

Citizen Participation in Decision Making — a Challenge for Public Land Managers

LLOYD C. IRLAND AND J. ROSS VINCENT

Highlight: *Citizen participation in decision making presents a major challenge to public land managers. Increased participation is needed to counter an imbalance between commodity and noncommodity users in access to information and to influence on decisions. Two serious decisions in implementing participation programs are how much influence to allow to citizen groups, and how to assure proper representation of diverse groups in the process. Vigorous citizen participation programs can benefit land managing agencies by helping reduce conflict, by improving public understanding, and by helping managers assess public attitudes.*

Land managers are beset by a bewildering array of conflicts over the use of public lands. Decisions have to be made between ski areas and wildlife refuges, between timber production and scenic values, between grazing values and wilderness areas. Often in such conflicts, citizen conservation groups oppose the decisions and the decision-making processes of a public agency. Further, some groups are attacking traditional wildland uses such as grazing and timber harvesting (Hood and Morgan, 1972; Paris, 1972; Conservation Foundation, 1972).

This paper introduces some of the issues surrounding participation in land-use decisions by citizen groups. We have used the term *citizen* to denote a person not involved in commodity-oriented pursuits on public lands. We describe the nature of and need for citizen participation in decision making and the groups that are involved in this activity. Then we examine the challenges managers face in expanding citizen participation and the gains that may result. Citizen groups often affect legislative decisions, but this

paper deals with administrative rather than legislative processes.

Increased participation by citizen groups is often desirable for a public agency. These groups can counterbalance the very considerable influence sometimes generated by commodity groups. But permitting citizen participation in decision making requires resolution of some critical issues. How much influence will be given to various groups and how much will be retained by the land manager? What balance will be struck between economic and other interests?

What Is Participation?

Participation requires the granting of actual influence over the content of decisions to groups affected by those decisions. This definition implies that merely listening to public views at hearings is insufficient. It requires machinery for including the views in the decision itself. In practice, citizen participation will occur through organized groups concerned with specific interests—hiking, canoeing, and the like. It is impractical to solicit the views of individual citizens, many of whom are profoundly uninterested in the public lands (Altschuler, 1970; Umpleby, 1972; Barber, 1969).

Through the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), public agencies are now obliged to seek out and analyze all viewpoints on a given proposal. An active citizen participation program is one way to accomplish this goal.

Need for Participation

The demand for participation in government decision making is rising throughout our society. Demands for decentralized schools, unions in prisons, and student control of universities all spring from common roots (Altschuler, 1970, p. 63):

Political participation becomes an issue when significant groups of citizens claim that they have inequitable shares of power to affect important governmental decisions. Importance, of course, is in the eye of the observer—a product of his priorities and perceptions of causality.

In addition, Americans inherit a long tradition of organizing to influence public policy.

We think land managers need increased citizen participation to redress an imbalance between commercial users and citizens groups in their access to information and to decision makers. Access denotes resources for obtaining information as well as availability of the information. Business and government today have easiest access to the information needed to make public policy decisions and to the tools which enable effective use of that information. Ralph Nader has called information “the currency of democracy,” and obtaining that currency can be difficult.

Environmentalists and others active in public affairs have long complained of the difficulty in becoming informed. A recent study¹ concluded that: “The information problem reported by many environmental groups appears most acute in their

Authors are associate economist, Southern Forest Experiment Station, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, New Orleans, Louisiana, and president, Ecology Center of Louisiana, New Orleans.

Ireland is now assistant professor of forest economics, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, New Haven, Connecticut.

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¹National Center for Voluntary Action. Unpublished draft of report. Washington, D.C. 1972.

relations with government and industry. The information willingly provided by government and industry, and sometimes in great quantities, seems self-serving. On the other hand, the information that groups really need to develop responsible positions and to act effectively on environmental decisions is usually provided grudgingly if at all."

Groups interested in obtaining commodities, such as minerals, timber, or water, maintain lobbyists to look after their interests and express their views to Congressman and officials. These lobbyists can be full-time experts in their fields and can stay in close touch with current developments.

In contrast, persons interested in wilderness, wildlife, and other values are widely dispersed and cannot devote all their time to public land controversies. Environmental groups hire lobbyists, too, and keep members informed through newsletters and magazines. But the disparity in resources between them and the commodity groups is great. This disparity leads to tactics such as ad hoc lawsuits and letterwriting campaigns as substitutes for direct legislative lobbying. In some instances, these tactics have been highly successful.

Unequal access to information and to decision makers is a major reason for much current discontent with public land management. These inequalities place upon public agencies an affirmative obligation to seek out and facilitate participation in decision making by citizen groups.

