness and protected areas should produce, in terms of values and uses, bring various goals into conflict. Also, as concerns grow about consequences at longer temporal scales and larger spatial scales, managers face increasing scientific uncertainty in decisions. Learning and consensus building become important attributes of the planning processes for these wicked problems and messy situations.

The third model (fig. 3) attempts to address these concerns by developing “Collaborative” processes. Collaborative processes involve the public throughout the planning process

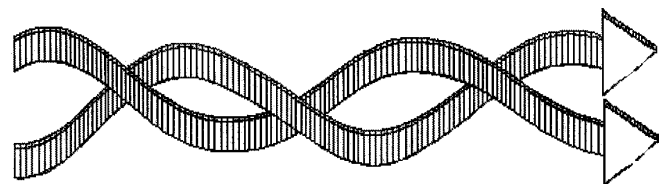


**Figure 3**—*Collaborative* planning model of public participation. Public maintains involvement throughout process, but in general its involvement is distinctive from agency’s technical planning process.

and bring together disparate interests to attempt a shared resolution. Collaborative processes are particularly useful in gaining consensus, and groups involved in such processes may identify alternatives to agency-developed options. Collaborative processes recognize the legitimacy of emotional and experiential knowledge, but the technical planning process may not directly incorporate these forms of knowledge. Therefore, such processes, while occurring parallel to agency planning, are distinctly separate from it. Much of the current discussion of public participation embraces the collaborative model. However, plans often remain identified with a particular agency, and are not necessarily a direct result of public participation.

A fourth model (fig. 4) is now emerging. This process is termed “Transactive” after John Friedmann’s theory of transactive planning (Friedmann 1973). This approach is represented by the double helix of DNA. One track represents the technical planning process; the other, public participation. The lines connecting the two tracks represent the planner’s role, which is largely facilitative. The double helix exemplifies the tightly integrated character of technical planning and public participation. These are so tightly integrated that it is difficult to determine what is planning and what is participation. Agency employees with technical expertise are woven into this process at a level of involvement equal to members of the public. This approach is particularly useful for messy situations in which both learning and consensus building are critical to successful planning. Both public and agency participants have “ownership” in the plan.

This model of public participation was first used in wilderness and protected area planning in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex of Montana (Stankey and others 1984), and has influenced processes elsewhere. A growing literature has documented both its success and limitations.



**Figure 4**—*Transactive* model of public participation. Public and agency technical planning processes are tightly integrated and interwoven. Public has ownership of the plan.

## Conclusion

The emerging transactive model of public participation will soon characterize much of wilderness and protected area planning. While there remain important barriers to its use in the U.S. (e.g., the Federal Advisory Committee Act), it is an efficient and effective method of public participation. It ensures adequate representation of interests, learning, building relationships with and among an agency's publics, testing social and political acceptability early in the planning process, and, with the emergence of ownership in the plan, a politically astute and active constituency that will work for implementation.

## Resolving Declining Goose Populations Using Effective Community Information and Education

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*Sue Matthews*

*Sue Matthews is a Wildlife Biologist and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Representative, Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812. Sue was in Alaska for 20 years where she worked as the Refuge Manager for the Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge. Sue coordinated the award-winning goose information and education program for the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge which made her a real supporter of working effectively with communities.*

In a landmark case study of using information and education as an effective resource management tool, with extensive community involvement, an innovative information program was conducted in 56 Yup'ik Eskimo villages within the 20-million-acre Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge in western Alaska during the 1980s and 1990s. Four species of geese that nest in western Alaska had been experiencing severe population declines over a 40-year period. These declines were attributed to over-hunting along the entire Pacific Flyway, from Alaska to Mexico. During those 40 years, law enforcement activities had been unsuccessful in halting the decline. In 1983 and 1984, hunters from along the flyway were brought together in a series of stakeholder meetings to try to solve the problem. In 1984, an agreement was signed between hunting organizations and state and federal agencies in California and Alaska. The agreement called for an intensive information and education program to convince residents along the flyway that voluntary reduction in hunting of these species was necessary for their survival. The result was that three of the four goose populations have increased to the point that hunting is now again allowed.

The success of the information and education program hinged on five key factors:

1. The information program was designed by local residents, making the program their own effort.
2. Local residents were hired as "Refuge Information Technicians" to implement the information dissemination, again adding ownership.

3. Creative, cross-cultural products were produced for all levels of individuals, including informational posters for the hunters, an entire K-12 grade curriculum on geese on the Yukon Delta, a poster contest for school children with the winning posters featured in an annual wall calendar distributed to all households on the Yukon Delta, a culturally appropriate comic book with artwork by a local artist, bumper stickers for snow machines in the local Yup'ik Eskimo language, embroidered patches for "Goose Conservation Committees" and other related materials.
4. The project was given time to work. Leaders were patient and within five years the goose populations began to increase.
5. The team of the program involved good, committed people who could work across cultural boundaries.

This program, along with other successful community conservation programs, is described in workshop proceedings from "Building Support For Conservation In Rural Areas," produced by the Quebec Labrador Foundation/Atlantic Center for the Environment, 39 South Main Street, Ipswich, Massachusetts 01938, (617) 356-0038.

