

**Consensus-Based Collaboration in Watershed Management:
Quixotic Notion or the Environmental Pot of Gold?**

by

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“We’ve become mesmerized by the quixotic notion that, after decades of fighting ferocious water wars, we can leave our disagreements behind, amble into the Quaker meeting-house, and seek—and magically *find*—consensus.” —Marc Reisner 1999:31

INTRODUCTION

“Environmentalism is a big-picture movement, valuable when it comes to imagining a different kind of world than the one we live in, but usually incapable of implementing that vision. Implementation takes people who work the land, who can invent machinery and logging and grazing techniques, and who can put together capital and labor and markets to restore the land. Environmentalists need to be at the table because we understand what the land should look like. But others must translate that vision into concrete achievements. Those environmentalists who participate in consensus efforts aren’t doing it out of the goodness of their hearts, or because they are foolish and overly trusting. They do it because they need help to get their way. The same enlightened but selfish reasoning brings ranchers, loggers and federal land managers to the table. They join consensus efforts because it is the most efficient way for them to do business today.” —Ed Marston 1999:1

These observations by Ed Marston, publisher of the well-known periodical *High Country News* examining contemporary environmental issues in the American West, capture both the promise and the challenge of consensus efforts to protect and restore the environment. Collaboration between stakeholders involved in specific natural resource use issues appears to be a positive step toward uncovering solutions and approaches that reflect the interests and perspectives of business, industry, government, environmental, and citizen representatives. However, we cannot naïvely believe that forging innovative solutions that are amenable to the parties involved is as simple as getting everyone to sit down at a table together. In fact, despite the current enthusiasm for and acceptance of consensus-based collaborative approaches to environmental problems, a growing counter-movement of scholars and practitioners is calling for a more careful consideration of the almost blanket application of consensual processes. Their hesitation and cautionary advice stems from concerns about the potential of 1) undermining government action and powerful environmental legislation; 2) compromising on lowest-common-denominator solutions; 3) excluding or representing incompletely all relevant stakeholders; and 4) quelling environmental and other marginalized voices.

How can one environmentalist—Ed Marston—espouse the potential for consensus to promote environmental goals while the late Sierra Club president and environmentalist—David Brower—denounced consensus for its co-optation of environmental participants who have lost their advocate edge? “Polite conservationists,” said Brower “leave no marks except the scars on the landscape that could have been prevented” (quoted by Amy 1983:2). This mixture of enthusiastic acceptance and outright condemnation of consensus-based collaboration should be a warning call to managers, researchers, and extension staff who conduct, monitor, and/or study collaboration as a means to achieve sustainable natural resource management and stakeholder satisfaction.

This report examines the appropriateness of stakeholder collaboration in natural resource management, particularly of watersheds, with the intent of clarifying both the potential benefits and risks involved. The information and conclusions presented here are based on a review of

literature from the fields of alternative dispute resolution and watershed management. The discussion contained herein will be of interest to those with specific watershed management interests, as well as to a broader audience of state and federal fish and wildlife managers, extension staff, and citizen groups concerned with the relationship between humans and the environment.

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CONSENSUS-BASED COLLABORATION

Democratic procedures typically engage a defined majority as the decision rule in which an option is ratified when more than 50 percent of the members vote in favor of that option. In contrast, most collaborative partnerships operationalize consensus as their decision rule (Coughlin et al. 1999:4-24). “One of the research areas most in need of scholarly attention is how a reliance on consensus decision-making—often interpreted in practice as a unanimity requirement—impacts the functioning of collaborative groups” (Kenney 2000:viii). Understanding the role and repercussions of consensus must be nested in an understanding of the theory and practice of collaborative natural resource management approaches. The range of definitions of collaboration and consensus found in the literature is presented below, followed by a brief summary of the historical development and evolution of collaborative approaches in the United States.

Defining Collaboration

Definitions of collaboration emphasize that stakeholders come together to try to forge mutually satisfying solutions to the sustainable management of a natural resource of concern. A stakeholder is “any group or individual that uses the resource, has an interest or claim on it, or will be affected by its management” (Cordova 1997). The current enthusiasm for collaboration is illustrated by definitions from the literature (Table 1). Yet the second dictionary definition for collaborate is a reminder of the caution that should be applied to collaborative efforts when individuals and groups with varied interests and motives come together (see Table 1). In this report, collaboration is defined as *dialogue, deliberation, and negotiation among stakeholders who have mutual or competing interests in an issue or an area, and who work together to affect the future of that interest* (see Williams and Ellefson 1996:1).

Table 1. Definitions of collaboration taken from a review of current literature

“Collaborate v. **1** to work together esp. in some literary, artistic, or scientific undertaking **2** to cooperate with an enemy invader” (taken from Webster’s New World Dictionary, Neufeldt and Guralink 1991:273)

“A collaborative partnership...is defined as an association of individuals or organizations working together to solve environmental problems within a defined geographic boundary” (Coughlin et al. 1999:4-1).

