

**ENGAGING LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT PLANNING:
AN EVALUATION OF THE LAKE ONTARIO ISLANDS SEARCH CONFERENCE**

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Tania M. Schusler and Daniel J. Decker
Human Dimensions Research Unit
Department of Natural Resources
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853-3001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) in cooperation with Cornell University embarked upon an innovation in its approach to wildlife management area planning in 2000. Using a participatory planning process called a *search conference*, the agency engaged a diverse range of stakeholders from local communities in planning for the Lake Ontario Islands Wildlife Management Area (LOIWMA), located in New York's eastern basin of Lake Ontario (Figure 1). While all NYSDEC planning efforts include some form of public participation, NYSDEC staff believed that meaningful participation in planning for the LOIWMA would be especially crucial given the high level of public interest and controversy that had developed around the impact of double-crested cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) on the Eastern Basin's internationally renowned sport fishery. This report describes and evaluates the search process implemented for LOIWMA planning.

A preliminary situation analysis conducted in 1999 (Schusler and Decker 2000) suggested that a participatory planning process could succeed if it were carefully designed. One method for participatory planning, the search conference has been used effectively by organizations and communities for a variety of purposes from strategic planning to community development, addressing social, environmental, and economic issues. Through a structured, systematic process (Figure 2), search methodology encourages collective planning aimed at solving problems and realizing opportunities directly relevant to the people involved. A search conference typically involves 25-75 people participating in a complex interplay of large and small group work sessions over the course of 2 ½ days (Greenwood and Levin 1998, Emery and Purser 1996). Several design principles of a search conference may differ from more traditional participation processes with which wildlife managers are familiar. These include:

- Consideration of the system of focus as it interacts with the broader environment.
- Participation that is intentionally diverse.
- Valuing the knowledge of all participants. Expert knowledge is not privileged (e.g., wildlife managers participate in the same vein as other participants, rather than in a specific expert or technical role).
- A systematic process that creates valuable arenas for dialogue, or open two-way communication.
- A democratic structure that enables participants to define the direction in which the search proceeds.

The search itself is the centerpiece of a three-phase process (Emery and Purser 1996) that also includes a preparation and design phase prior to the event and an implementation and diffusion phase following it.

NYSDEC sponsored the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference with organizational assistance from Cornell University's Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU). We began by requesting the assistance of 15 community leaders and resource persons on a steering committee that informed the design of the event. A key task for the steering committee was defining the search question, which provided the overall focus:

What is the ideal future land use and management of DEC-owned islands in the Eastern Lake Ontario Basin, considering the relationship of the islands to coastal communities?

The steering committee's other major task was the selection of participants through a systematic process called a "community" or "peer reference system" (Emery and Purser 1996, Rich, Hemlock and Martin 1999).

The Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference occurred November 8-10, 2000 in Henderson Harbor, New York. Thirty-two participants attended. These included business owners, recreationists, tourism professionals, extension agents, planning staff, town board members, charter captains, environmentalists, state parks staff, and NYSDEC staff, among others. Participants shared their understanding of the situation, identified ideal futures for their communities, predicted probable futures, identified areas for change, set priorities, and initiated action planning. A combination of large and small group work led to the formation of self-defined action planning teams around the following topics:

- community planning and cooperation,
- ecosystem management,
- education,
- recreational resource use, and
- sustainable resource-based tourism.

At the conclusion of the event, participants agreed that they would reconvene within six months to provide feedback on a completed draft plan for the LOIWMA and to assess and further coordinate progress on other action items. Participants also suggested the formation of an Eastern Basin Working Group as a mechanism to maintain communication. However, the function and logistics of such a group were not discussed at any length.

Participants completed an evaluation instrument (N=22) at the end of the event. Nine out of ten responded that the conference accomplished its purpose to a great extent. All respondents (100%) felt that the conference design made sense in terms of its stated purpose. Respondents felt that the shared history and action planning contributed most to the effectiveness of the event.

Aspects of the search process identified as most valuable by participants included:

- the mix of people present, providing a diverse range of perspectives,
- the opportunity to meet and network with others,
- learning about the region, its issues, and its people,
- the opportunity to work together, and
- the opportunity to provide genuine input.

Several people also expressed surprise at the degree of common ground that existed among the diverse population of participants. The amount of time required was cited as the greatest drawback to the process. Several participants felt that the real value of the process would be measured by whether concrete actions occur as a result of it.

For fish and wildlife managers at NYSDEC, a substantial strength of the search conference was consideration of LOIWMA planning in a comprehensive way that focused on multiple issues rather than the single issue of cormorant management. Managers noted the substantial investment of time in the event's design and implementation as a potential drawback, but they found the investment worthwhile in this case.

Reflecting on our experience with design and implementation of the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference, we elaborate on the following themes in this report:

- purpose and expectations,
- scope of focus,
- participation,
- conflict, and
- transferability.

A challenge from the start of the search conference development process that continued throughout was ambiguity about its purpose and expectations of participants. This seemed the result of a discrepancy between those who felt the search conference purpose was to inform NYSDEC about what the agency should do and those who viewed the purpose as the collective discovery of what communities could do to realize benefits from the resource. By the event's end, it appeared that the search conference's dual purpose – providing input to the LOIWMA plan and exploring broader community-based initiatives – had become clearer to most participants. We will learn more about the interaction of these parallel tracks when the search group re-convenes.

A strength of the process was flexibility in its scope of focus. Discussion during the event followed two parallel tracks, one addressing the future management of the LOIWMA and the other addressing the future of resource management and community development more generally in the Eastern Basin region. This enabled NYSDEC to gather input specific to the LOIWMA, while at the same time allowing participants to address other related issues of concern to them, such as improving coordination between municipalities on zoning regulations.

Another benefit of the search process was the use of the peer reference system to identify participants. The steering committee's assistance with the peer reference process resulted in a broad, inclusive group of participants, perhaps more so than NYSDEC staff could have otherwise identified. Systematic identification and selection of participants also enabled the agency to hear from individuals who possessed a stake in resource management but had not actively voiced that stake in the past. The peer reference system resulted in the purposeful selection of stakeholders with a diverse range of perspectives and knowledge, which many participants reported contributed to learning about issues and each other (Schusler and Decker In prep.A).

Another useful aspect of the search process in this case was how it handled conflict. Prior to the event, we could not predict how the process would play out with respect to an overcast effect from the cormorant controversy. During the search conference, areas of

disagreement were acknowledged but then set aside so that progress could be made where common ground did exist. This approach to dealing with the cormorant controversy worked effectively because participants knew that the issue was being addressed in other forums, including a national planning effort initiated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS Division of Migratory Birds 2001), a conflict mediation process (Senecah and Sobel 2000), and court cases. In addition, NYSDEC had begun cormorant control efforts in May 1999 through an egg-oiling program (Farquhar, Mazzocchi, and McCullough 2000). To our surprise, participants themselves recognized the potential for the cormorant issue to create an irreparably divisive atmosphere and limited discussion around it.

Participants' and managers' evaluation comments suggested that using the search method again in the future could be beneficial in some situations. Participants felt the approach would be appropriate for regional issues; situations in which multiple stakeholders (landowners, resource users, etc.) or many sectors of a community are affected by management; and issues involving controversy, particularly if the agency could anticipate problems and the need for public input and use the method proactively to diffuse conflict. Participants noted that the method should be used sparingly and only for complex issues or matters of significant magnitude because of the substantial investment of time and resources required.