## Beyond Science

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*Tom Parker*

*Tom Parker owns an outfitting business and has been working as a hunting guide in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex (BMWC) since 1975. Tom was a member of the Limits of Acceptable Change Task Force for the BMWC, and works closely with the Swan Valley Ad Hoc Committee. He also founded Northwest Connections, a nonprofit that works to facilitate community-based conservation and participation by community members in long term monitoring projects. He can be reached at Northwest Connections, P.O. Box 1340, Condon, MT 59826.*

In order to understand wilderness ecosystems, it is important to consult local knowledge. Contemporary approaches to wilderness management, and in fact ecosystem management of any kind, tend to look to conventional scientific processes of inquiry to answer questions about how nature works. However, science is limited when it begins to address ecosystems. Because of the subtle and complex nature of normal ecological interrelationships and the compound random variables that influence any of them over time, contemporary scientific approaches by their design are limited and deficient in their ability to quantify these interactions. We need to employ knowledge that gives insight into the realm beyond the confines of the scientific approach.

Wilderness managers and scientists often overlook some of the very best sources of this kind of knowing. People who live adjacent to and work within wilderness areas often have decades of informal observations from which to draw. In Montana, these people tend to be trappers, hunters, outfitters, ranchers, loggers, and Native Americans. These very people are often not recognized as having anything meaningful to contribute to ecosystem management because of their lack of formal academic credentials. But quite often, they have credentials earned simply by time on the land. Whenever people depend on the landscape, they come to

know it. Normally, we discount those whose lives are intertwined with wilderness ecosystems as biased and one-sided. But it is these very people who, quite often, can contribute valuable insights into and appreciation for subtle interconnections and relationships that hold ecosystems together over time.

Science and local knowledge should be integrated in any attempt to understand wilderness ecosystems, in order to achieve a fuller picture of the land and its capacity for human activities of any kind. Just as important is recognition of the limitations of all human knowledge, formal and informal, bringing to the task of wilderness management a measure of humility. We will never fully understand nature's complexities; if for one moment we do, it will surely change and defy us. The predictive

capabilities we have with nature are limited, and we should act accordingly. Wilderness managers quite often want science to identify precisely the thresholds in nature so that we can use her resources right up to those thresholds. In a more humble frame of mind, we would accept that we do not fully understand those thresholds and so must act conservatively and give natural processes a wide berth for change.

Therefore, wilderness science should include and embrace local knowledge. Wilderness management should integrate scientific and informal knowledge and then act conservatively, in acknowledgement of our limited understanding of these complex systems.

## Even Wilderness Is Someone's Backyard

*Carol Daly*

*Carol Daly is the President of the Flathead Economic Policy Center, 15 Depot Park, Kalispell, MT 59901. The Flathead Economic Policy Center is a non-profit that works on collaborative problem solving for natural resource issues. Her past work with economic development led to her current interest in sustainable development which has inspired her work on problem solving and collaboration. Carol also works with the Flathead Forestry Project, and is the Vice Chair of the Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress, which works to get communities reestablished in a stewardship role.*

In planning, implementing and monitoring for the management of protected areas and/or wilderness, public land managers should actively involve residents of the area. Although all citizens (local and non-local) have a legitimate interest in public land management decisions, the effects of those decisions are played out on-the-ground in or near specific communities. Residents of those areas have a special relationship with nearby public lands; they work and play on them, study them, draw spiritual strength and aesthetic enjoyment from them. Frequently, they take an active stewardship role. Their indigenous knowledge of the land — its history, vegetation, wildlife, fisheries, natural processes and flows, patterns and trends — can be a powerful and useful complement to the more formal scientific information gathered by land management agencies. All too often, local voices

are drowned out by more powerful national environmental and industry lobbies. The current community-based ecosystem management movement is a reaction to the discounting of local interests. Communities of place (as well as local environmental and industrial interests) are not asking for local control, but they are demanding a place at the table where decisions are made.

## Dialogue Summary

*Laurie Yung*

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After the statements outlined above, the session was opened for general discussion. What follows is a summary of the main points of this dialogue.

Session participants discussed the challenge of getting community members involved in decision-making processes. Some of the managers suggested trying different venues, essentially reaching beyond traditional public hearings and meetings to the places where different groups of people spend time, such as schools, bars, and other community institutions. One participant suggested spending a lot of time with opposing individuals or groups, in order to learn more about their perspectives and build trust. Others suggested that the burden is on the wilderness management agencies to find the people who are not attending meetings and seek out their perspectives. There was no discussion of the potential challenges of involving more individuals with diverse perspectives in planning processes. There was, however, a general desire to ensure that people who want to be involved in decision-making have adequate opportunities. Some participants suggested, furthermore, that public meetings were useless and counterproductive because they did not help managers find common ground and, at times, exacerbated conflict.

