

CHALLENGE OPPORTUNITY/RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMUNITIES NEAR NATIONAL FORESTS

COMMUNITY GUIDE FOR FOREST PLANNING No. 6 Building Common Ground in Your Community

Local Communities are taking greater responsibility in decision making about and in the management of public lands, natural resources, and environmental protection. At the present time, all three National Forests in the Ozark/Ouachita Highlands region of Arkansas, Oklahoma and Missouri are beginning the process of revising their long-range forest management plans. They are seeking citizen input into that process. However, that process has frequently caused a lot of conflict, with major national or regional interest groups using the local communities as the battleground(s) for their respective positions.

Assumptions for Building common Ground

This Community Guide for building common ground is based upon several assumptions:

There is common ground.--For those who live in the communities which will be affected by National Forest Management, there is at least some "common ground." There are at least some things upon which they agree, or will be able to agree if they can communicate with each other.

Community in-fighting reduces community impact.--Whenever local communities present polarized or highly divergent positions concerning their preferences for forest management during the planning process, it is very difficult, if no impossible, for Forest Planners to use the input of either community group. The result is that the community has little if any impact. That leaves the opportunity to influence the plan to others, especially to highly organized national and regional interest groups. The same is true for other issues. If a community cannot agree upon a funding proposal for a water system, for example, and factions in the community battle each other all the way to Little Rock or Oklahoma City, it is pretty certain they won't get funded.

The local community is the place for dialogue.--The local community provides a unique place for civilized debate and dialogue, and the building of common ground. It is in the local community where people at least have the possibility of knowing each other in a variety of environments, where their children go to the same schools, where they attend the same churches, use the same businesses, etc. It is also local people who are most familiar with the forest lands under consideration, and who will be the most profoundly affected by the choices made concerning long-term management of the national forest lands.

You can help the public land managers.--If and when local community people come to consider themselves partners with the USDA Forest Service in the planning for and management of the public lands in their vicinity, they also become an important resource in helping the Forest Service achieve its objectives.

As the steward of America's public lands, the Federal Government has the responsibility to manage them.--At the same time, the National Forest lands do belong to all the people of America, represented by the Federal Government. So, national objectives for their use, and national laws respecting their management and use, are legitimate and must be honored, and the USDA Forest Service must be exercise that responsibility.

What Can You Do?

Get a sponsor.--Identify someone or some organization which has the courage to host or sponsor an event or a series of events designed to bring everyone together. This needs to be a person or organization which, simultaneously, is widely respected and as nearly as possible is seen as neutral on some of the major divisions within the community. Under some circumstances it might be helpful to partner closely with an outside organization, consultant, or other entity that brings disinterest and neutrality, and also the possibility of denial (if it all blows up the local sponsor can blame it on that "outside agitator").

Hold an initial meeting.--Host an initial trial meeting in an attempt to launch dialogue. The meeting should be tentative, initially without much of an agenda other than to try to get these people together on a trial basis, at least once.

Be open and inclusive.--This meeting must be open (anyone who wants to may attend) and it must be inclusive (all major interests, factions, etc., must at least be represented). Inclusiveness will be the hardest thing to accomplish. In highly factionalized communities, some people will inevitably decide that "if A is going to be there, I won't go!" If significant elements of the community don't participate, either for lack of trust or because they have already determined to play strategically, the effort won't work. If the process, even in the least, turns into an "us against them" process, it may accomplish something, but it won't be able to build common ground.

Talk about your aspirations for your community.--Try to get everyone to express themselves. Don't jump directly into the things which divide--indeed, you ought to avoid these like the plague at the outset. A good strategy is to ask everyone to take just a few minutes to introduce themselves and to talk very briefly about their own, personal aspirations for the future of the community. That might take the entire meeting. The person in charge of the meeting, or someone else who has agreed to do so, briefly summarizes what has been said without moralizing or trying to reach any kind of premature decisions. Then you decide whether, when, and where you will have the next meeting, and adjourn.

Avoid (Evade) the need to "accomplish something."--After a meeting or two, some folks will start to complain that the group "isn't doing anything." Of course, these are busy people, and you have to respect this sentiment. At the same time, **you** know that they are accomplishing something very important simply by the fact that they are talking. It wouldn't be a bad idea to undertake some simple task or project, but be sure that you don't get caught up in the obsession to have to "accomplish something."

Be careful about your language.--Often, in the end, it's all about the language you use. The big one at first will be "they" or "them." People will say "They," speaking of their own community, "are doing this or that (to me or mine)." The big task is to get the "they's" and the "them's" turned into "we's" and "us's." That's hard, but it can happen.

You also have to be very careful about words that carry a lot of ideological and emotional baggage. To many people in rural communities the very word "environment" means "They are out to treat us like idiots, and to control our lives." At some point you may be able to get the common ground group to discuss sensitive words frankly. At the outset, though, just be very careful to bring in as little baggage as possible.

Some Stories of Building Common Ground in Communities

There is a community in the Ozarks that suffers from severe factionalization. A history of public lands acquisition 40 years ago which deeply offended many local families, of the in-migration of "outsiders," and of increased restriction upon what many consider their traditional way of life and culture has led to gridlock, hostility, and even violence. Literally embarrassed into action by hearing the story of a well-known western community which had succeeded in moving beyond "teaching their children to hate each other," representatives of all or most of the various groups, points of view, and positions in the community agreed to meet--at least once. A very courageous County Agent agreed to organize the meeting(s). Thanks to this group of brave people, there has been no more violence and mutual letters of insult in the local paper have ceased. Perhaps most importantly, members of the group recently helped negotiate plans for a very controversial timber sale which could have caused major community conflict.

Yes, they probably aren't forwarding the agenda of any particular national interest group. And, yes, what they have accomplished could be shoved aside at any time. But, what they have done--for the time, at least--is to take control of their own community, and wrest it out of the grip of those who would simply use it as a battle ground. That's something. It can happen in your community too.

Another story involves a very rural area in southwestern New Mexico, Catron county. This story has received a lot of publicity. Conflict was so bad that the local doctor became concerned about physical symptoms of stress, fear of violence, and even threatened suicides. A brief version of the story can be found at <http://www.publicdecisions.org/community.htm>. Several stories about this case were also published in the High Country News (<http://www.hcn.org/>) in 1996, and can be found in the HCN archives on the web.

Some source materials on conflict management and building common ground

The Conciliation Handbook

http://www.cpn.org/cpn/community_boards/conciliation_intro.html

Public Decisions Network:

<http://www.publicdecisions.org/sources.htm>

EPA Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center

<http://www.epa.gov/adr/>

This is one of a set of **COMMUNITY GUIDES FOR FOREST PLANNING** designed to help community leaders and community groups participate effectively in the up-coming USDA National Forest Plan Revision process. The entire series includes:

Guide 1: Who is Responsible for Public Lands, Natural Resources, and Environmental Issues (in process)

Guide 2: A Guide to National Forest Planning and Management (available)

Guide 3: Public Involvement and "Participatory Management" in National Forest Planning and Decisionmaking (available)

Guide 4: Summary of the Ouachita National Forest Long-Range Plan of 1990 (in process)

Guide 5: Summary of the Ozark/St. Francis National Forest Long-Range Plan of 1986 (in process)

Guide 6: Building Common Ground in Your Community