“[Collaboration] is a process in which the parties involved agree to work together in anticipation of a conflict, and work collaboratively to plan and manage ways to avoid the conflict” (Rijsberman 1999:54).

“Cooperation is working together to implement an idea that’s already formulated. Collaboration starts much earlier: it’s working together to create the idea in the first place. When people have a hand in creating an idea, they’re far more likely to support it, or at least be willing to live with it” (Kinsley 1997:46).

Defining Consensus

The definitions for consensus used by collaborative management groups vary (see Table 2). Even within watershed partnerships, consensus can have different meanings. For example, the McKenzie River Watershed Council recognized five levels of consensus as decision-rule ranging from “wholeheartedly agree” to “serious concerns, but can live with the decision” (Coughlin et al. 1999: 4-23). Although some references to consensus in the literature emphasize the unanimity of consensus agreements, functionally this often means that stakeholder participants may differ in their range of enthusiasm for an agreed-upon decision or group action.

Historical development and evolution of collaborative processes

This section of the report summarizes the historical development and evolution of collaborative processes from the 1960s through the present.

1960s and 1970s: The environmental movement in the United States was born. It was characterized by advocacy groups, conflict, and adversarial positions that moved the environment into our political consciousness. Important environmental legislation was passed (such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Clean Water Act) and most battles were waged in the courtroom (Coughlin et al. 1999:1-2).

Table 2. Definitions of consensus taken from a review of current literature.

“**Consensus** *n* **1** an opinion held by all or most **2** general agreement, esp. in opinion” (taken from Webster’s New World Dictionary, Neufeldt and Guralink 1991:296).

Consensus “has come to mean that none of the participants opposes the agreement, although the degree of support for the agreement among them may vary” (Touval 1995:361).

“Consensus...is defined as ‘general agreement’ rather than unanimity” (Weber 2000:239).

“Consensus-seeking: joining together of those with differing positions on an issue to develop mutually acceptable solutions” (Raymond 1995:9).

“Consensus typically is described as an agreement that all members can live with and support—or at least not sabotage—even if it is not everyone’s preferred decision” (Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-4.5).

“Consensus doesn’t mean unanimous agreement—it means a decision that just about everyone can live with” (Kinsley 1997:44).

“Consensus is not kind and gentle... Consensus is agreeing not to agree on a lot of things, but working together on the things you can agree upon” (Doc Hatfield of Oregon’s Trout Creek Mountain Working Group—quoted in Knudson 1999:15).

Consensus building “is a process leading to an agreement (or synthesis) that is reached by identifying the interests of all concerned parties and then building an integrative solutions. [It] focuses less on the resolution of a specific conflict than on fostering a cooperative (planning) process for complex, multi-issue, multi-user situations” (Rijsberman 1999:54).

1980s: The field of alternative dispute resolution emerged (ADR) as an option for resolving conflict outside the judicial system. It was believed that ADR would be more efficient than courtroom processes and the resultant decisions could be more innovative than those constrained by legislation and legal precedents (Susskind 1980 cited by Coughlin et al. 1999:1-2). “While the judicial system is specialized in finding legal, fair, and equitable solutions... it is not necessarily very good in finding creative solutions that best fit the interests of all parties” (Rijsberman 1999:10).

1990s: ADR became institutionalized as government agencies and the Clinton administration incorporated it into approaches for resolving internal and external conflicts (Susskind et al. 1993

cited by Coughlin et al. 1999:1-2). In the environmental realm, Congress created and appropriated funds for the Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (an extension of the Morris K. Udall Foundation) and President Clinton encouraged collaboration in the activities of his chief advising body on environmental policy, the Council on Environmental Quality (Coughlin et al. 1999:1-2, 1-3). “In the 1990s the principles of ADR have transmuted into an on-going adaptive process, applying the experience gained in one-time negotiations to community-based problem solving” (Coughlin et al. 1999:1-2, 1-3).

2000: Collaboration is met with growing skepticism at the dawning of a new century. While most of the skeptics acknowledge that consensus-based collaboration has merits, they are wary of its blanket application and question its appropriateness in all natural resource management situations (Kenney 2000, Reisner 1999, Snow 1999, Rhoades 2000). “Unless practitioners think long and hard about how to do participatory watershed management, the movement may indeed fail. Failure, if it occurs, will not be caused by the critics, but because the proponents (both donors and implementers) of this exciting approach have not done their homework and come to grips with needed programmatic changes” (Rhoades 2000:334).

WHY CONSENSUS-BASED COLLABORATION?