Community members emphasized that the timing of a decision-making process is crucial. They argued that agencies need to involve the community in a meaningful way when issues are initially being identified, rather than later, when alternatives have already been formulated. Public review of alternatives does not necessarily allow for public values and objectives to be incorporated into decisions. Whereas, participants pointed out, involving communities at the beginning of the process demonstrates a sincere intention to involve their perspectives and ideas in decision-making.

Participants agreed that communities are not homogenous and must not be treated as such. In other words, the diversity of perspectives and priorities within communities must be acknowledged and taken into consideration during the planning process. This implies a need for processes that are structured so that different values can be accounted for, as opposed to processes which facilitate win-lose outcomes and polarize individuals and groups.

Participants also discussed the meaning of consensus. While some participants felt that consensus was vague and could not be firmly defined, others cited definitions they believed captured the concept. There were many questions about whether consensus needed to include everyone who participated.

There was some discussion of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) (1972) and its potential restrictions on decision-making processes that give power to nonagency groups. Several agency employees pointed out that the only way agency personnel can be convicted of violating FACA is if they proceed directly from meetings to regulations, thereby circumventing the NEPA process. Despite this reassurance, questions about how to effectively integrate collaborative processes and NEPA remained.

How alternative decision-making processes affect the distribution of power was also discussed. Participants wondered if wilderness managing agencies give up decision-making power in community-based or collaborative processes. Some participants argued that agencies are not fulfilling their obligation to be good stewards if they do not retain decision-making authority. In other words, some managers feel that they are ultimately responsible for public lands, and that the obligation to make a good decision for a wilderness area rests largely on their shoulders. Allowing communities more of a role in decision-making might be regarded as a shirking of their duties. Other participants cited projects where they did or are currently giving up power to local communities or user groups and argued that appropriate decisions are being made. They pointed out that federal guidelines for environmental review put forth in NEPA and NFMA must still be adhered to.

In the context of power, the expert-driven culture of the federal land management agencies was discussed. Because this culture values the specialized knowledge of educated professionals, some participants felt that it hindered valuing the experiential knowledge of communities. Participants pointed out that experiential and anecdotal knowledge, as well as values and emotions, are essential to making decisions. They argued that nonexpert knowledge can only be obtained and understood through alternative decision-making processes that focus on dialogue and mutual learning. In other words, unlike traditional planning, collaborative processes value both expert and experiential knowledge and regard them as commensurable.

The question of how to incorporate national interests in community-based decision-making processes was raised. One community member suggested that the national groups, such as industry and environmental groups, need to create better vertical linkages between local chapters, members, or organizations and national institutions. She argued that with effective vertical linkages, local members could represent national perspectives. It was also suggested that federal employees could represent the national interest or national mandate. While not discussed at the session, critics argue that federal employees are a specific subculture with their own values and priorities. Therefore, they may not adequately represent national perspectives and interests.

Participants pointed out that new forms of more participatory decision-making appear to be here to stay, but that many agency employees do not have the skills or knowledge

to facilitate them. Others wondered how long these processes would take and how much they would cost. One federal employee currently involved in such a process argued that it was not less work for the agencies, but rather more work. Other managers pointed out that these processes are intensive by nature, and gave examples of the time and travel investments required. Some participants asked how managers could sustain community involvement if processes were prolonged. They also wondered if meaningful community involvement would produce plans acceptable to many interested parties, thus reducing appeals and litigation.

One person pointed out that the agencies are also trying to streamline the planning and decision-making process so that the public is involved at key times and in ways that do not slow down or stop the project. Participants wondered how this would affect the move toward collaborative decision-making, given its intensive, often lengthy, process-driven nature.

## Concluding Questions and Challenges

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The current push toward collaborative or community-based public lands decision-making has important implications for wilderness management. Rather than a smooth transition to a new and well-defined planning framework, this trend represents a profound rethinking of the role of managers, scientists and various communities in protected area management. The result is increasing uncertainty in the planning process and a number of opportunities for experimentation. Wilderness science can play an important role by documenting the outcomes of these experiments. In doing so, they need to keep the following questions in mind:

- Who are the communities involved in these processes? Which publics are included and excluded, and why?
- How are national interests and priorities represented in processes that are often locally based? How are communities of place and communities of interest dealt with? Are local communities privileged by these processes?
- What potential benefits of these processes are being realized? Under what conditions?
- How is decision-making authority and power negotiated in alternative decision-making processes? Are decisions made by consensus and how is consensus defined?
- Is consensus always possible? Desirable? Is there always common ground to find?
- Do agencies have the time, skills, and desire to work with communities in the ways demanded by more participatory processes?
- What is the role of national environmental legislation in setting standards? How are collaborative processes integrated with NEPA public participation?
- What is the role of science, and how is scientific or expert knowledge regarded?
- Do these new decision-making processes have elements of transactive planning as well as collaboration?
- Do these processes result in better wilderness management and how is "better" defined?

In order for wilderness *and* communities to truly benefit from public participation in wilderness decision-making, we need to be clear about the real *and* potential benefits of new forms of participation, and how these benefits can best be realized. Researchers, managers, and community members have important roles in determining the respective benefits of different wilderness decision-making processes. Future experimentation with process and assessment should be clear about the challenges and trade-offs involved in choices about planning processes.

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