We found the search conference method to be an effective vehicle to facilitate meaningful participation by stakeholders from local communities in planning for the LOIWMA. The process provided several benefits, including:

- understanding LOIWMA planning in a broader regional context,
- eliciting input from participants with diverse interests and concerns,
- learning among participants about the region, issues, and one another,
- relationship-building,
- enhanced agency credibility,
- concrete actions that can be incorporated in the LOIWMA plan,
- concrete action steps for broader community initiatives,
- and interest in ongoing collaboration demonstrated by participants' desire to reconvene.

We attribute these benefits not only to inherent strengths of the process, but also to the substantial care taken by NYSDEC in its appropriate design through the involvement of the steering committee, purposeful selection of participants, and careful attention to a variety of details that contributed to its success.

The Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference was not a one-time intervention, but rather one component of an ongoing agency effort to foster collaborative management with local communities. It provided a valuable component upon which NYSDEC, other agencies, and community leaders can build to realize an ideal future that includes a strong economy, vibrant communities, and a healthy natural environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the 32 individuals who participated in the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference, as well as the members of the steering committee who aided in its design. We are also grateful to the New York State Department of Conservation (NYSDEC) for its courage in trying and learning from the search process. In particular, we acknowledge Jim Farquhar, Dennis Faulkham, Steve Litwhiler, John Major, George Mattfeld, Russ McCullough, Gary Parsons, and Albert Schiavone. We also thank Tom Brown, Nancy Connelly, and Karlene Smith with Cornell University's Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU) for assistance in the design and implementation of the event. We are grateful to these HDRU staff and Cornell professor Max Pfeffer for contributions to the research component of this effort. We also appreciate the excellent facilitation skills of the search managers, Robert Rich and Scott Sears from Cornell's Program on Employment and Workplace Systems.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether initiated by grassroots movements or mandated by state and federal laws, public participation has grown increasingly prevalent in natural resource management. Wildlife management is no exception (Chase 2000). Yet one of the most commonly employed approaches to public participation in governmental decision-making, public hearings, often proves dissatisfactory to both citizens and managers. Reflecting upon mechanisms for interaction between government officials and the public, Mathews (1994:23) states:

The standard public hearings that bring citizens and officials together are probably the most counterproductive mechanism of all. ... Officials usually make presentations or get lectured at by some outraged individual. Little two-way communication occurs. And with no feedback, people don't think that they have been heard. The prevailing sense is that a decision was reached long before the hearing was scheduled.

Forester (1999:147) concurs, “. . . public hearings are pathological rituals that often minimize responsive interaction and maximize exaggeration and adversarial posturing.”

Seeking an alternative to the common “decide-announce-defend” (Forester 1999:63) model of planning in which an agency drafts a management plan and then presents and defends it to citizens at public hearings, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) in cooperation with Cornell University embarked upon an innovation in its approach to wildlife management planning in 2000. Using a participatory planning process called a *search conference*, the agency engaged a diverse range of stakeholders from local communities in planning for the Lake Ontario Islands Wildlife Management Area (LOIWMA). Located in New York's eastern basin of Lake Ontario (Figure 1), the centerpiece of the LOIWMA, Little Galloo Island, has also been the focal point of more than a decade of controversy about double-crested cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) management. Against this backdrop of controversy, NYSDEC sponsored the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference to explore the potential for local communities to realize benefits from the islands, which many stakeholders considered a liability (Schusler and Decker 2000). The search conference occurred in conjunction with research investigating the contribution of deliberative processes to the development of collaborative resource management (Schusler and Decker In prep.A, Schusler and Decker In prep.B).

This report describes and evaluates the search process implemented for LOIWMA planning. Its purpose is to share our experience with the search method with others who may be considering alternative processes for public participation in natural resource management. After describing the background of the LOIWMA, we present results of a preliminary situation analysis that assessed the appropriateness of proceeding with a collaborative planning process. We then describe the search conference method and its implementation for LOIWMA planning. Finally, we evaluate the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference and discuss the transferability of this method to other situations.

Figure 1. Map of Eastern Lake Ontario Basin.

LAKE ONTARIO ISLANDS WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

The eastern Lake Ontario islands and adjacent shoals comprise an unique ecosystem that provides important habitat for warmwater fishes, colonial waterbirds, waterfowl, and shorebirds. Four parcels owned by NYSDEC constitute the LOIWMA (Figure 1): 43-acre Little Galloo Island, two parcels totaling 20 acres on neighboring Galloo Island, and one-acre Gull Island. A colonial waterbird rookery, the islands provide nesting grounds for the only colony of Caspian terns (*Sterna caspia*) in New York State, as well as ring-billed gulls (*Larus delawarensis*), herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*), great black-backed gulls (*Larus marinus*), black-crowned night herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), and a highly controversial population of double-crested cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) (Farquhar, Mazzocchi, and McCullough 2000).

Since the late 1980's, Little Galloo Island has been at the center of human controversy about the impact of cormorants, an opportunistic predator of fish, on the eastern basin's internationally renowned sport fishery. Due to pollution control, ample food supply, and state and federal protection, the cormorant population on Little Galloo Island grew from 22 pairs in 1974 to a peak of 8,410 pairs in 1996 (Farquhar, Mazzocchi, and McCullough 2000). As cormorant numbers have grown, so too has suspicion that cormorants are a cause of declining fish populations, which many residents of local tourism-based communities feel is threatening their economic livelihoods and traditional lifestyles. The controversy exploded in 1998 when a group of men from shoreline communities illegally shot nearly 1,000 birds (Revkin 1999). Scientific studies have implicated cormorants in the decline of smallmouth bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*), a popular sport species (NYSDEC and USGS 1999). Charter captains, marina owners, and others have urged state and federal agencies to aggressively control the impact of cormorants on the fishery. At the same time, birders, environmentalists, and animal rights supporters have sought continued protection of these birds. Cormorants' protection as a migratory species under federal law and international treaty creates a complex institutional context, involving a variety of actors at the local, state, federal, and international levels.

Following the gift transfer of Little Galloo Island from Phillips Petroleum to New York State in late 1998, the Lake Ontario Islands were designated a Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The WMA program is part of a long-term effort to establish permanent access to lands in New York State for the protection and promotion of its fish and wildlife resources (NYSDEC Division of Fish, Wildlife, and Marine Resources 2001). Per policy, NYSDEC Region 6 initiated management planning for the LOIWMA. While all NYSDEC planning efforts include some form of public participation, Region 6 staff believed that meaningful participation in planning for the LOIWMA would be especially crucial given the high level of public interest and controversy that had developed around the cormorant issue. NYSDEC also hoped to explore the potential for future collaborative resource management with local communities in the region (Schusler and Decker In prep.B).

PRELIMINARY SITUATION ANALYSIS

In 1999, we conducted a preliminary situation analysis (Schusler and Decker 2000) to aid NYSDEC in designing a community-based approach to develop a management plan for the LOIWMA. The situation analysis identified individuals and organizations with a stake in

management of the LOIWMA, examined the range of stakeholder attitudes toward the islands and their management, and assessed the feasibility of proceeding with a collaborative planning process. Methods included systematic document review of 176 newspaper articles occurring from 1987 to 1999 in national, regional, and local papers; open-ended interviews with 8 staff from NYSDEC, New York Sea Grant, and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County; and semi-structured interviews with 21 stakeholders in local communities. Stakeholders included charter captains, marina owners, business owners, local government officials, tourism professionals, birders and environmentalists, sportsmen, and residents.