“What many local watershed initiatives and similar collaborative efforts are demonstrating is that the coercive power of the state is not always needed to ensure that individual behavior conforms to community interests. Instead, social and cultural tools—implemented through approaches such as trust-building, peer pressure, and appeals to good citizenship—can sometimes be effectively used in many situations to affect positive change.” –Douglas Kenney 2000:33

Kenney’s observation underscores the growing popularity of collaboration as an alternative to conventional natural resource decision-making processes. Interest in collaboration can be found from the local level to the highest levels of government. President Clinton applauded the Council on Environmental Quality for its efforts to “promote collaboration over conflict, and to demonstrate that a healthy economy and a healthy environment not only are compatible, but are inextricably linked” (Clinton 1998 quoted by Coughlin et al. 1999:1-4). What is the attraction of collaboration? Why do its proponents turn to collaboration instead of conventional avenues for confronting environmental problems?

A summary of the most common reasons mentioned in the literature for choosing collaboration is provided below. Each of the reasons for collaboration is based on theory. In practice, these reasons have proven to be true in some cases, but not all. This reflects an important point found throughout the literature: the appropriateness of consensus-based collaboration and its overall benefit for the environment is not generalizable; its successful operationalization depends on the specific factors involved in each situation and context. The literature emphasizes that more research is needed to help identify which factors contribute to its success and to help managers and practitioners know when it is an appropriate approach to natural resource management (Weber 2000:257, Rhoades 2000:337, 340). Reasons for collaboration include the following:

- **Shifted focus to sustainable development** (Coughlin et al. 1999:1-2).
 The popularity of collaborative approaches gained momentum after the concept of sustainable development was recognized globally following the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) and the Agenda 21 objectives outlined at the international 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The previous focus on protecting the environment from humans was shifted to address the intersection of environment, society, and economy, emphasizing sustainable development. This new focus heightened the level of complexity involved in natural resource decision-making, further prompting interest in collaboration because its emphasis on multi-stakeholder participation complemented the inclusion of human, economic, and biological dimensions in resource management.
- **Alternative to conventional top-down natural resource management** (Coughlin et al. 1999:15-3, Kenney and Lord 1999:28-31, CC-7).
 Frustration with the inefficacy (length of time and costs) of conventional natural resource management approaches prompted interest in consensus-based collaboration. These top-down approaches typically rely on the enforcement of laws and regulations made in a central location, far removed from specific ecological and social contexts that influence the sustainable use of natural resources (Coughlin et al. 1999:1-3, 15-3). According to a collaborative watershed management participant “There was growing recognition that the regulatory framework was not going to bring about recovery [of endangered fish species]” (Coughlin et al. 1999:15-3).
- **The threat of government action or a lawsuit** (Coughlin et al. 1999:15-1, Rijsberman 1999:10).
 Whereas the courts have been traditionally the arena for resolving conflicts and environmental problems, many hold that this approach is often lengthy, costly, and may not result in a solution that is satisfactory to all involved parties. Powerful environmental legislation and the threat of government action also have prompted collaboration. For instance, in some cases the Endangered Species Act has had severe repercussions for local and regional economies when resource-based industries were shut down to protect a listed species. The highly controversial listing of the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest and the consequent effects on the timber industry brought attention to the potential economic repercussions of species listings. In response, the potential listing of species by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has become a catalyst for bringing diverse stakeholders to the table. For example, in many watersheds the listing, or potential listing, of a fish species on the endangered species list by the USFWS prompted stakeholders who wanted to avoid the potential economic consequences of such a listing to initiate collaborative efforts to improve habitat conditions and minimize human activities detrimental to declining fish populations (Kenney and Lord 1999:viii, Coughlin et al. 1999:18-9).
- **To overcome divisive conflict among stakeholders** (Coughlin et al. 1999, Raymond 1995, Rijsberman 1999).
 “Collaborative decision-making is the basis for rebuilding trust and respect that may have

been marred by years of wear and tear; it's a way to replace boring or painful meetings with fun and creative ones; it's the vehicle by which people who have been ignored can finally fully participate" (Kinsley 1997:40).

- **Decisions/outcomes will be longer-lasting** (Coughlin et al. 1999:15-3, Krist 1999:23, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000:146-149).
 Decisions/outcomes of collaboration will be longer-lasting than top-down agency decisions that may not have fully considered all of the relevant issues or stakeholder opinions. Consider this USFWS employee's observation that consensus-based collaboration "is the future of natural resource management. Unless you get local people involved, you [a federal agency] may win your battles but ultimately lose your war" (Coughlin et al. 1999:15-3). Enduring outcomes relate to a sense of ownership and long-term commitment by the stakeholders. Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) analyzed collaborative efforts in natural resource management and concluded that "through involvement in the process, participants came to own its outcomes and consequently ensured that decisions were implemented."
- **Coordination between interested parties** (Coughlin et al. 1999:15-4).
 Collaboration between stakeholder groups enables them to avoid duplication of their efforts by joining forces and strategizing how to get the most accomplished. This coordination is not limited to local stakeholders, but also can occur between relevant management agencies. For instance, water quality in a lake may depend on the management decisions of many agencies in a watershed including the US Forest Service, BLM, and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Rather than each working in isolation, collaboration can bring these agencies together to formulate the best-coordinated plan that reduces duplication and maximizes the use of their combined resources. Former EPA administrator William Ruckelhaus noted that environmental laws were written "to stand alone, instead of directing agencies to search for the best combination of policies to benefit the environment" (quoted by Coughlin et al. 1999:1-3).
- **Increase stakeholder influence on government decisions** (Snow 1999:34, Knudson 1999:14, Raymond 1995:6).
 Consensus has more power than conflict to influence decisions regarding a natural resource. In the case of cutthroat trout restoration in Eastern Oregon streams, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) became more receptive to the requests of ranchers and conservationists after they began to work collaboratively on a grazing plan that minimized riparian damage. Before the collaboration, the BLM was often caught in the middle of the two sides and was unable to accommodate the desires of either group (Knudson 1999:14). Increased influence has also been associated with stakeholder empowerment (Coughlin et al. 1999:15-1) and augmented representation (Kenney and Lord 1999:30).
- **Innovative solutions** (Wondolleck et al. 1996, Yaffee 1998 –cited in Coughlin et al. 1999:3-2).
 By bringing stakeholders of varied backgrounds and experiences together, it is believed that the combination of their knowledge will produce "more creative and adaptive" solutions than