Organized Citizens

The environmental movement comes largely from the white middle class. In a recent survey of environmental volunteers,¹ 96% were Caucasian and 80% had some college training; 23% had graduate degrees. The average environmental volunteer is male, Caucasian, over 30 (50% are over 40), married, and a white collar worker. The second largest occupational grouping is that of housewives. Environmentalists come from high-income groups. Twenty-seven percent of the volunteers surveyed had incomes above \$20,000/year. Environmentalists, then, come from the same groups likely to be active in civic affairs and traditional party politics.

American political life is based on group action. Americans are more likely than citizens of other nations to believe in the legitimacy and effectiveness of forming groups to influence government

Table 1. A continuum of citizen control.

Level of citizen control	Example	Characteristics
Weak	Pre-NEPA forest management planning	Bureaucratic form; decisions by technocrats Control through legislatures Public relations and administrative reports to superiors Administrative Procedure Act and similar protections
Nominal	NEPA, Wilderness Act	Listening sessions, hearings Advisory groups selected or controlled by bureau
Significant	Grazing Advisory Boards Soil Conservation Districts, ACP Committees	Advisory groups selected or controlled by citizens or resource users Policy board with veto, controlled by users
Strong	Neighborhood Corporation, Community Action	Control of policy, conduct, hiring, and administration by policy board of citizens

decisions. For public land management, group action is difficult because the decisions often affect people that live far away from the national forests or grazing districts involved. What kinds of groups are becoming involved in public land management issues?

The President's Council on Environmental Quality (1971) reported: "Best estimates show over 3,100 environmental organizations in the United States. A survey for the 1971 White House Conference on Youth identified approximately 2,500 local groups. This figure does not include civic, church, or school groups or local chapters of national organizations." This number has undoubtedly grown since that time. The total membership of these organizations is certainly in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps in the millions.

National environmental groups fall into five general categories. Most familiar, both because of their longevity and their effectiveness, are the wildlife and conservation groups. The Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, Izaak Walton League, and the Wilderness Society work through local affiliates, local and regional representatives, and well-staffed national offices. They reach millions of Americans every year and are responsible for much of the popularity enjoyed by the environmental movement. Some national groups operate direct action programs for resource conservation. Both the Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society carry out land acquisition programs, usually for transfer to public agencies. Ducks Unlimited, a hunters group, has for many years purchased wetlands to pre-

serve duck habitat.

The present movement is not simply a logical extension of the old conservation movement. Such groups as Environmental Action, the Environmental Policy Center, Friends of the Earth, and others view themselves largely as environmental-political action groups. They engage in lobbying and political activity and keep local groups informed of developments in Washington.

Another action-oriented type of national group is the public interest law firm. Most notable are the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council. In addition, there are several private public-interest firms which engage in environmental litigation.

Educational/technical/professional groups have aided the environmental movement by conducting professional investigations of environmental problems and disseminating information. Examples include the Center for Curriculum Design, the Scientists' Institute for Public Information, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and the Public Interest Economics Center.

A more recent type of national organization, probably least visible to the public, is exemplified by the Ecology Center Communications Council. This group exists solely to service local environmental education and information centers in nearly 50 communities in the United States and Canada. It was established by the centers themselves, operates on a shoestring budget, and makes a valuable contribution to the work of local groups.

Regional and local groups assume many forms—the Rocky Mountain Center

Table 2. Groups exercising control or influence.

Group	Decision-making body influenced
Bureaucrats	Federal coordinating committees such as River Basin Committees
Outside technocrats and experts } High-status citizens }	Periodic federal policy commissions—ORRRC, National Water Commission
Target population or clienteles	Grazing Advisory Committees Soil Conservation Districts
Local or national politicians } Representatives of economic interests }	Soil Conservation Service, Corps of Engineers, Forest Service
Citizen groups.	State and federal legislative bodies, and agencies through legislative bodies

on Environment for example. Most local groups are formed to deal with a specific local controversy. Frequently they go on to work on a broader range of issues. Through membership and community support, such groups can often rent offices, issue newsletters, and provide significant ongoing input into local environmental problems. The Ecology Center of Louisiana, of which the junior author of this paper is president, is one such group.

Land conservation trusts are an important form of local group. They are nonprofit institutions formed to hold interests in land for the public benefit. They are a prime example of local direct action which supplements similar activities already carried on by state and municipal government. Land trusts have been particularly active and successful in New England, but are found elsewhere.

Challenges for Management

Given the rise of activist citizen groups concerned with public land management, and increased judicial willingness to grant them standing to sue and to review agency decisions, land management must adjust to a new environment. Creative answers to new problems will be needed. The challenges are twofold: How to provide for effective citizen influence on decisions, and how to provide appropriate representation of all interests affected by public land management.