Inductive, cross-interview analysis (Greene 1999, Patton 1990) identified several themes. We found that attitudes toward the islands composing the LOIWMA varied greatly among interviewees. While some stakeholders viewed the islands as an asset, others viewed them as devastated chunks of rock with little value. Interviewees' attitudes toward the islands seemed to influence their perceptions of potential benefits that could be realized from the islands' management.

A crucial finding of the situation analysis was that interviewees were most familiar with public meetings as a method for providing input to management planning. Although several noted the same drawbacks described by Mathews (1994) and Forester (1999), few interviewees had experience with other participation processes. This reinforced NYSDEC's belief that an alternative to the common model in which an agency announces and then defends a plan was needed for LOIWMA planning. NYSDEC had successfully employed other forms of participation, such as open houses and citizen task forces, in the region. Planning for the LOIWMA provided a valuable opportunity for the agency to further learn about alternative participation processes by experimenting with a collaborative approach to management planning.

The situation analysis revealed several challenges that a collaborative planning process could address by:

- helping NYSDEC understand how the islands' management fits within the broader socio-economic context of the Eastern Basin region;
- including participants with a more diverse range of perspectives so that NYSDEC would hear from those who were not the most active or vocal advocates of their stakes in resource management;
- enhancing understanding among all involved of scientific information, community needs, and one another's interests and values;
- bolstering existing social capital (Putnam 1993) through the development of new relationships and building of trust among stakeholders;
- enhancing agency credibility;
- initiating plans for concrete actions (e.g., education, safe harbor, tourism promotion, research) that participants could potentially help implement; and
- serving as a catalyst for ongoing planning and implementation.

The situation analysis suggested that a collaborative planning process would be useful for the LOIWMA, but would it be feasible? To help assess this, we utilized a diagnostic tool developed by Cordova (1997) in our analysis of interview data. Cordova (1997) identified eight

conditions for successful collaboration (Table 1). We found several present in this case. There were multiple issues (e.g., sustaining the fishery and developing wildlife-based tourism), multiple approaches to addressing those issues, and multiple stakeholder groups involved. Because no single stakeholder group could solve the issues on its own, collaboration was required. It was also in the parties' self-interest to collaborate by virtue of their shared interest in the region's natural resources and shared concern about the future of the fishery and the fate of colonial-nesting waterbirds. In addition, the timing was appropriate. A collaborative planning process would complement concurrent processes addressing cormorant management (Farquhar, Mazzocchi, and McCullough 2000, USFWS Division of Migratory Birds 2001 (Senecah and Sobel 2000). Collaborative planning could build upon interest generated by the cormorant-fishery controversy to generate positive energy around management of the LOIWMA.

Table 1. Diagnostics for assessing potential collaboration in resource management planning and their presence/absence based on LOIWMA preliminary situation analysis. (Adapted from Cordova 1997.)

Diagnostics for Assessing Collaboration Potential	Presence/Absence in LOIWMA Situation Analysis
There are multiple issues, multiple approaches to addressing those issues and multiple stakeholder groups involved. No one stakeholder group can solve the issue on its own.	+
It is in the parties' self-interest to collaborate by virtue of shared interests, shared fears, and interdependence.	+
Stakeholder groups are willing to collaborate with others.	?
There is a general institutional and policy context conducive to stakeholder involvement.	—
The timing is appropriate	+
There is capacity for collaborative decision-making – information and experience exist.	—
There is capacity for collaborative decision-making – intrinsic features of stakeholder groups.	?
Power is balanced at the negotiation table. There is a level playing field.	—

Although interview data were insufficient to draw a firm conclusion about the willingness of various stakeholders to collaborate with one another, some interviewees recognized others with opposing opinions on cormorant management as reasonable people and implied some willingness to work together. It was also unclear whether stakeholders had the capacity for collaboration. But interviewees' descriptions of their communities as rural areas where people often help each other out suggested that they possessed social capital (Putnam 1993) that would facilitate collaboration. A well designed and executed planning process itself could help build additional capacity.

While the aforementioned forces support collaboration, three conditions were absent in this case. Although NYSDEC expressed interest in exploring new processes for participation

that could lead to collaborative resource management, its limited experience with such approaches implied an institutional and policy context not particularly conducive to collaborative planning. Some interviewees also expressed sentiments that power at the negotiating table was unbalanced. Insufficient information about the desirability and feasibility of possible benefits from the islands' management, along with a lack of experience with collaborative decision-making also reduced the potential for successful collaboration.

Yet overall, it appeared that collaborative planning could occur if a process were carefully designed to build upon those factors supporting collaboration, while working to develop those that were lacking. We were also encouraged by the finding that people shared common ground in valuing the quality of life in their communities. Interviewees overwhelmingly responded that the most pressing issue in the region was building a strong economy while preserving the rural character and natural beauty of the area (Schusler and Decker 2000).

SEARCH METHODOLOGY

A search conference is a methodology for participatory planning and design. First developed in the 1960s, the method has been used effectively by organizations and communities for a variety of purposes from strategic planning to community development, addressing social, environmental, and economic issues (Emery and Purser 1996). The process is called a "search" because it brings people together to explore possibilities or search for a desirable future for their organization or community.

Through a structured, systematic process (Figure 2), search methodology encourages collective planning aimed at solving problems and realizing opportunities directly relevant to the people involved. Participants share their understanding of a situation, identify ideal futures for their community, predict probable futures, identify areas for change, set priorities, and initiate action planning. One outcome of a successful search is a set of action plans that participants want to pursue collectively. A search conference typically involves 25-75 people participating in a complex interplay of large and small group work sessions over the course of 2½ days (Greenwood and Levin 1998, Emery and Purser 1996). Several design principles of a search may differ from more traditional participation processes with which wildlife managers are familiar. These include:

- Consideration of the system of focus as it interacts with the broader environment.
- Participation that is intentionally diverse. Also, people participate as individuals rather than representatives of a specific organization.
- Valuing the knowledge of all participants. Expert knowledge is not privileged (e.g., wildlife managers participate in the same vein as other participants, rather than in a specific expert or technical role).
- A systematic process that creates valuable arenas for dialogue, or open two-way communication.
- A democratic structure that enables participants to define the direction in which the search proceeds.

A search conference is one process for planning (Holman and Devane 1999, Bunker and Alban 1997). We selected this approach because it matched well with NYSDEC's interest in fostering collaborative management with local communities (Schusler and Decker In prep.B). In addition, its design emphasizes learning among participants, a focus of research conducted in conjunction with this effort (Schusler and Decker In prep.A). The search itself is the centerpiece of a three-phase process (Emery and Purser 1996) that also includes a preparation and design phase prior to the event and an implementation and diffusion phase following it. Next, we discuss the implementation of these phases (Figure 3) for LOIWMA planning.

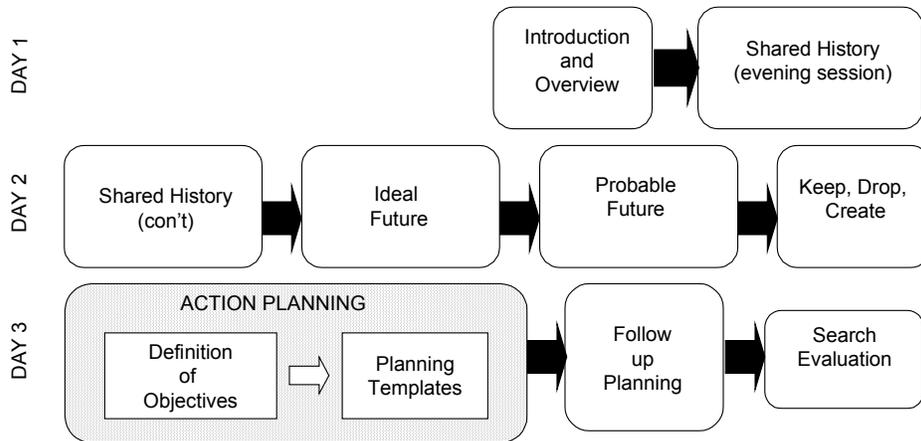


Figure 2. Stages of the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference. Adapted from Martin and Rich (1998).