those that would be produced in a non-collaborative process (Coughlin et al. 1999:3-2). In the field of watershed conflict resolution, consensus “encourages openness to a range of ideas” (Raymond 1995:4). A participant in the McKenzie Watershed Council asserted that one must “base the whole collaborative process on the premise that everyone who’s there is entitled to be there and they have a part of the answer and if you all just listen carefully enough, you come up with solutions you would never have before” (quoted in Coughlin et al. 1999:18-13).

CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH COLLABORATION MAY BE DESIRABLE

Even though consensus-based collaboration is gaining momentum as an alternative approach to natural resource and watershed management, it is unwise to initiate collaborative efforts to remedy all environmental problems and in all arenas. Some conditions make specific management contexts more or less amenable to collaborative efforts. Conditions under which consensus-based collaboration is desirable are summarized below.

- **Benefits of collaborating outweigh the costs** (Krist 1999:23, Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-1.4, Rijsberman 1999:10).
 “Conflict management approaches will work only if all parties to a conflict are convinced that they will be—or at least may be—better off by participating in resolution attempts than they would be otherwise” (Rijsberman 1999:10). In the field of alternative dispute resolution, this is referred to as BATNA (best alternative to negotiated agreement) (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987, McCarthy 1995:116, Fisher and Ury 1991). Agreements that are a potential outcome of negotiation/collaboration should be perceived to be more advantageous to stakeholder interests than the best alternative to not participating in a negotiation/collaboration. In watershed management, collaborations are possible when there are “clearly defined benefits that outweigh the perceived costs of participating” (Raymond 1995:9).
- **Conventional avenues for natural resource management have reached a stalemate** (Coughlin et al. 1999:3-2, Snow 1999:36, Chesler 1991:8).
 Collaboration may be useful to ameliorate gridlock. Stakeholders may be willing to come together when there is shared frustration over conventional avenues of natural resource management’s inability to address the situation (Coughlin et al. 1999:3-2). In this sense, collaboration may serve as “a means of overcoming political inertia” (Snow 1999:36).
- **Strong leadership is present** (Krist 1999:23, Knudson 1999:16).
 Past literature has not recognized the role of leadership as often as one would expect given that the need for motivation, commitment, and vision that are part and parcel of consensus-based collaborative efforts. A respected and effective leader likely could influence other stakeholders not only to take part in collaboration, but also to keep the process moving until consensus is reached. While leadership was not commonly noted, the following quotes emphasize how critical this condition is to collaborative processes. Krist (1999:23)

researched collaborative initiatives in nine states in the United States and concluded that “each of the programs examined in my series was pushed and prodded along by a tireless, dedicated individual in the community—sometimes a local employee of the state or federal government, sometimes just a concerned citizen seeking a way for neighbors to get along.” In addition, retired BLM range conservationist Earl McKinney, who has participated in both conventional and collaborative approaches to solving water quality issues relating to overgrazing, observed that “one common denominator to all this is having folks with the drive to make things come together... It takes somebody to grab a problem by the throat” (Knudson 1999:16).

