Beyond Civil Discourse: Moving Dispassionate Objectivity To Empathetic Action

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Abstract

Our relationship to the natural world brings meaning and value to our lives. Kellert (1997, p. 3) asserts, “During the long course of human evolution, we value nature and living diversity because of the adaptive benefits it offer[s] us physically, emotionally, and intellectually.” The natural world provides a source of physical beauty and appeal, material utilization and exploitation, knowledge and understanding, exploration and discovery, bonding and companionship, moral and spiritual connection, and fear and repression (Kellert, 1997). This case study explores the physical, emotional, and intellectual benefits accrued from these diverse values from two differing perspectives. These perspectives offer meaningful insight into the complexity of providing these benefits today and in the future on public lands in the Sierra Nevada bioregion. This study also considers whether deep listening, learning, and a heightened sense of curiosity through interest-based problem solving can lead past seemingly intractable conflict to actionable results.
INTRODUCTION

Complex social, economic, political and ecological values frequently clash over how best to manage public lands in the Sierra Nevada bioregion. Allen et al. (2009) defined values as:

“…relatively enduring conceptions about the important principles of life, such as what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable; people in a given society or culture share values as well as beliefs. As used here, values also refer to people’s orientations to nature and public lands management, specifically what types of public land opportunities or benefits are viewed as the most desirable” (p. 5).

In other words, values are the ideas we have about what is good and what is bad, and how things should be. Bullis and Kennedy (1991) cited the importance of acknowledging underlying values to enable stakeholders to better understand the long-term effects of natural resource management decisions. In the past, values were normally ignored during decision-making processes, due to the assumption that decision-making is a purely rational process and therefore values should not be involved (Birnbaum, 2007). Therefore, it has been difficult for public land decision makers to weigh societal values and rationally explain how they factor into the decision process along with a traditional focus on ecological issues.

The purpose of this case study is to explore a range of values associated with the natural world through two distinct value sets as identified through an environmental values continuum. These perspectives offer insight into the complexity of providing public land benefits today and in the future in the Sierra Nevada bioregion. Another aspect of this study is to explore whether, through interest-based problem solving, common interests are shared, and if so, what they are. Equally important, is understanding where divergent interests exist and why. The case study
concludes with a strategy on reaching common ground on divergent interests in the Sierra Nevada bioregion and lessons learned.

*Environmental Values Continuum*

Social values associated with the natural world are created as we interact with the earth’s ecosystems, whether directly or indirectly. Social values such as resourcefulness can originate from our basic needs for water, food and shelter (e.g. Maslow, 1954). They can also reach beyond these basic needs to encompass values such as adventurousness, resiliency, or serenity. Kennedy and Koch (2004) believe these socially learned values range from human-dominant to human-mutual relationships with the earth’s ecosystems.

At the human-dominant end of this value continuum, natural resources have worth only as they fulfill human needs—be these needs material or recreational or spiritual (Kennedy & Thomas, 1995).

On the human-mutual end of the continuum, biocentric values of the natural world (more independent of human use or value) are recognized. This belief postulates that plants and animals have value (and often rights) similar to our own species (Rolston, 1988; Rolston & Coufal, 1991).

Kennedy and Koch (2004) believe this social value paradigm of natural resource use and management accommodates the full spectrum of evolving human-ecosystem values in our diverse urban, post-industrial society—from the human-dominant and utilitarian perspective, to more biocentric human-ecosystem relationships.

*Positions, Interests, and Values*

It is important to distinguish between positions, interests, and values. Interests are the underlying desires and concerns that motivate people to take a position (CRC, 2005). While their
position is what they say they want ("I want to build a campground here"), their interests are the reasons why they take that position ("because I want a quiet camping spot with a good view of the mountains."), and are based on values ("Being in natural settings is a spiritual experience"). Differing stakeholders’ interests are often compatible, and hence negotiable, even when their positions seem to be in complete opposition.

There are instances, however, in which conflict results from a clash of values. Values tend to be stable and non-negotiable. If individuals or groups have radically different ideas about the best way to live (e.g., “nature is only a consumer resource” vs. “nature is only a spiritual resource”), they are likely to stress the importance of different things and have very different, even incompatible interests. Attempts to resolve such conflicts solely by addressing interests are likely to prove ineffective (Malese, 2005). Thus, while interest-based bargaining is effective in interest-based disputes, it should not be applied to disputes involving deep differences in values (Malese, 2005).