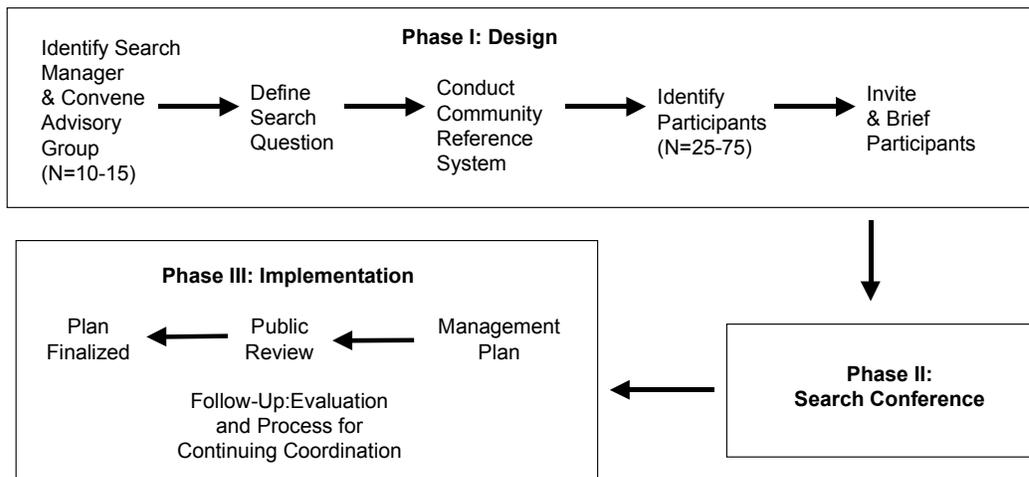


Figure 3. Overview of planning process: design, search event, and implementation. Adapted from Pelletier et al. (1999).

LAKE ONTARIO ISLANDS SEARCH CONFERENCE

Design

NYSDEC sponsored the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference with organizational assistance from Cornell University's Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU). We began by requesting the assistance of 15 community leaders and resource persons on a steering committee that informed the design of the search conference. In addition to NYSDEC, this committee included individuals with interests in business, extension, planning, local government, tourism, recreation, conservation, and public land management. The steering committee met for 2-3 hours three times during the summer of 2000 with meetings occurring about one month apart. The steering committee helped us design the search conference appropriately for the situation. In addition, these individuals' association with the process enhanced its credibility.

A key task for the steering committee was defining the search question, which provided the overall focus for the event. After substantial discussion and several iterations, the steering committee agreed upon the following question:

What is the ideal future land use and management of DEC-owned islands in the Eastern Lake Ontario Basin, considering the relationship of the islands to coastal communities?

The search conference would bring together a diverse group of people to discuss this question keeping in mind:

- protecting natural resources,
- benefiting citizens and local communities,
- developing economic opportunities,
- considering concerns of all users,
- sustaining community participation, and
- recognizing legal limitations.

In addition to defining the search question, the steering committee's other major task was the selection of participants through a systematic process called a "community" or "peer reference system" (Emery and Purser 1996, Rich, Hemlock and Martin 1999). Similar to the concept of "snowball" sampling, the peer reference system involved an iterative process of asking knowledgeable members of the community for the names of other respected community members. This produced a matrix of potential participants that reflected community interests in natural resource conservation and use as well as community and economic development. The primary criteria for participant selection was to maximize the diversity of perspectives reflected at the search, as well as the demographic diversity (e.g., age, gender, tenure living in region, private or public sector, etc.). This was not a random sample of stakeholders.

The steering committee advised holding the search conference after the end of the tourist season when more invitees would be likely to attend. The committee also suggested that the

event occur during the week because many invitees either worked with an agency for which they would participate during work hours or owned a business in which weekends were their busiest time. Of 71 individuals invited, 32 participated (Table 2). These included business owners, recreationists, tourism professionals, extension agents, planning staff, town board members, charter captains, environmentalists, state parks staff, and NYSDEC staff, among others. Some of those who declined to attend cited insufficient interest in the topic. Others expressed interest in attending but were unable to because of conflicting commitments in their schedules. We sought to ensure that the search would not be dominated by any single interest by making certain that the diverse perspectives reflected among those invited were also present in the group of 32 individuals attending. This required targeted effort encouraging attendance by a few specific individuals to ensure that their perspectives would be included.

Table 2. Diversity of stakes reflected among participants at the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference.

➤ Birders	➤ Extension agents
➤ Business owners	➤ Kayakers/paddling enthusiasts
➤ Charter boat captains	➤ Local government officials
➤ Community development professionals	➤ NYSDEC staff
➤ County planners	➤ Recreational anglers
➤ Educators	➤ State parks staff
➤ Environmentalists	➤ Tourism professionals

The event

The Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference occurred November 8-10, 2000 in Henderson Harbor, New York at the Charter House Inn. This small hotel located on the shore of Henderson Bay provided a comfortable atmosphere with a view of Lake Ontario that kept the focus of discussion close at hand. Professional facilitators from the Program for Employment and Workplace Systems in Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations managed the conference.

The event began with an evening session that included dinner, providing an opportunity for participants to socialize informally. A slide presentation by NYSDEC staff gave an informative overview of the unique natural resources of the Eastern Basin, including the LOIWMA. This was important because participants’ familiarity with the islands varied greatly.

The real work of the search conference participants began with the development of a shared history (Figure 4) for the Eastern Lake Ontario Basin. The history depicted along a chronological timeline the major events and forces influencing the region. The activity highlighted a complex interplay of ecological, economic, social and political forces shaping the region. It also provided context for subsequent planning and began to air areas of disagreement among participants. Although a few participants felt the shared history took more time than necessary, many found it a valuable learning experience, an especially interesting finding given

that at least 17 participants had lived in the area for a minimum of eleven years and many for over twenty years. The shared history concluded the evening session of day one.