- **Legal/government framework allows collaboration** (Snow 1999:36).
Decisions that are the outcome of collaborative processes must be within the constraints of the overarching legal and governmental framework so that implementation is legitimate and not delayed by questions of the legalities of such a decision. Awareness of these constraints is important at the initiation of collaboration and should be kept in mind as the group is formulating its action plans and proposals.
- **Parties must have an equitable power distribution** (Snow 1999:36, Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-1.4, Chesler 1991:8).
Balance of power was noted throughout the literature in relation to stakeholder participation and the outcome of the collaborative process. Although the literature generally held that “the balance of power among stakeholders involved in a conflict must not be too uneven” (Rijsberman 1999:18), proposals to achieve power balance varied widely. In sum, “the parties all must have at least enough power to be able to block each others’ initiatives, but not enough power unilaterally to win the issue” (Snow 1999:36).
- **Sufficient stakeholder representation must be possible** (Snow 1999:37, Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-1.4, Krist 1999:25).
The term “sufficient” is emphasized because there is significant disparity in the literature as to whether stakeholder representation must be 1) all-inclusive (Johnston 1999:325), 2) sufficient if individuals from each level (local, environmental, industry, government, etc.) are present (Snow 1999:37), or 3) limited just to those parties with capacity and clout to influence the outcome (Amy 1983:9, Touval 1995:363). In an analysis of over 450 collaborative natural resource efforts, a research group at the University of Michigan concluded that there is “no magical formula for achieving perfect representation nor a single representation template that can be applied to all groups” (Coughlin et al. 1999:17-1). Because stakeholder representation and the balance of power strongly influence the outcome of collaborative processes, these issues are examined further below.

CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH COLLABORATION MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE

Collaboration is not suggested in cases when conditions are present that limit or contradict those outlined above as being desirable for collaboration. In addition, other conditions, based on the literature, under which consensus-based collaboration may be inappropriate, are summarized below.

- **A quick response is needed** (Johnston 1999:325, Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-1.4).
In the case of an environmental emergency—such as a natural disaster—or when a prompt deadline must be met, consensus-based collaboration may be unwise because it requires time for stakeholders to fully understand the issue(s), establish trust, and come to agreement.
- **Unwieldy keystone stakeholders can halt collaboration** (Johnston 1999:325, Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-1.4, Kinsley 1997:53).
In ecology, a keystone species is defined as a species whose removal causes repercussions throughout the food-web that can lead to ecosystem collapse (referred to as trophic cascades). Like keystone species in an ecosystem, some stakeholders—because of their power and/or influence—are critical to the passage and implementation of collaborative actions relating to environmental issues. If these stakeholders either 1) refuse to collaborate or 2) choose to influence the outcome of an environmental issue independently, then collaboration is inappropriate. Thus, “as long as one of the parties involved feels that it can force its own solution, or could obtain a total victory at acceptable costs through the courts, or would actually benefit from a stalemate (no action), conflict management approaches will not work” (Rijsberman 1999:10).
- **The scope is too large** (Raymond 1995:3, Weber 2000:255).
Scope is often correlated to an increase in the number of affected stakeholders, local governments, agencies, and business/industry interests involved. The larger the geographic area that must be encompassed by natural resource management activities to address the resource of concern effectively, the more complex collaboration becomes. As complexity heightens, so do the challenges to formulating an effective and representative collaborative group. If scope and complexity become too great, collaboration may become inappropriate. Watershed management is prone to issues of scope because political and cultural boundaries do not typically conform to the natural boundaries of watersheds (Raymond 1995:3). One watershed collaboration found that its greatest challenge was the “the size of the watershed. With six counties and numerous townships and municipalities within the watershed boundary, each with their own zoning ordinances and regulation, it has been difficult for the group to address land use issues, to manage multi-jurisdictional efforts, and to find its own voice” (Coughlin et al. 1999:18-4)
- **Conflicts are based on deeply-held values** (Johnston 1999:325, Kenney and Lord 1999:ix, Coughlin et al. 1999:3-6).

When the conflict is rooted in differences in stakeholder values rather than differences in interests in the natural resource, many hold that collaboration is inappropriate: “Conflicts over values, where values can be defined as deeply held beliefs, are not amenable to negotiation or other conflict resolution techniques” (Rijsberman 1999:12). The comments of an environmental lawyer underscore that some environmental issues are rooted in fundamental values: “It should be clearly recognized that there are times when you just can’t negotiate, because there are some things in the world that are non-negotiable” (quoted in Amy 1983:15). Collaboration or other deliberation processes may be necessary to undertake before it is possible to identify that deeply-held values are involved. Even when values are an impasse to achieving consensus, agency credibility is enhanced by attempting collaboration before resorting to management approaches with less stakeholder involvement.

THE RISKS OF CONSENSUS-BASED COLLABORATION

“What has hamstrung efforts to inaugurate a modern water era in the arid West—to deconstruct as well as construct, to get beyond the zero-sum game, to privatize and decentralize, to merge the best interests of the human and natural worlds—is less a set of laws or rules than an idea, a concept that, in my view, has been taken to an almost ludicrous extreme. Its name is *consensus*.” –Marc Reisner 1999:30.

This condemnation of consensus from Marc Reisner, author of *Cadillac Desert*, must not be taken lightly given his historical understanding of the political and societal progression of water development and allocation in the Western United States. To try to understand why Reisner is so adamantly opposed to consensus, the risks and potential negative consequences of consensus-based collaboration as noted in the literature are presented here. The case of stakeholder representation is given special consideration.

