

PERSPECTIVE FROM THE FIELD

Collaborative Management in Natural Resources and Environmental Administration

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In 2006, Tomas Koontz and Craig Thomas wrote, “If the 20th century was the year of the administration state then the 21st century may be the year of the collaborative state” (Koontz and Thomas, 2006). Koontz and Thomas were correct in one respect—collaborative management has come to be a part of environmental and natural resources decision making at almost every level of government and in almost every subset issue area. The question this essay addresses is: Is this necessarily a good thing? More specifically, are there situations in which collaborative management works well and others in which it should be avoided entirely?

Environmental Practice 17: 156–159 (2015)

Since the early 1990s, collaborative management has become widely accepted and has been adapted as an environmental decision making tool. During the 1990s, the United States Forest Service and Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) both began practicing various types of collaborative management. US EPA started its community-based environmental program while the Forest Service, as well as 18 other federal agencies involved in land management, also engaged in some form of ecosystem management that included collaboration as an important component (Carr, Selin, and Schuett, 1998; Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Morrissey, Zinn, and Corn, 1994). Collaborative management has also been used by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Homeland Security, state and local public health departments, and many other US public entities (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, 2012; Thornton and Scheer, 2012), and has also been used in other countries (Reed, Henderson, and Mendis-Millard, 2013).

The move towards collaborative management is touted as one component for addressing “wicked problems” (Head, 2014),

but, more often, it has been attributed to the perceived desirability of more bottom-up approaches to tackling complex management issues. This would seem to be a reasonable assumption – those closer to the problem may be better equipped to address it. It has been argued that a top-down approach is less desirable and more likely to result in decisions that miss or ignore important local concerns (Sabatier et.al., 2005).

What Is Collaborative Management?

There are many different definitions of collaborative management and the literature identifies a wide variety of prerequisites necessary for successful collaborative management. These definitions run from the simple, involving talking to people, to the more complex. Anne Marie Thomson and James Perry have provided a comprehensive definition that includes the elements most scholars, in one way or another, use to define collaborative management:

Collaboration is a process in which autonomous actors interact through formal and informal negotiation, jointly creating rules and structures governing their relationships and ways to act or decide on the issues that brought them together; it is a process involving shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions.

(Thomson and Perry, 2006)

Collaborative management is not easy. Many of the requirements for collaborative management to be successful define what collaborative management is differently, and many of these requirements and the definitions derived from them suggest a form of collaborative management that is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Donna Wood and Barbara Gray have written that “collaboration can occur as long as stake holders can satisfy one another’s differing interest without loss to themselves” (Wood and Gray, 1991). Stated another way, this means that collaborative management must result in a win-win outcome. How often is that going to be true in environmental management disputes?

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As Thomson and Perry have pointed out, “Collaboration is like cottage cheese. It occasionally smells bad and separates easily” (1998, p. 409). We will begin our examination of prerequisites for collaborative management by citing one of the earliest and most often-quoted works by Wood and Gray – “Collaboration [c]an occur as long as stakeholders can satisfy one another’s different interests without loss to themselves” (1991, p. 161). This, of course, is similar to the prerequisite defined by Wood and Gray and is common among the definitions found in the literature. In many respects, such mutual satisfaction of all parties is clearly required for successful collaborative management. When one side feels as though they are going to lose they can, like the curd and the whey of cottage cheese, separate easily. Hence, collaborative management cannot involve what Theodore Lowi termed “redistributive politics” (Lowi, 1964). Environmental and natural resource management without winners and losers is a wonderful thought.

Lawrence Susskind, Alejandro Camacho, and Todd Schenk found, among other things, that collaborative management requires “clear overarching goals as well as concrete and measurable objectives to guide the management process... [and]... well defined fact finding protocols to promote shared learning and manage scientific uncertainty” (Susskind, Camacho, and Schenk, 2010). These would seem to be quite reasonable requirements for collaborative management, until one considers that, as concrete as one might wish goals to be, goals and objectives, particularly in environmental and natural resource management context, tend to shift as more information becomes available. Of course, one could argue that agreement on goals simply means that parties concur that “we’ll fix this problem” and leave the details until later. But short-term and medium-term goals have a tendency to shift when new information is acquired. The second aspect of this prerequisite, i.e., “shared learning... [to]... manage scientific uncertainty” seems quite reasonable, on its face. This prerequisite assumes that participants will be willing to open their books, so to speak, and share all the information they possess about any given management situation. But information is power, and asking all parties to collaborative management to relinquish control of what they know about a situation (some of which may be proprietary) would be asking them to hand over whatever power and advantage they might have in negotiations. This is an admirable goal, and it might lead to a better world, but it is not realistic in any but the least confrontational situations.

Tatiana Borisovol, Laila Racevskis, and Jennison Kipp have noted that successful collaborative efforts must involve all

stakeholders and that most of the published research on collaborative management concludes that “collaborative initiatives have a broad representation of stakeholders’ interests, attitudes, and opinions are more likely to be successful than those with limited stakeholder representation” (Borisovol, Racevskis, and Kipp, 2012). This is another observation that seems clear and accurate on its face. However, anyone who has been involved in regulatory decision making knows that stakeholder participation is easier said than done. In most complex management situations, there is a very high likelihood that someone will be left out, someone that you will hear from later on in the process. This is not to suggest that collaborative management is doomed because of the difficulty of ensuring stakeholder representation, only to point out that it can be very difficult to get all the parties to the table.