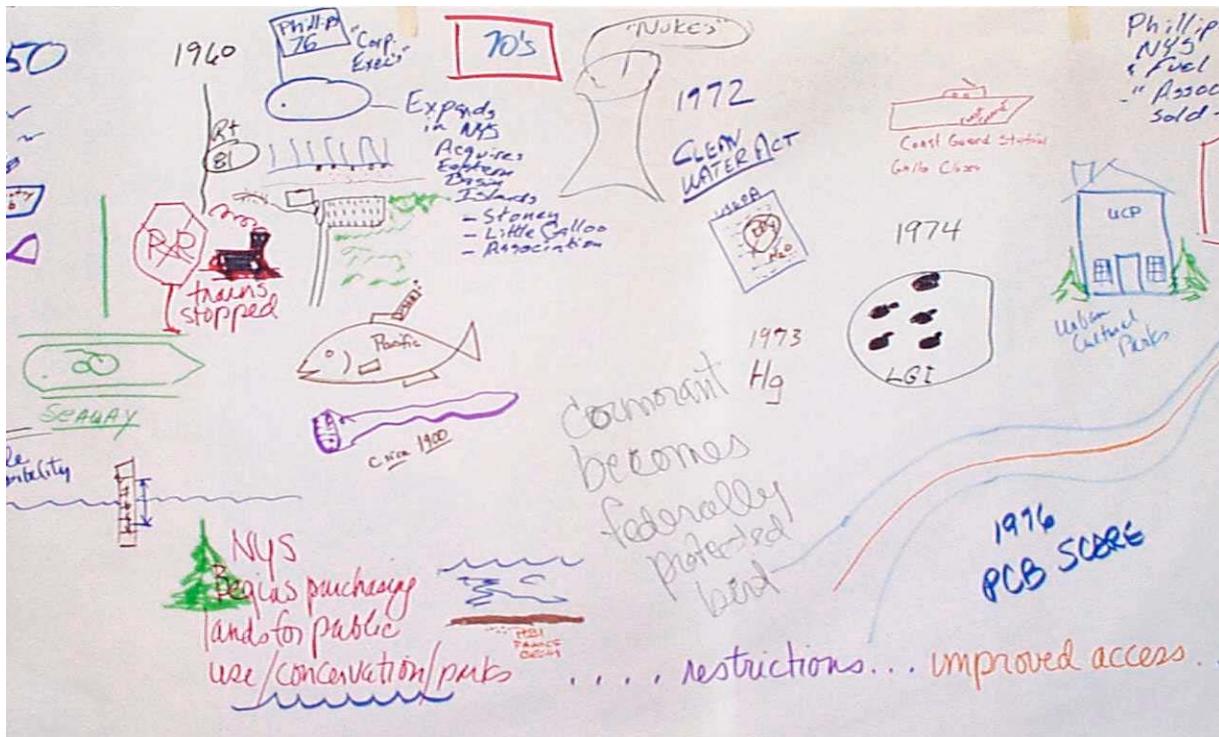


Figure 4. A portion of the graphic depiction of the shared history.

On the second day of the event, participants split into four breakout groups, which each identified traits of what they deemed an ideal future for the LOIWMA and/or the Eastern Basin region in the year 2010. To illustrate, Table 3 provides a list of ideal traits developed by one of the four groups. Each breakout group then reported their work to the full group. Despite the diversity of interests that people brought to the table, the ideal futures described by breakout groups overlapped substantially. Several participants were surprised by the extent to which common ground existed. One reflected, “I was blown away that there could be four or five breakout groups all having different discussions and when we came back [and reported back to the large group], all had similar points.”

Table 3. Ideal traits for the future generated by one of four breakout groups. Separate groups had many similar ideas of what would constitute an ideal future.

- Earth science curriculum in local schools based on resource
- Council of governments for the basin to discuss regional issues, multi-jurisdictional planning
- Eastern Basin recognized as premier destination for natural resource based tourism and knowledge based tourism with world class research facilities
- Create an Institute for Cropland and Environmental Research
- Eastern Basin has obtained stable, sustainable economy
- Coexistence between knowledge and consumption
- Key eco-tourism facilities located on islands – resources protected
- Public land contributing to tax base (no tax penalty to community for public ownership)
- State ownership of best resource based islands
- Establish process for local communities and residents to communicate with state and federal agencies
- Resource based “magnet” school established
- Community objectives for resource management become the standard for regulation

The full group then tackled the task of organizing these ideals for the future into broad categories that would later serve as areas of focus for planning. This was done by “affinity grouping” or clustering similar statements together to form general categories. Thus, the statement “earth science curriculum in local schools based on resource” was joined with similar statements like “resource based ‘magnet’ school established” to form a category titled “education.” By literally cutting apart flip chart pages, re-arranging items, and taping them back together, participants generated five broad categories of focus for further planning:

- community planning and cooperation,
- ecosystem management,
- education,
- recreational resource use, and
- sustainable resource-based tourism.

Nearly all of the ideal future statements fit into one of these categories. The few that did not were discussed briefly and then set aside, recognizing that while they were important, they were not central to the focus of this search conference.

Next, the search managers asked the full group to consider the probable future in each of the five areas listed above if no major changes of direction or new initiatives were undertaken. Table 4 illustrates probable future statements related to the area of education. Participants similarly developed statements of the probable future for each of the other categories of focus (i.e., community planning and cooperation, ecosystem management, recreational resource use, and sustainable resource-based tourism). Comparison of the ideal and probable futures emphasized the need for change in many areas, although a few participants found the probable future exercise exaggeratedly negative.

Table 4. Predictions of the probable future if no action were taken in the area of education.

- Missed opportunity to get kids out of classroom
- Lack of appreciation or sense of place instilled
- Best and brightest kids will move away
- Uninformed electorate
- Opportunity for research will come and go
- Lose the energy of youth
- Erosion of certain resources
- Informal family group modeling re: environment will be lost

Participants then split into four new breakout groups and completed an activity called “keep, drop, and create.” Addressing the five categories listed above, each group reflected upon what is currently occurring in communities along the Eastern Basin and asked:

- What should our communities keep doing because it is moving us closer to our ideal future?
- What should our communities stop doing because it is moving us away from our ideal future?
- What new things do our communities need to do because nothing or not enough is being done already?

This exercise produced specific ideas for consideration in action planning the following day. To illustrate, Table 5 provides an example of the ideas generated in the area of education.

Table 5. A portion of ideas generated through the “keep, drop and create” activity in the area of education.

- | |
|---|
| <p>Keep</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Conservation field days➤ Current educational activities directed at natural resource understanding <p>Drop</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Top down regents mandates➤ Classroom only natural resource instruction <p>Create</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Curricula for local environmental and coastal education and awareness➤ Inventory of educational tools and resources related to environment that are already available➤ Video viewing of colonial waterbirds on islands➤ Adult education for environmental issues➤ Publicity, educational handouts➤ “Citizen science” programs where public could assist in data collection and projects➤ WPBS show for Eastern Basin➤ Etc. |
|---|

Before the conclusion of the second day, participants self-selected one of the five areas in which they would like to focus further in their efforts to do action planning. This process of “prioritizing with one’s feet” created five self-defined, action-planning teams, ranging in number from three to eight participants.

Participants reconvened on the third day and, using a template for action planning, each team identified at least one short-term and one long-term objective for their area of focus. Figure 5 illustrates a completed planning template for one of the long-term objectives identified by the team addressing education. For each of the five areas of focus (i.e., community planning and cooperation, ecosystem management, education, recreational resource use, and sustainable resource-based tourism), action-planning teams identified several objectives and accompanying action strategies, other groups to involve, information needs, and resource needs. The bulk of the day was devoted to action planning (Figure 6). The event concluded with discussion of next steps.