- **Local control undermines national oversight.**
 “Most natural resources are, at least to some degree, public resources, and should be managed in accordance with the values held by the nation and society at large—not just a local constituency” (Kenney 2000:13). The literature is replete with concerns about increasing local control subverting federal environmental regulations and national policies regarding publicly owned resources. This point is clarified by the notion that increased proximity to a resource of concern should not necessarily equate to increased local influence over policy and management of these resources, especially when they occur on federal or publicly-owned lands. “Local collaborative partnerships can dilute [federal] standards and threaten hard won national laws like NEPA” (Coughlin et al. 1999:3-5).
- **Preserving consensus may become more important than realizing environmental management goals** (Reisner 1999:31).
 A graduate student studying watershed collaborations in Oregon observed that “time and time again with controversial issues [the groups] failed to get to the point where they took action... there seems to be a desire not to hurt people’s feelings too much. There is too much emphasis on relationships” (Quoted in Coughlin et al. 1999:18-8). A participant in one of these watershed groups stated: “There are times when we can’t tackle a really controversial

issue... because we know we can't deal with it in a consensus format" (quoted in Coughlin et al. 1999:18-9). In his analysis of consensus-based watershed groups, Kenney (2000:47) found that avoiding issues when strong dissenting opinions existed was a common strategy for maintaining group collaboration. Unfortunately, these controversial issues tend to be the ones upon which the future of the watershed environment—whether it is a threatened fish species, declining water quality, or a wetland slated for development—is vested. Consider Reisner: "and though we altered nature tremendously to the detriment of fisheries, now consensus politics won't let us alter nature minimally for the *benefit* of fisheries" (Reisner 1999:31).

- **Lowest-common-denominator agreements may prevail.**

"A potential pitfall in trying to achieve a consensus decision is that you may end up with a 'lowest-common-denominator' decision. The challenge of consensus decision-making is to make decisions that incorporate the fundamental interests of everyone but still are worthwhile" (Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-4.5). In the process of collaborating, stakeholders may end up compromising on issues rather than actually finding a "win-win" option for mutual gain (Fisher and Ury 1991:56-80). These compromises may be agreeable to all the involved parties, yet they may not be the best possible option for the future of the resource in question (Coughlin et al. 1999:18-1). The Western Water Policy Review Advisory Commission (1998:3-41), found that such "lowest common denominator" decisions were not uncommon in watershed groups in which collaboration and consensus was emphasized. This evidence provides support for environmentalists who choose to refrain from consensual processes to avoid compromise: "Some hardline environmentalists, for instance would rather hold out for total victory—blocking projects by direct action, litigation or endless administrative appeals—than join a negotiating effort if the best they can win is a scaled down version of a project or facility they adamantly oppose" (John Crowfoot 1980:37 as quoted by Chesler 1991:21).

- **Potentially constructive conflict may be devalued or suppressed.**

Skeptics also hold that the emphasis on consensus and collaboration has served to devalue the important place and purpose of conflict in pushing environmental issues to the forefront of society and politics. "It is also argued that conflict-oriented processes are a legitimate and important approach to decision-making, and that venerating consensus can promote an inappropriate social pressure to compromise" (Kenney 2000:13). In other words, more than two decades of alternative dispute resolution and collaborative approaches have served to paint conflict in a negative light, while many point out that conflict has long been used for both destructive and constructive purposes.

Mary Parker Follet, who coined the term "constructive conflict," stated that "it is possible to conceive of conflict as not necessarily a wasteful outbreak of incompatibilities, but a normal process by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned" (quoted by Davis 1995:17). In the realm of watershed management, conflict is useful for increasing public awareness about important environmental issues, for mobilizing constituencies and for catalyzing leadership (Raymond 1995:4). Whereas the

field of alternative dispute resolution has its merits, it should not serve to dilute or delegitimize the vital role of conflict in generating power and credibility for society's weaker voices: "It is important to keep in mind the utility of conflict as a power-generating tool for low power groups" (Chesler 1991:34). "Low power groups often must utilize disruptive and challenging tactics to generate sufficient power to bring their concerns to the attention of ruling groups, and to bring these groups to the table" (Chesler 1991:19).

WHOSE CONSENSUS? STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION & REPRESENTATION

It is not clear from the literature how the process of consensus-building is operationalized within a collaborative effort, nor what implications this has on stakeholder participation and representation. "The protocols for coming to consensus vary widely" (Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-4.5). What happens when one or more stakeholders is adamantly opposed to a decision being discussed by collaborators? Consensus raises the stakes so that it is conceivable that opposition may be more uncomfortable with consensus as the decision-rule than when majority-rule is the mode of operation. Is it possible that the pressure to concede may influence stakeholders with strong and/or legitimate concerns to "agree to disagree" and thus table their concerns for the good of the group? If so, then the irony of consensus-based collaboration is that it may in some scenarios actually quell objecting stakeholders and keep legitimate concerns from being addressed fully by collaborators and/or government. Amy (1983), Reisner (1999), Kenney (2000) and others are highly concerned by the risks of operationalizing consensus and question whether or not collaboration really has the best interests of the environment in mind, or if the public good is highly vulnerable in an arena that relies upon satisfying the "enlightened" self-interests of all who come to the table. The following is a summary of the primary concerns found within the literature reviewed in regard to stakeholder participation and representation in consensus-based collaborative approaches.