In their best-selling book, Getting to Yes, Fisher, Ury, and Patton assert that most disputes have negotiable interests (1992). But when people define their dispute only in terms of position, they often appear to be intractable, since one side wants something that the other completely opposes. Therefore, rather than describing a dispute in terms of stakeholders' positions about what they want, it is often helpful to redefine the situation in terms of the reasons that underlie these positions. By focusing on underlying interests rather than overt positions, resolution-resistant conflicts often become solvable. This is because, in many cases, interests are compatible even when positions are not.
Interest-Based Problem Solving

Glaser (2005) emphasizes that understanding each party’s interests rather than focusing on their positions or solutions is an effective problem solving technique. Why an issue is important allows others to help in the development of a workable solution. When all parties value and respect each other’s interests, there is a better chance of developing a variety of solutions. Interests help to identify what part of the solution is important to each party. Characteristics of interest-based problem solving include: deep listening, learning, and a heightened sense of curiosity about another’s perspective.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT: SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Theory provides a way to contemplate our collective understanding about certain topics or ideas. In 1969, Herbert Blumer created the theory "symbolic interactionism," based on three ideas:

- Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.
- The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society.
- These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters.

Consequently, Blumer claimed that people interact with each other by interpreting each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. In other words, symbolic interactionism suggests that our 'response' is not made directly to the actions of another but instead, is based on the meaning that we attach to such actions. Interest-based problem solving provides a technique for redefining the meaning we ascribe to a situation by separating positions from interests. Thus, interest-based problem solving can provide a methodology, or way, of
applying meaning to actions through consideration of *why* we want something as opposed to *what* we want or need. In so doing, the likelihood of reaching positive outcomes to seemingly intractable problems increases.

To test this theory, the following question is posed: “does interest-based problem solving increase the potential for achieving ecological restoration objectives on National Forest System lands within the Sierra Nevada bioregion?” To address the question, stakeholders representing different ends of the values continuum, provided insight into the way differing values can shape the approach to ecological restoration. After hearing their values statements, they discussed their interests and the kind of management and policies they would like to see on public lands in the Sierra Nevada bioregion.

**METHODS AND CASE DESCRIPTION**

**Case Description: Sierra Cascades Dialog Group**

The U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, established the Sierra Cascades Dialog to hold regular conversations among stakeholders (individuals or organizations with a direct interest in public lands) on a range of issues across the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade mountain ranges. The goal of the dialog is to create shared understanding among participants with diverse opinions. While insights and outcomes achieved through dialog inform Forest Service decisions, the true goal is deepening understanding, building trust, and strengthening relationships. Another longer-term goal is to increase the capacity of the Forest Service and its stakeholders to collaborate on regional and individual forest planning-related activities.

The Dialog brings together public and private land managers to grapple with an “all lands” approach to planning and conservation. In this case, “all lands” refers to all land within the Sierra Nevada bioregion irrespective of jurisdictional or ownership boundaries. The Dialog
typically has about 140 participants representing a range of interest groups such as county
governments, environmental organizations, fire safe councils, industry, land managers, including
Forest Service staff and leadership, private landowners, recreation groups, rural communities,
scientists, state government, tribes, water agency, and youth. All Dialogs are open to the public,
and while participation shifts, a core group attends regularly. The organizers have committed and
actively recruit to realize age, cultural, geographic and socio-economic diversity among
participants.

Methodology

   The Dialog is based on best practices in the fields of public participation\textsuperscript{1}, collaborative
policy (Carpenter & Kennedy, 1988; Innes & Booher, 2010; and Straus, 2002), and dialog
(Bohm, 1996). A professional facilitator with advanced training in the field of conflict analysis
and resolution and an active mediation practice in natural resources planning facilitates the
sessions. The facilitator works with senior Forest Service policy staff, including its social
scientist, to design the sessions in cooperation with a twenty-member steering committee that is
representative of all stakeholder interests.