<p><u>Action Statement:</u> Set up and maintain a remote video camera link from Little Galloo to create an awareness of the bird populations on the islands.</p>										
<p><u>Action Strategy—Sequence of Activities</u></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>1. Research technical specifications: Solar power? Battery power? Size? Still photos?</td> <td>5. Advertise</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. Research cost</td> <td>6. Maintenance</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3. Seek funding</td> <td>7. Develop classroom activity package to coordinate with photos</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4. Set up web site</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			1. Research technical specifications: Solar power? Battery power? Size? Still photos?	5. Advertise	2. Research cost	6. Maintenance	3. Seek funding	7. Develop classroom activity package to coordinate with photos	4. Set up web site	
1. Research technical specifications: Solar power? Battery power? Size? Still photos?	5. Advertise									
2. Research cost	6. Maintenance									
3. Seek funding	7. Develop classroom activity package to coordinate with photos									
4. Set up web site										
<p><u>Others to involve</u> Local internet provider DEC Cooperative extension Cornell Lab of Ornithology Sea Grant Montezuma NWR (for technical info)</p>	<p><u>Information Needed</u> Camera specs Size – how intrusive would camera be?</p>	<p><u>Resources Needed</u> Web server Technology info Camera Power supply</p>								
<p><u>Immediate Actions</u> Contact Cornell Ornithology</p>										
<p><u>Meeting Coordinator/Key Contact Person(s)</u></p>		<p><u>Next Meeting</u></p>								

Figure 5. Completed planning template for long-term education objective. (Adapted from R. E. Rich, Program for Employment and Workplace Systems, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.)



Figure 6. Small group work led to the formation of short-term and long-term objectives for action plans.

Follow-up

The search conference concluded with discussion of how NYSDEC would proceed with planning for the LOIWMA and how the group would proceed with additional actions that participants wanted to implement beyond NYSDEC's mission. Participants agreed that they would reconvene within six months to provide feedback on a completed draft plan for the LOIWMA and to assess and further coordinate progress on other action items. NYSDEC will also follow standard procedures for communicating about the draft LOIWMA plan with the broader public and inviting public review and comment on the plan. However, in this case, rather than announcing and defending a plan developed by agency staff alone, NYSDEC is presenting the public with a plan that already incorporates substantial public input and, presumably, better reflects community interests in the islands' management.

Participants also suggested the formation of an Eastern Basin Working Group as a mechanism to maintain communication. However, the function and logistics of such a group were not discussed at any length. More time devoted to discussion of next steps might have clarified what would happen next and who would take responsibility for which actions.

Following the event, Cornell University compiled a summary report of the search, which was mailed to all participants. The report included the content of flip chart notes from both small and large group activities, as well as completed action planning forms. NYSDEC and Cornell intend to reconvene the group in spring of 2001, but other entities will need to assume leadership

for ongoing efforts. Re-convening participants will provide an opportunity to build upon the foundation laid during the search conference. Research conducted in conjunction with this effort also assessed the potential for future collaboration between NYSDEC and local communities (Schusler and Decker In prep.B). Only time will fully reveal the search conference's actual impact.

EVALUATION

Participants' perspectives

Upon conclusion of the event, participants completed an evaluation instrument (N=22). Nine out of ten responded that the conference *accomplished its purpose* to a great extent. All respondents (100%) felt that the conference design made sense in terms of its stated purpose. Respondents felt that the *shared history* and *action planning* contributed most to the effectiveness of the conference.

We also contacted participants by telephone (N=29) one month following the event to gain further insight into their interpretations of the search conference experience. We asked people what they found most and least valuable about participating in the search conference. Several common themes were apparent in their comments. Many participants valued the "mix of people" present, providing a diverse range of perspectives, interests, and backgrounds. People also valued the opportunity to meet and network with others. For some, this included merely the opportunity to exchange business cards; for others, it involved the "... opportunity to really sit down and talk with people and get to know them better." Several participants valued learning about the region, its issues, and its people. In particular, they gained a greater understanding of others' points of view.

Several participants expressed surprise at the degree of common ground that existed among the diverse population of participants in the search conference. Many participants also valued the opportunity to work together. One person observed, "Much greater willingness to work and collaborate than I had envisioned." Another explained that he found most valuable the "... ability to work with people on the opposite end of the spectrum from where I stood and understand positions which I had little or no real understanding of before." Research conducted in conjunction with LOIWMA planning identified characteristics of the process that contributed to learning among participants and to the development of common purpose and collaborative relationships (Schusler and Decker In prep.A). Finally, participants praised the facilitation of the event and appreciated the opportunity to provide genuine input into the LOIWMA plan.

Nineteen of the 29 participants interviewed by telephone could identify *nothing* as least valuable about their experience. The greatest drawback mentioned by others was the time required, which was particularly problematic for those not employed by a public agency who volunteered their time. Indeed, some invitees did not participate because they could not take time away from work and other commitments. Four out of five respondents to the immediate post-event evaluation instrument (N=22) felt that the length of the conference was about right. Although the 2½ day time commitment is substantial, it does provide an efficient means to

develop a plan in a condensed timeframe and, depending upon the situation, may be preferable to periodic meetings of shorter duration over several months.

A small number of participants were frustrated with the direction of discussions during certain portions of the event. For example, one person felt that little progress was made in the discussion of ecosystem management; another felt that some discussions were dominated by a handful of individuals. A few participants found portions of the process to be rudimentary and repetitive. One described it as “a bit exhausting.” Several participants said that the real value of the process would be measured by what comes of it, as reflected in the following comments:

The process is fine, as long as it results in some action – a task list, who’ll do what, etc.

I’m probably over optimistic of what the long-term results might be, but if several small advances are made (some already have) it will have been time very well spent.

Some of the outcomes will need a serious commitment to implement.

We also inquired in telephone interviews how NYSDEC’s sponsorship of this search conference may have altered participants’ impressions of the agency. Many participants responded that their impression of NYSDEC did not change much because they already had good working relationships with Region 6 staff. Those who responded that their impressions had changed all reported that the search conference interaction contributed to a more positive view of the agency. They appreciated NYSDEC’s willingness to try a different, more open approach by reaching out to communities in a neutral forum and listening to ideas from a variety of people. Several participants commented that many of NYSDEC’s actions in recent years, of which the search conference was another, had improved their impressions of the agency. As one participant said, “They’re much more friendly.” Several attributed this to local leadership within Region 6. Reflecting upon several of NYSDEC’s actions in recent years, another participant stated “. . . the challenge to DEC is to keep the bar up.”

We do not know how the event may have influenced perceptions among the broader public, as that assessment was beyond the scope of our evaluation. However, one participant explained that he knew others invited to attend who felt the search conference was indicative of “NYSDEC selling out by involving the public to take pressure off themselves.” This participant did not agree, especially because he recognized the risk taken by NYSDEC in that “they could have ended up with the public telling them something they really didn’t want.” This comment suggests that in the future the development of outreach strategies to inform the broader community of stakeholders about the purpose and progress of processes like the search conference could be valuable (Pelstring 1999).

NYSDEC perspectives

For fish and wildlife managers at NYSDEC, a substantial strength of the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference was the consideration of LOIWMA planning in a comprehensive way

that focused on multiple issues rather than the single issue of cormorant management. One manager noted, “The group steered itself away from the cormorant issue. If we had tried to do that, we would have been embroiled in it.” Managers found value in bringing together stakeholders with diverse interests to talk in a civil way, gain a better understanding of each others’ perspectives, and recognize some areas of common interest. One manager expressed amazement at the positive interactions that occurred among stakeholders with a contentious history. In addition to encouraging communication among these stakeholders, the process also brought managers’ attention to the concerns of other stakeholders that had not been previously involved, such as local governments and chambers of commerce. NYSDEC staff were also impressed by the enthusiasm of many participants. Finally, managers felt that the agency received “many excellent and reasonable recommendations,” some of which (e.g., installation of mooring buoys) it intends to implement in 2001.