Land management decisions are increasingly concerned with values that affect citizens far beyond the immediate boundaries of a given management unit. Conflicts such as wilderness preservation, wildlife protection, and clearcutting all affect a wide range of interest groups beyond the commodity users directly concerned. At the same time, solutions to these conflicts are beyond the purely technical subject matter of forestry or

range science. How then can the views of affected citizens be included in management decisions?

It is helpful to consider a continuum of decision-making structures based on the degree to which they permit citizen influence over the content of decisions. Table 1 ranks structures between strong and weak poles of influence.

Weak citizen control is exerted on federal land-managing agencies—the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service (Reich, 1962; Center for Study of Responsive Law, 1972; Wengert, 1971). This system is supported by a theory of public administration that emphasizes citizen control through legislatures, with delegation of decisions to professionals. It is supported by professionalism itself, since a basic thesis of a profession is that its members know what is best for their clients. It is supported by a political system which provides the range, forest industry, and agribusiness interests with easy access to legislators and administrators.

At the other end of the continuum are social programs such as community action, job training, and community health. These programs utilized neighborhood groups or corporations operating under a regime of “maximum feasible participation.” It was felt that social rehabilitation of inner city neighborhoods would follow from the creation of effective participation. Further, neighborhood institutions would increase minority group political power in relation to the dominant groups controlling city governments (Altschuler, 1970; Mogulof, 1970; Rein, 1970; Riedel, 1972; Stenberg, 1972).

Table 1 should not be viewed as a “good-bad” continuum. Structures with strong citizen control—such as grazing advisory boards—may be extremely narrow in outlook. Further, services produced on federal lands are not suited to

neighborhood control.

Environmental groups clearly recognize the basic issue of influence. Finding participation strategies inadequate, citizen groups have resorted to new methods (Burch et al, 1972, p. 264):

“Environmentalists are increasingly turning to *power* strategies (attempting to achieve sufficient group influence to coerce changes) and away from participation strategies (educating, and urging people voluntarily to make changes).”

Given this drive for effective influence, the question becomes, “How much influence should be allowed to citizen groups?” Table 1 shows the range of possibilities. The challenge is to decide what level of influence is appropriate, and who will exercise it.

The poverty program agencies attempted to turn over significant power to local groups, thus reducing the control of bureaucrats and local politicians. On the federal lands, actual decisions often are strongly influenced by local and national economic clienteles—the timber buyers, grazing permittees, and mineral developers. In some instances citizen campaigns have also strongly influenced decisions on federal lands (Table 2).

The process for selecting representative views will be difficult. Obviously, public land decisions affect a much wider range of persons and interests than do neighborhood social services. In addition to the specific land allocation problems at stake, local needs will have to be balanced against national interests. This is why the issue of representation will be a serious problem for public land policy in the 1970's. There are no easy answers.

Gains from Increased Participation

Many observers have lamented the alleged costs of increased citizen participation—lawsuits cause delays, impact statements cost money and time, the uninformed public simply cannot understand the technical issues at stake. But we believe that increased public participation can yield major gains to resource managers. Not only is increased participation inevitable, it is also *desirable*. Some of the potential gains will be:

—More knowledgeable citizen group leaders. Their contributions to land-use controversies will become more sophisticated and useful.

—Active allies for support of noncommodity programs. In the past, land

managers had virtually no support for their decisions in favor of environmental values—only opposition from commercial interests.

—Reduction or elimination of legal challenges on procedural issues. Under an active participation policy, conflicts will concentrate on substantive rather than procedural issues.

—An improved means of assessing public attitudes.

A better informed public will result from active efforts to inform and involve citizens in work on the federal lands. Additionally, an active participation program will facilitate agency compliance with NEPA requirements to seek out and discuss opposing points of view (Freeman, 1972; Institute for Water Resources, 1970a, 1970b, 1972).

Conclusions

Citizen participation will not solve all management problems. Tough decisions will remain. When they are made, some parties at interest will be unhappy and may go to court anyway. Citizen participation and high quality land management will prove costly. And one thing can be guaranteed: decisions resulting from a conscientious effort to balance competing values will not conform to narrow no-

tions of economic optimality.

Land managers would be deeply in error, however, if they believed that what they are doing is enough. They have changed to meet new needs. But they will get no cheers for this, for the changes have often been slow and usually have been extracted under pressure. Managers could accept greater public influence on their decisions. Citizen groups concerned with land management are gaining the political power to demand such influence.

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☆ See the April issue of Rangeman's News for details.