   The Dialog is in its infant stages, yet is grappling with topics of significance to the Sierra
Nevada bioregion, including the Pacific Southwest Region’s Leadership Intent for Ecological
Restoration (March, 2011), improving social and economic conditions in rural communities,
ecosystem services and watershed health. In its second session (February, 2011), the Dialog
explored values, attitudes, and interests and the tie to interest-based problem solving.

\textsuperscript{1}For resources, see the International Association for Public Participation at http://www.iap2.org/
**Dialog on values, attitudes and interests.**

This Dialog provided an opportunity for participants to deepen their understanding of one another’s values and to understand the difference between values and interests. The intent of the Dialog was for participants to be aware that individuals do not shift their values, but they can shift their positions by thinking about their interests. Focusing on these interests, while respecting value differences, can create a context for problem solving and negotiation.

Ecological restoration, reflected in the region’s Leadership Intent (March, 2011), provides a range of options regarding how the Forest Service manages its land. Yet, society has a complex set of social, economic, political and ecological values that frequently clash over how best to manage public lands.

Since the Forest Service is initiating a regional assessment as an initial step in forest planning, this session served as a starting point to contemplate the role values play in shaping stakeholders’ attitudes and interests in moving forward the region’s intent on ecological restoration. During the Dialog, stakeholders engaged in a series of exercises to reflect on their values and articulate them to others. Participants discussed desirable public lands benefits, specifically their values and future conditions.

*Values continuum among Forest Service stakeholders.*

One way that social scientists consider values and analyze their role in conflict is to consider individual orientations to nature, focusing on a continuum from utilitarian to biocentric (Steel, List, & Shindler, 1994; Vaske & Donnelly, 1999; Vaske, Donnelly, Williams, & Jonker, 2001). Dialog participants articulated a range of values along this continuum. Some fell on one extreme or the other with many in between. Some stakeholders value the forest because of its spiritual qualities and aesthetic beauty. Others value the forest as a biological ecosystem (biocentric).
Some value the resources that the forest sustains: air, water resources, and timber. Some value the medicinal qualities of the forest, appreciating the plants and other medical advances research in the forest has provided. Yet others view the forest as an opportunity, some for recreation, and others for economic purposes. Some view the forest as an opportunity for timber to support society’s needs for wood products and economic growth. All of these values are represented in the stakeholder community in this bioregion.

Following this Dialog session two key stakeholders, reflecting different ends of the value continuum, met to discuss their interests and the kind of management and policies they would like to see on public lands in the Sierra Nevada bioregion. Their dialog provided insight into the way differing values can shape the approach to ecological restoration and policy outcomes.

**DISCUSSION**

The two stakeholders met, in person, to converse about where their interests were shared, diverged and whether common ground could be reached on divergent interests. A professional mediator and policy advisor facilitated the two-hour conversation between the stakeholders.

*Shared and Divergent Interests*

Shared interests included: developing biomass policy at the state and federal level, improving the federal capacity to increase the pace and scale of landscape restoration, and synthesizing available science. While shared interests were identified, so were a number of divergent interests. These divergent interests included: how and where landscape restoration occurred, the temporal and spatial specificity of implementing synthesized science, the tensions between hard standards and adaptive management policies, and differing perspectives on the roles of transparency, trust and collaboration.
Strategy Forward: Reaching Common Ground on Divergent Interests

After discussing their shared and divergent interests, the conversation shifted between the stakeholders to whether common ground could be reached on divergent issues. They identified a number of opportunities for building capacity and trust to implement synthesized science to increase the pace and scale of landscape-scale restoration work. These opportunities ranged from developing a certification process for creating a cadre of locally hired, master performers in the implementation of synthesized science to fostering collaborative learning in plantations to gain trust and speed implementation of landscape restoration work.

To create a strategic focus on collaboration, funding, and working across land ownerships the two stakeholders recommended: including stakeholders in the development of metrics for evaluating the success of landscape-scale, collaborative restoration projects; pursuing restoration projects across jurisdictional boundaries; focusing public investments in fuel reduction, and changing the agency organizational structure to better address large-scale restoration plans and projects.