The above benefits did not come without a substantial investment of time in the event’s design and implementation, which managers noted as a potential drawback. In this case, managers felt the time investment was worthwhile. As one stated, “If you want something, you have to work for it.” Another drawback noted by NYSDEC was the inability to educate some participants on specific issues. For example, in the area of ecosystem management, it seemed that many participants did not understand the concept of an ecosystem, nor realize what ecosystem management might involve or the feasibility of undertaking certain recommendations. At times, it was clear to NYSDEC staff that some participants had incorrect information on biological issues, but an opportunity to really clarify understanding around these issues did not occur. Managers also cited the uncertainty surrounding follow-up as a drawback. NYSDEC would have liked to see some commitment from others to undertake actions beyond its own mission, but some participants expressed reluctance to do so, understandably given competing demands on their time and resources.

At first skeptical of what could really come of the search process, NYSDEC staff now agree that having gone through it and seen some of its outcomes, they would recommend its use again in the future for certain situations. It would be most appropriate for planning in situations similar to that in the Eastern Lake Ontario Basin, which involve “a strong divergence of opinion and a gem of a resource.” One example would be to inform Unit Management Plans in the Adirondack Park. Often in those situations, people are interested in their own segment of an issue and are reluctant to listen to others involved. The search conference method offers an efficient technique that brings those stakeholders together and results in a report summarizing all the perspectives that can guide NYSDEC in management planning (A. Schiavone, R. D. Faulknham, and J. F. Farquhar, NYSDEC, personal communication).

REFLECTIONS ON OUR EXPERIENCE

Purpose and expectations

A challenge from the start of the search conference development process that continued throughout was ambiguity about its purpose. Confusion existed in two respects: (1) NYSDEC’s intended use of outcomes produced by the search conference, and (2) participants’ roles and expectations, especially for follow-up. A question that repeatedly came up during steering

committee meetings and at the search conference itself was, “What does NYSDEC intend to do with this?” People were unsure whether the search conference would actually produce the management plan, provide a strong foundation of ideas for the plan, or merely provide some input to be thrown in a hopper with a lot of other ideas that may or may not be incorporated into the plan. As a NYSDEC staff member explained at the start of the event, the agency hoped to accomplish two things:

One of the reasons I’m here, one of the reasons we’re here, is to get some input into a very specific management plan for a very small chunk of real estate. Pretty easy to write a biological component to that. A little more difficult to incorporate public input into it, but that’s something that we hope to gain out of this process. I guess that all slides into a much larger context and something I think is more important to this search conference. Yeah, I’ll get input and I’ll get some good stuff to put into a plan. But there may be things that go way far beyond what DEC can do and what’s even within our mission that the folks in this room can decide are important and maybe start selecting some actions and some planning in a broader community sense to accomplish some of those things as well. So hopefully we’ll get to two things. A little bit of help in terms of input to our specific land and in a broader sense the betterment of the whole community.

Some of the confusion surrounding purpose could have been diminished through clearer and repeated explanation of expectations. However, it seemed that much of it resulted from a discrepancy evident throughout the event between those who felt the search conference purpose was to inform NYSDEC about what the agency should do and those who viewed the purpose as the collective discovery of what communities could do to realize benefits from the resource. The following comments during the discussion of follow-up to the event illustrate:

To me it seems like it’s going to go into the digestive stage of the DEC to find out what they can actually do. Then when that process takes place, then come back to us and then we’ll help take the ball. . . . I see it as the DEC was the leading force in getting this together. And I think at these stages, I mean like when we come up with ideas, if we could have a contact person in the DEC to say ‘hey this came up’ or ‘that came up.’ Then the next time we get together, all of us are going to have more time to digest this and then we may be able to take more of an active role. We need a little nurturing.

I think a lot of what’s being talked about today, that you may have community resources that can help do some of this if DEC will come back and work with this group and work with the players. . . . There is a lot of self-help potential here. There’s a lot of grassroots, a lot of us can go back and work with our contacts. . . . We want to be players with DEC. We don’t just want to give you input to run independent. We want to stay a part of the process.

Although people struggled with understanding how the LOIWMA plan fit in with other community-based initiatives, and who would take responsibility for which action plans, it was clear that participants wanted to continue working together. Issues surrounding implementation of action plans, as well as ongoing communication and coordination through an Eastern Basin

Working Group, will be important areas for further discussion when the search conference group re-convenes in spring 2001.

One way in which some of this confusion could have been avoided and a foundation laid for collaborative efforts in the future might have been to include a broader range of entities in the event's sponsorship. The involvement of additional sponsors, such as local governments, extension organizations, or others, might have made clear that the process was intended not only to inform NYSDEC but also to provide valuable understanding for others' use. NYSDEC and Cornell considered this during design of the search conference but chose not to request additional sponsorship because sponsorship by some entities, such as fishing or environmental organizations, might have connoted a process dominated by specific interests in the minds of some potential participants. By the event's end, it appeared that the search conference's dual purpose – providing input to the LOIWMA plan and exploring broader community-based initiatives – had become clearer to most participants. We will learn more about the interaction of these parallel tracks when the search group re-convenes in spring 2001.

Scope of focus

A strength of the process, although at times a source of confusion, was the flexibility in its scope of focus. As mentioned above, discussion during the event followed two parallel tracks, one addressing the future management of the LOIWMA and the other addressing the future of resource management and community development more generally in the Eastern Basin region. This enabled NYSDEC to gather input specific to the LOIWMA, while at the same time allowing participants to address other related issues of concern to them, such as improving coordination between municipalities on zoning regulations. Indeed, NYSDEC hoped the search would encourage consideration of the islands' management within a broader context because this additional information could improve management decisions. In addition, the broader focus enhanced the event's salience for some participants. As one person noted with regard to the broad focus (beyond solely the LOIWMA) permitted in discussions, "I greatly appreciate the moderators allowing that to happen."

Determining the scope of focus was a robust area of discussion for the steering committee in developing the search question. A search conference addressing the future of cormorant management on Little Galloo Island would have been too narrow a focus, while a search conference sponsored by a single agency that addressed the future management of all public lands in the region would have been presumptuous and equally inappropriate. Ultimately, the steering group decided to focus on the islands, emphasizing their interactions – ecological, economic, social, and jurisdictional – with the Eastern Basin coast. Participants' feedback suggested that this focus worked well. A few individuals who had previously participated in other search conferences reported in telephone interviews that the focused, localized scope of this search conference contributed to its success. They found this search conference to be more productive than others they had attended that focused on more general, macro issues.

Participation

A key question in the design of any participatory process is “Who participates?” Because the LOIWMA is a public resource, any number of different stakeholders from across New York State could have been invited to participate in the search conference. We limited participation to the local region because we were interested in exploring the potential for collaborative resource management (Schusler and Decker In prep.B) with those stakeholders most directly affected by the islands’ management. People in shoreline communities who make their livelihoods from resource-based activities have the most to lose or gain from the islands’ management. They not only directly feel the economic impact of a declining fishery, but they also could best take advantage of potential benefits, such as safe harbor, a kayaking trail, or tourism promotion highlighting the islands and other basin resources. Thus, we focused on local participation for input to LOIWMA planning. We recognized that NYSDEC plays an important role in coordinating local actions with those at broader state, regional, national, and international scales. Indeed, the management plan will be available for review by the broader public before it is finalized. Non-local stakeholders have been directly involved in separate proceedings specific to cormorant management (Senecah and Sobel 2000).

Having focused participation locally, the task of determining who would participate still required careful consideration. A benefit of the search process was the use of the peer reference system to identify participants. Doing so provided several advantages. First, the steering group’s assistance with the peer reference process resulted in a broad, inclusive group of participants, perhaps more so than NYSDEC staff could have otherwise identified. Steering committee members drew upon their knowledge and contacts to expand the list of potential participants and ensure that all possible stakes would be included among search conference participants.