Co-optation

According to Amy (1983:9) "distribution of power may determine not only who participates, but also who has the upper hand... especially if [powerful stakeholder groups] are able to translate their political and economic superiority into advantages at the bargaining table." A wide-spread critique of consensus-based collaboration is that environmental stakeholders and concerns are co-opted because of a lack of power and capacity for negotiation due to limited experience, time, and finances (Coughlin et al. 1999:3-5). When co-optation occurs, weaker stakeholders participate in the collaborative process, but their influence is limited and their roles become "purely symbolic" (Howell et al. 1987:8). This can often be the intent of business and industry, and even government, who may purposefully use collaboration to quell conflict and the grass-roots activism of environmentalists. When more powerful groups use collaboration "to give the illusion of significant and widespread participation, while retaining essential policymaking power, is classic textbook co-optation: participation without power" (Amy 1983:12-13).

Silencing the radical environmentalists

Related to co-optation is the mitigation of environmental voices by the pressures of the consensual process. Even if environmentalists are on equal footing with the other parties at the table (in regard to power and influence), they still may tend to compromise. Conflict can be framed as a function of “unreasonable demands and unwillingness to compromise... It puts pressure on [environmental groups] to be ‘reasonable,’ give up some of their ‘extremist’ demands and compromise on a ‘responsible’ plan” (Amy 1983:16). In this way, consensus-based collaboration can serve to “inhibit the mobilization of voices of opposition” (Coughlin et al. 1999:3-6). For instance, one participant in a collaborative watershed effort noted that “there have been situations where the group will have a sense that there is a consensus [even] when there are people there who do not really agree and find it difficult to express that because they are feeling somewhat overwhelmed” (quoted in Coughlin et al. 1999:19-6).

Selective exclusion of stakeholders

Research on stakeholder representation in collaborative approaches reveals highly problematical issues relating to power imbalances and the inclusion of all pertinent voices, especially of stakeholders who lack influence or capacity. Of greatest concern to watershed and natural resource management is that the “environmentalists are typically the ones who bear the brunt of disadvantage” (Snow 1999:36). Moreover, the environmental voice is missing in a large number of collaborative efforts that aim to resolve natural resource-related issues. Research by the Natural Resources Law Center at the University of Colorado Law School in Boulder, Colorado indicates that approximately *one half* of the existing, known collaborative watershed groups in the Western United States do not include environmental representatives, and *two-fifths* of those groups lack a policy of open membership (emphasis added, Kenney 2000:61).

Kenney opens his report *Arguing About Consensus* in Western watershed initiatives by saying that it was prompted by an outcry from scholars and citizens who had been rejected by consensus-based groups because of their strong environmental stances: “It seems that individuals raising thorny issues regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of watershed initiatives and similar collaborative groups have not been welcomed into what should be an active and constructive arena for debate, but have rather been encouraged to remain silent” through their “systematic exclusion” from collaborative watershed groups (Kenney 2000:iii). Kenney went on to state that he had been contacted by “dozens of individuals” who had been “labeled a radical or a heretic by one or more groups for raising issues that, at the least, seemed worthy of consideration and discussion... This seems particularly ironic given that the substantive background of this debate is tenets of consensus, collaboration, community, and trust building” (Kenney 2000:iii).

While the selective exclusion of environmental voices is disconcerting, these findings are not surprising given that many collaborative groups admit freely that to proceed efficiently, the number and scope of stakeholders must be limited. “In order to maximize the chance of agreement, some [collaborations] prefer to limit participation to as small a number as possible.

Often the main criterion in choosing the participants is whether a group has enough power to block or subvert any final agreement” (Amy 1983:7). Participants in four different collaborative watershed groups noted that their members were limited to stakeholders “with the right skills” (Coughlin et al. 1999:17-4) who were willing “to be flexible” (Coughlin et al. 1999:17-14) and “work in the consensus process” (Coughlin et al. 1999:17-4). In sum, “people who know how to operate in a consensus process” (Coughlin et al. 1999:17-14).

These comments raise serious questions about the people who do not know how to operate in a consensus process. Are their concerns considered as legitimate and important? Are their voices being heard? “It is tempting, but a grave mistake, to only include like-minded members in a watershed alliance; this risks non-acceptance by those not included who can block a policy agreement later” (Raymond 1995:9). Consider the following observation: “Local citizens and environmental groups especially have difficulty in amassing the resources that would allow them to wage the prolonged legal and political battles necessary to establish themselves as ‘cloutful people.’ The result is that these types of groups tend to be left out of the bargaining process, and this can skew the results of any settlement. In environmental mediation, as in pluralist political theory, the assumption of neutrality and fairness in the decision making process rests largely on the presupposition that all interests have free and equal access to the process. The fulfillment of this requirement is in jeopardy when power serves as the passport to participation in mediation efforts” (Amy 1983:7-8).