Finally, the stakeholders believed that critical to the successful development of future Forest Service planning efforts, additional collaborative, science synthesis (i.e., General Technical Reports) be developed.

Breaking the Impasse

Six weeks after the meeting, the two stakeholders co-authored a letter to the U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Regional Forester and Research Station Director outlining additional strategies for increasing the pace and scale of restoration work (July 20, 2011). Significantly, the letterhead on this letter represented both the California Forestry Association and Sierra Forest Legacy. Because of past animosity between these organizations, this unprecedented level of
cooperation did not go unnoticed: the Regional Forester remarked at a subsequent meeting (August 3, 2011), “I’d like to frame the letter!”

CONCLUSION

Theory Supported

To test the theory of symbolic interactionism, this study used the mediation technique of interest based problem solving to determine whether two individuals with diverse policy interests interact with each other by interpreting each other's actions or by simply reacting to them. In this case, the theory of symbolic interactionism was validated: through deep listening, learning, and a heightened sense of empathy these two stakeholders were able to interpret new meaning from long-held, adversarial positions. Redirecting the conversation from what they wanted, to why they wanted it, was critical in breaking the historical impasse between them.

These two individuals, while not directly representing others, reflect the differing values of key stakeholder groups interested in public land management in California. Despite their differing values, they agreed to discuss whether they shared common interests. Just as important, they also discussed where their interests diverged and developed a workable strategy supported by the U.S. Forest Service to achieve positive policy outcomes.

Society more generally, has a complex set of social, economic, political and ecological values that frequently clash over how best to manage public lands. Interest-based problem solving is a valuable conflict resolution technique to move people from positions to interests while respecting values. Individuals do not shift their values, but they can shift their positions by thinking about why they want something, in other words, their interests.

Kenneth Gergen (2001) described civil discourse as the “language of dispassionate objectivity.” This study concurs with his description as far as the benefits of detachment from one’s position and openness to others’ underlying interests. Yet, these benefits reflect one step
in building understanding and achieving actionable results. As this case study illustrates, another critical step is building on common interests in a manner that inspires creativity and passion to achieve sustainable outcomes. This problem-solving zone, in which stakeholders can work together, takes us one step further from dispassionate objectivity to empathetically derived solutions.

**Lessons Learned**

*Relationships are resilient.*

When Craig Thomas decided to explore the “space” available for appropriate collaboration within the historic context of some badly damaged relationships and entrenched positions he was surprised to find “resilience” and a broader working space for conversation, understanding and agreements. He believes keeping the Sierra Nevada’s ecological future in the forefront and sharing ownership in potential restoration accomplishments or failures is sobering and has lead to formation of a new perspective for collaborative planning, communication and adaptive, science-based experimentation.

*Deep listening never ends.*

Steve Brink believes (personal communication, September 1, 2011), “It’s hard work to do the deep listening to seek where there’s agreement and to explore the reasons for disagreement and if there’s room for movement.” There is tremendous benefit in being able to work together and move forward once a pathway is found. Steve also believes the hard work continues because positions are likely to change somewhat as dialog continues. Hence, the deep listening never ends.
Applying theory to practice needs work.

Integrating major theoretical perspectives from the field of sociology, including symbolic interactionism, is foundational to the field of public administration. Yet, the transference of these theoretical perspectives to the preparation of civil servants in the implementation of public policy is not well developed. In other words, applying theory to practice needs work. This case study is one example of what is possible when theory and practice come together. Important to the outcome was the assistance of a professional facilitator with advanced training in the field of conflict analysis and resolution and a senior policy advisor with extensive expertise in social science and natural resource management.

Understanding each other’s values is critical.

The Sierra Cascades Dialog on values, attitudes and interests emphasized the importance of deepening stakeholder understanding of one another’s values. This understanding has enhanced stakeholders’ ability to work together and engage in interest-based problem solving. Further, this understanding is critical to analyzing conflict and beginning to understand stakeholders’ interests. Fundamentally, stakeholders cannot forego their values: building understanding of these deeply held beliefs can increase the opportunity for effective dialog. Stakeholders who better understand one another can craft interest statements and build on common agreement, recognizing that there are some things they may never agree on.
References


http://www.beyonдинtractability.org/essay/interests/