Systematic identification and selection of participants also enabled the agency to hear from individuals who possessed a stake in resource management but had not actively voiced that stake in the past. NYSDEC was well aware of the views of stakeholders in favor or opposed to cormorant control, a highly polarized issue. The agency was interested in learning about stakes in other aspects of the islands’ management. Doing so required dialogue among stakeholders with a diverse range of perspectives and knowledge about additional areas of expertise, such as tourism and community development. The peer reference system provided a mechanism for purposefully identifying such a group. The success of the search conference depended on the individuals who participated. As one participant noted, “. . . the people involved represent as good a group of people as you could have involved.”

Many participants reported that the mix of different views was highly valuable and contributed to learning about issues and each other (Schusler and Decker In prep.A). While participants in the search conference provided a diversity of perspectives, they could have been more demographically diverse. We sought a group that would be balanced in the ratio of women and men, people employed in the public and private sectors, and people living throughout shoreline communities in Jefferson County as well as Watertown, New York, the regional urban center. We also sought diversity in age and the length of time people had lived in the region.

While we succeeded in some of these, the group consisted of 26 men and only 6 women and no one below the age of 30.

Also important was NYSDEC's participation as equals with the rest of the group. Obviously, wildlife managers brought knowledge about the LOIWMA that others did not possess; however, the parallel contribution of this knowledge in the same way that others shared their knowledge of local communities, history, and economic development, for instance, demonstrated that NYSDEC genuinely valued participants' contributions. Participants hope to see further evidence of this in the resulting LOIWMA plan.

A potential problem of participation in the search conference was intermittent attendance by some participants. This was true of the preparatory meetings with the steering group as well. Encouraging participation of as many invitees as possible, we allowed those individuals who could not participate during the entire event to attend portions of it. While most participants were present throughout the entire event, a few participants missed the final day of action planning or attended sporadically. For the most part, this seemed to work fine with minimal disruption to the process. However, a few participants did comment on the intermittent attendance of others and noted that their participation throughout would have been preferable.

We could have avoided this problem by holding the event as a retreat where everyone would have been expected to stay overnight, a format often used for search conferences. However, the steering committee felt it unlikely that most participants would stay overnight given the minimal travel distance required for most attendees and the likelihood that many would be unable to commit the additional evening time. Holding the event only during the day also reduced facility costs. Overnight accommodations were provided for individuals desiring them, which included a few participants who had to travel longer distances to attend. Those who stayed overnight throughout the event felt that it would have been preferable for all participants to stay at the hotel, creating more of a retreat-like atmosphere.

Conflict

Prior to the event, we could not predict how the process would play out with respect to an overcast effect from the cormorant controversy. This was one of the first topics of discussion at the initial steering group meeting. We could not ignore the controversy over cormorants; however, we did not want cormorant management to derail discussion from many potential benefits of the islands' management. An excerpt of discussion within the steering group illustrates this thinking:

Community development professional: If you can't set it [the cormorant conflict] aside, you'll never get at the big picture . . . It'll just swamp everything else. Not that it shouldn't be resolved, but it would defeat the purpose of this effort, which is bigger.

Businessperson: But can you get to the other issues? How do you talk about recreation and so on when you have these birds?

NYSDEC staff member: Right now we're doing everything we can that is legally possible . . . somehow we've got to make it clear from the beginning that there are a whole lot of other issues related to these lands. For instance, public use or even education of the public on the uniqueness. How many people are really aware of Little Galloo Island? People have a view of Little Galloo as just cormorants. There are a lot of other things . . . we right here in Jefferson County have something that could be on the Discovery Channel, was on the Discovery Channel. But the viewpoint is that it's a dirty island with cormorants on it. If we look at it as how can we change the public's image of it to benefit the communities on the lake, then we will get past conflicts.

A useful aspect of the search process in this case was how it handled conflict. One aim of the search method is to clarify areas of agreement and disagreement. While doing so acknowledges that conflict exists, the search process is *not* a method for conflict resolution. Areas of disagreement are acknowledged and then set aside so that progress can be made where common ground does exist (R. E. Rich, Cornell University, personal communication). This approach to dealing with the cormorant controversy worked effectively because participants knew that the issue was being addressed in other forums, including a national planning effort initiated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS Division of Migratory Birds 2001), a conflict mediation process (Senecah and Sobel 2000), and court cases. In addition, NYSDEC had begun cormorant control efforts in May 1999 through an egg-oiling program (Farquhar, Mazzocchi, and McCullough 2000). To our surprise, participants themselves recognized the potential for the cormorant issue to create an irreparably divisive atmosphere and limited discussion around cormorants. In the end, concerns around cormorants were appropriately included within the area of planning labeled "ecosystem management." An evaluation comment reflected a sentiment reported by several participants, "[The] conference showed tremendous balance on a very controversial 'cormorant' issue."

Transferability

When asked in telephone interviews, participants overwhelmingly agreed that the NYSDEC should use the search method again in the future, although a few added the caveat "if it ends up being followed through on." People felt the approach would be appropriate for:

- regional issues, management planning for other public lands and natural resources, and changes in fishing and hunting regulations;
- situations in which multiple stakeholders (landowners, resource users, etc.) or many sectors of a community are affected by management;
- issues involving controversy, particularly if the agency can anticipate problems and the need for public input and use the method proactively to diffuse conflict; and
- revision of the LOIWMA management plan when that time arrives.

Participants noted that the method should be used sparingly and only for complex issues or matters of significant magnitude. They felt that it would be inappropriate for "no-brainers" because of the substantial investment of time and resources required. We estimated the cost of the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference to be \$17,200. The bulk of expenses were for

professional facilitation and the facility (including meals). Additional expenses included supplies, printing, postage, telephone, and travel. In addition, coordination of a search conference requires the allocation of staff time to make contacts, organize meetings, and produce support materials.

CONCLUSION

We found the search conference method to be an effective vehicle to facilitate meaningful participation by stakeholders from local communities in planning for the LOIWMA. The process provided several benefits, including:

- understanding LOIWMA planning in a broader regional context,
- eliciting input from participants with diverse interests and concerns,
- learning among participants about the region, issues, and one another,
- relationship-building,
- enhanced agency credibility,
- concrete actions that can be incorporated in the LOIWMA plan,
- concrete action steps for broader community initiatives,
- and interest in ongoing collaboration demonstrated by participants' desire to re-convene.

We attribute these benefits not only to inherent strengths of the process, but also to the substantial care taken in its appropriate design through the involvement of the steering group, purposeful selection of participants, and careful attention to a variety of details that contributed to its success.

The search conference is one of many processes that an agency might consider for stakeholder involvement. Selection of any citizen participation process should be based upon an assessment of the situation (Chase 2000). Research conducted in conjunction with the Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference examined characteristics of the process that contributed to learning among participants and explored how learning can contribute to the development of collaborative resource management. This understanding can help managers to design context-specific processes that foster common purpose and collaborative relationships by advancing learning (Schusler and Decker In prep.A).

The Lake Ontario Islands Search Conference was not a one-time intervention, but rather one component of an ongoing agency effort to foster collaborative management with local communities. The search conference provided a valuable component upon which NYSDEC, other agencies, and community leaders can build to realize an ideal future that includes a strong economy, vibrant communities, and a healthy natural environment.

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