Leveling the playing field

Given the ideal that “all major stakeholders should be involved with a reasonably level playing field” (Raymond 1995:8), how is this achieved? If power is the passport to participation, then how do we level the playing field so that weaker stakeholder groups gain the clout, influence, and capacity they need to participate fully and meaningfully in a collaborative process? “Where severe inequalities exist, to treat the strong and the weak alike only ensures that the strong remain strong, the weak remain weak” (Forester 1987:312).

The coordinator of the McKenzie watershed collaboration held that the influence of dominant stakeholders could be mitigated by the use of consensus: “The final sort of equalizer is our consensus process” (quoted by Coughlin et al. 1999:19-4). According to the guide to Watershed Stewardship “the purpose of raising the standard of decision making to consensus (instead of majority vote) is to encourage people to work *through* an issue rather than *around* it. It’s easy to avoid thinking seriously about the concerns of a minority when all you have to do is outvote them” (emphasis in the original, Watershed Stewardship 1998:1-4.5). However, there is evidence that the choice of consensus as the decision-rule of most collaborative groups is disadvantageous for weaker and marginalized stakeholders such as environmentalists. Falk (1982 study cited by Kenney 2000:46) found that the decision-rule which most increased the power of underrepresented and weaker interests was majority-rule. In response to this finding, Kenney (2000:46) stated, “This result should not come as a surprise to environmental activists, who have found their greatest victories in Congress and the courts – arenas where the consent of their ‘anti-environmental’ counterparts is not a prerequisite to successful decision-making.”

Regardless of whether the decision-rule is consensus or majority-rule, imbalances of power are common, and they typically favor business and industry over environmental interests. “Imbalances of power are the norm rather than the exception and are likely to be an important element in most conflicts. This implies that in situations of considerable power imbalances, conflict management approaches will need to include (or be preceded by) safeguards to guarantee the weaker party a fair deal” (Rijsberman 1999:13). One way to address the disparity of power between stakeholders is to increase the weaker parties’ capacity to participate, negotiate, and contribute. This could be achieved through training (Rijsberman 1999:18). The EPA, for example, provides eight-hour training sessions on negotiation for stakeholder representatives involved in environmental collaboration (Sirianni and Friedland 1995 –cited in Rijsberman 1999:18). Augmenting the capacity of weaker stakeholders will require an investment of time, commitment, and money. Whether these costs are worth the potential benefits of empowered and strengthened stakeholder groups will depend on the overall goals of the collaboration. Perhaps there should be a prerequisite for consensus-based collaborative decisions to be implemented/ratified by government agencies and institutions: evidence of 1) an all-inclusive process (all relevant stakeholders had equal opportunity to contribute to and influence the outcome); and 2) a level playing field. Without these two criteria, the government is ratifying essentially undemocratically derived recommendations that may not represent the desires of all the relevant stakeholders, especially those who were missing from or co-opted during the process. In sum, without power balancing, environmental stakeholders “can easily get into negotiation/mediation with inadequate power and subsequently have to make many concessions” (John Crowfoot 1980:39 as quoted by Chesler 1991:19-20). Clearly, this cannot be in the best interests of watersheds and other natural resources.

CONCLUSION

This report examined the potential benefits and risks of collaborative approaches and provided guidelines for assessing the appropriateness of collaboration in watershed management contexts. This information has practical applications for citizens, local user-groups, and extension staff considering whether or not to engage in a collaborative process. In addition, other natural resource managers may find this evaluation of stakeholder collaboration useful for determining whether or not the recommendations of collaborative groups will gain institutional/government endorsement.

Given the breadth and variety of situations and contexts needing effective and sustainable natural resource management, it seems naïve to think that a single approach should be applied across the board to every situation. As an alternative to conventional approaches to natural resource management, collaboration has potential, especially considering the suite of benefits associated with its fruitful operationalization. However, the critics of consensus-based collaboration provide ample evidence that significant room for improvement of this alternative still exists. It is also important to clarify that the decision of what management approach to use in a particular context does not need to be mutually exclusive. Kenney aptly noted that while the kinks are still being worked out of consensus-based collaboration, it might be very effective when used in concert with conventional approaches, rather than as a complete substitution.

Kenney (2000:viii) “encourages viewing watershed initiatives and similar collaborative efforts as supplements rather than replacements, for traditional processes such as regulation and litigation.” Thus, it seems wise to continue researching and exploring the conditions under which consensus-based collaboration is desirable and appropriate. In situations where it is the approach of choice, it is critical that both managers and researchers focus on how to improve stakeholder participation and representation, because in its current state of development—as shown by the literature—it is not just stakeholders who are being co-opted, but the democratic process itself.

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