Many scholars have written that collaborative management happens when one organization cannot solve a particular problem on its own. As Rosemary O’Leary, Katharine Gerard and Lisa Bingham wrote in their introduction to a symposium on collaborative public management, published in the *Public Administration Review*: “collaborative public management... [can be used to]... solve problems that cannot be solved or easily solved by single organizations” (O’Leary, Gerard, and Bingham, 2006). Does this mean that there are no ways to deal with environmental problems unless they involve collaboration? In one sense, yes – in a federal system, the units of government have to communicate with one another and work out arrangements with one another. But, perhaps, this just means that decisions should be made at a higher level – the federal government, for example – where an organization can oversee, and, sometimes, coerce, all the actors to proceed in a manner that will solve the problem.

Environmental problems tend to ignore the regulatory schemes and agencies that we have set up to deal with them. It is not uncommon for a particular type of pollution to fall under the jurisdiction of several different government agencies at several different levels of government, acting under a wide array of statutes and regulations. Parties involved in regulating the environment know that you often have to interact with other organizations in order to achieve your goals. As Morton Grodzins wrote in 1960, “any governmental activity is almost certain to involve the influence, if not the formal administration, of all three planes of the federal system” (Grodzins, 1960, pp. 266–67). The question should thus become which organizations should be involved, what power relationships will they have, and which should take the lead? Nearly all the research on

collaborative management makes the case for equal access to information, and other resources, and for having all the participants playing on an even playing field in other ways. However, this is almost never achieved and can only be achieved if all the players enter the discussion with equal resources. This has been the primary reason for the failures of collaborative management.

We must add the cost incurred by any organization engaging in collaborative management to these requirements. These costs include time and what can amount to a great deal of money spent gathering the necessary data and information to represent ones interest. Given that all stakeholders need to be involved, one can anticipate that time and monetary resources will not be equally distributed between participants. Some organizations, governmental and non-governmental, will have more resources to bring to the table than others and, as indicated above, information as well as other resources equals power.

When to Participate in Collaborative Management

As noted above, collaborative management is something that environmental and natural resource managers have been doing for a relatively long time. Collaboration in one form or another is fundamental to public administration in almost every arena. Granted, the formal process of collaborative management described in some definitions, including the one used here, are not as common, but that is largely because the prerequisites for that form of collaboration are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Even if all these prerequisites are met – ie, all the stakeholders involved are willing to share all the information developed, everyone is willing to devote the time necessary, and everyone has equal access to all the data generated – the question of enforcement remains. All parties must agree to the outcome of the collaborative management process, and there needs to be some means of enforcing the recommendations that result from the process. Participants must agree either in advance or during the process that they are willing to give up their original initiatives and positions on an issue for the greater good of whatever comes out of the collaborative decision-making process. Giving up one's "sovereignty" over an issue is not an easy thing to do, and the question of agreement over outcomes has often been the demise of previous collaborative management processes. One of the oldest, and most often noted, collaborative management situations is that of the Quincy Library Group. Their process, though it initially held a great deal of promise, resulted in decisions that not all participants could agree on

(Little and Jackson, 1995). As Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh have noted, "[P]ower can also be viewed as a resource and, like other resources, is almost always distributed unequally across participants" (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, 2012).

Who Should Engage in Collaborative Management?

The determination of who should engage in collaborative management depends upon what one's objectives are and what resources one has to bring to the table. Collaborative management already takes places in a number of different forms throughout environmental administration processes. For instance, a wide variety of environmental statutes have public participation and collaboration requirements. Given the uneven distribution of resources among stakeholders in any potential collaborative management situation, it would seem to behoove participants to evaluate their ability to contribute to the process. An under-funded environmental group sitting at the table with a wealthy corporation might find it in their best interest to avoid collaboration and, instead, look for opportunities to pursue their interests through the courts or through regulatory agencies. On the other hand, an environmental professional in state or local government might look at the potential participants in a collaborative management situation, determine that it is unlikely that negotiations can be carried out on an even playing field, and conclude that better decisions might be made by a regulatory process with input from stakeholders via some form of public participation.

At base, power seems to be the most important determinant of who should participate in collaborative management and who should not. Ideally, all parties would come together, share all their information, agree to agree on outcomes, and be respectful. Not uncommonly, in an adversarial political environment, the regulators are the participants most likely to be able to identify a position that reflects the general interests of underrepresented parties. If you accept that reasonable assumption, then environmental regulators might be doing the best job they can when they evaluate the resources of potential collaborative management participants and make an independent decision of when they should invite stakeholders to play a bigger or lesser role in their decision making processes.

Carl Friedrich made the point over 70 years ago: effective administration required expertise and the discretion to exercise same (Friedrich, 1935). Administrative discretion is not a bad thing.

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