

Federal Resource Decision-Making: Localization or Management Diversity?

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Several contributors to this colloquium argue that federal land policy-making and federal solutions for public-land conflicts have not been very successful and that there is a need for new techniques of dispute resolution, new forms of resource ethics, even a new notion of community. One common suggestion is that federal and state governments should move toward more direct democracy and smaller organizational scales, specifically toward local institutions and local solutions, including the use of local, self-governing groups, councils, and committees. Survey research has confirmed that this idea makes sense to the public in some parts of the country, such as Oregon (Shindler, Steel, and List 1996). Moreover it is consistent with the growing disenchantment of the American public with centralized and distant government, a phenomenon identified for many years now by political scientists, historians of technology, and other social researchers.

In the West, many citizens, both rural and urban, are unhappy with government management of natural resources. For example, there is clear evidence that the public in Oregon is frustrated with federal forest management in the state and, probably as a result of this belief, would like to be more involved in federal forest management decisions (Shindler, Steel and List 1996; Shindler, List, and Steel 1993). At the same time, public groups do not necessarily agree with what is wrong with federal resource decision-making; some would like to see it return to an emphasis on resource extraction while others would prefer that it promote more resource preservation and noncommercial uses of the land. Oddly, one scientific survey in Oregon indicates that, aside from local community residents, the organizations and publics in which the Oregon public has the most confidence to make federal forest decisions are the traditional federal resource agencies: the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. Additionally Oregonians express little confidence in national organizations and institutions, such as the Clinton administration, federal courts, national public opinion, and Congress (Shindler, Steel, and List 1996). For these and other reasons mentioned in colloquium papers, the time seems ripe to refashion public lands decision-making in a more local direction.

Clearly the long history of the United States attests to the many virtues of local citizen groups and the use of direct democracy. Some recent forest and range disputes in the Pacific Northwest have been at least partially resolved because the orientation of problem-solvers was to local interests and because mechanisms for resolution directly involved local peo-

ple and contending groups in a meaningful way. As Alan Randall and Robert Lee affirm, and other researchers have documented, these kinds of local, collaborative efforts can succeed, to a degree, and in some cases surprisingly so in view of the assumed differences between interest groups and the disparate nature of their demands (Daniels et al., 1993). Localization can lead to resource decisions that are "ecologically rational," to use Robert Lee's terminology.

But as Hess implies, there are different approaches that will have to be used in changing federal land policy management, and, as Merchant argues, there are new ethical systems that will have to emerge as well. Public-land management in the future will have to be more holistic, incorporate previously disenfranchised social groups, and recognize and incorporate new, more biocentric and "hard-to-define" values that have previously been ignored (Shindler, List, and Steel 1994; List and Brown 1996). All of this amounts to a tall order for public resource agencies, especially in a time when there are deep cuts in agency personnel such as in the U.S. Forest Service. It will require organizational ingenuity and innovation, and also new resource professionals who have a better understanding of the ecological sciences, a strong commitment to restoration of degraded federal lands, and new kinds of communication and interpersonal skills.

There are also other reasons to doubt that this move to localization and local control is a panacea that will, once and for all, resolve many difficult conflicts over public-land resources. Daniels and his colleagues conclude that "neither the long history of divisive politics nor the existing competitive institutions and incentives will be washed away by a few grassroots efforts to cooperate." (Daniels et al. 1993) Thus if the aim of localization is to avoid the deadlock that can come with litigation or to circumvent national regulatory mandates imposed by environmental and administrative legislation, it may not work by itself alone. The courts, Congress, the national administration, and other national interest groups cannot always be effectively deterred by localization. Experience with the federal Timber Salvage Rider that expired at the end of 1996 is evidence of this.

There are obviously times when local priorities should prevail over national ones, and other times when they should not. Some local priorities have justifiably become national priorities because they have represented deeper principles in our national life. As one of my colleagues at Oregon State University has noted, local control over segregation statutes

and voting qualifications was clearly unjust for blacks in the South, and the Civil Rights Movement was right to forcefully push local, racist practices in a more equitable direction. This local and regional movement made its point so well that national forces, such as Congress and the President, were compelled to establish new civil rights laws and override entrenched, local interests. To take a natural resource example, if the local interest groups in the 1980s that favored timber extraction over other forest uses on federal forests in the Pacific Northwest had continued to exert their influence over federal timber harvest processes, it is likely that much of the remaining and available old growth Douglas-fir stands in Western Oregon, not to mention many old growth-dependent species, would have been eliminated in no more than thirty years. At the same time, this possibility would now appear to have been forestalled by the protest actions of Northwest forest activists, working in conjunction with nonlocal forces such as regional and national environmental groups, political groups from beyond the Pacific Northwest, the Clinton administration, and federal foresters. Coalitions or mixtures of local and national interests have been successful in this situation as well.

It is advisable, then, to be cautious about concluding that localization will be sufficient to take public-land management into a new day. More reasonable is the idea that it will take a variety of efforts, techniques, and methods, some nationally directed, others regionally focused, still others more locally oriented, and finally some mixed collaborations, to rework public land management decision-making. Public lands and resources do not come in neat, local packages; the boundaries and scales of ecological systems are rarely, if ever, coextensive with those in political systems, local or national, as so many have recognized. Local interests can become encrusted in outmoded ideas and obstruct rather than lead the way toward new solutions. Moreover, local groups can effectively lobby Congress or the Administration to perpetuate their extractive interests in federal resource decision-making, and can cement those influences into legislation, just as they can sometimes forge new and creative alliances for resource sustainability. The land management bureaucracy might sometimes become a tool for maintaining the status quo while, at other times, it may succeed in formulating new methods of adaptive land management. In short, the historical and contemporary context of public lands decision-making in particular situations is all important, as are the methods recommended for changing management strategies. Federal land management should become more profoundly pluralistic in character; "land management diversity" is preferable to localization alone.

In the end, there are ecological limits to what legislators, land managers, resource users, and citizens can do to the public lands, no matter where decision-making is focused. As Aldo Leopold understood many years ago, the land is a complicated biotic system, and can lose its integrity and resiliency under human management, even with the best of human intentions (Leopold 1949). Thus, new management methodologies must be based on the virtues of biotic humility and conservatism. They should aim at the long-term ecological health of the land and its many components, human and nonhuman. The well-being of ecosystems should be a foundation stone in future, public land management (Lee 1993).

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