Case Study:  
An Insight into the Public Participation Process within the 
Florida Forest Management Plan

Kim Schlagel  
Dispute Resolution  
Dr. Taylor  
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Introduction

Since 1976, national forests within the United States have been required by law to establish and uphold to a comprehensive plan. These plans are to be revised every ten to fifteen years as environmental, wildlife, and user-group needs change. Within the state of Florida, the most recently updated plan was implemented in May of 1999 and was a revision of the 1986 forest plan. The following case study provides an overview of the processes involved with the construction of the plan with a specific emphasis on the role of public involvement. The structure for the case study will include the case history, a focus on public participation, outcomes of the plan, and conclusions.

Case History

As required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976, all national forests within the United States are to have and uphold to a comprehensive resource management plan to be updated every ten to fifteen years. The purpose of this legislation is to promote practical land use management and also to provide a logical means for integrating national needs with the capabilities of the national forests (Ramig 32). The main goal of forest service administrators in creating this plan is to attempt to serve the
best interests of both the environment and the public who have rights and pay taxes for these public lands. As one might suppose, these interests can be quite conflicting. When one takes into account the myriad of user groups that utilize the forests from ATV users to hikers there are several compatibility and environmental issues to be considered. Revisions of forest plans within the state of Florida have historically been hot items of debate as many user groups and those individuals who make a living within the timber industry have a lot to lose if regulations shift to their detriment. These issues are even more sensitive as we enter into the new millennium and the state of Florida continues to show trends of rapid growth. Open space and environmental accessibility are more of a critical commodity now than ever before.

The forest management plan became problematic on several grounds. The bottom line is that all individuals have rights to access the forest but it is unrealistic to allow this access without regulatory stipulations. One of the main problems the forest service has had within the last ten years is with motorized vehicle users in the sense that they are not utilizing the trails that have been designated for them. Proven by substantial evidence throughout the forest, these users have been known to travel literally cross country with no regard for trails or respect for environmentally sensitive areas. Since these users have an extreme impact on the environmental well-being of the forest, the new plan has prohibited cross country travel by people on motorized vehicles and bicycles. Forest officials hope that by restricting the limits of motorized use they will be able to restore the longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystems that have been harmed in the past by off-road users.

Another problematic issue addressed within the plan is the new timber management strategies. The forest service has decided to use unevenaged management techniques for timber and prescribed burning to emphasize ecosystem restoration. Unevenaged management techniques have caused intense interests within the timber companies as it severely limits the amount of available timber they will legally be able to
harvest. Under these new regulations, timber companies are no longer able to initiate clear-cutting but must selectively choose the trees they take by cutting trees of all ages in dispersed areas of the forests. These regulations have caused quite a stir with the timber industry as it is now more expensive and problematic to harvest trees as they are being forced to obtain their resources from a larger geographic area. In addition to the new timber management regulations, the selection of timber has been even further reduced through the efforts to sustain the red-cockaded woodpecker. These birds need substantially older trees to nest in and find food. As a result, the Forest Service has marked an extensive amount of timber to be reserved for the woodpecker thus further reducing the options of the timber industry.

Current issues within the new forest management plan lie within the problem of enforcement. Regulations and laws do not mean anything if they are not abided by. Currently, the forest service imposes strict fines upon those in violation of codes but patrolling the entire forest at all times is virtually impossible. This problem is not new to forest service officials. They are continually working at improving their system and finding new ways to enforce regulations. Ultimately, however, it is in the hands of the public to try to work together to preserve the forest and save some the last pristine open space we have.

**Public Involvement Process**

Integral to the process of creating a national forest land and resource management plan is public involvement. Within this realm a specific concern of examination within this case study is how success of public participation programs can be assessed. Other research (Moore 1994) indicates that success is not related just to the substantive outcomes of the planning effort. This is to say that people tend to view success in broader terms than simply “getting a plan done” or making changes in the landscape as a result of the plan. Definitions of success may include such things as representation in
planning, political or social acceptability of the plan, improved relationships with others and agencies, and the amount of learning that may occur. In a case study done by Seth Tuler and Thomas Webler in New York and New England, public participants working on a forest policymaking process were asked to define what makes a public participation effort successful. Results of the interview research of over 50 participants included seven normative principles deemed to hold the most importance. These principles were access to the process, power to influence process and outcomes, access to information, structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions, facilitation of constructive personal behaviors, adequate analysis, and enabling of social conditions necessary for future processes (Tuler, Webler 1999).

Tuler and Webler make a valid point within their research that since scientists, planners, and the public play different roles in traditional public participation processes it is safe to assume that each individual has differing definitions of success. To provide a general framework, however, it is useful to gather mass information from a variety of participants. This type of information is evident in Tuler and Webler’s research which determines similarities within public opinion in order to clearly define important criteria in defining the process of public participation. These definitions are important to note and analyze as they carry important implications for the design of future public participation programs. For the particular case of Florida this information is critical for use within future revisions of public land management documents.

The creation of the Florida forest management plan offered the public a very integral opportunity for involvement. It is in the best interest of the forest service to integrate the public in order to create a document that will produce commitment from the community and thus provide an easier road towards implementation. More importantly, however, the forest service is required by law to allow the public this opportunity. Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 it is specifically stated that the public shall have opportunity for participation in rulemaking, decisionmaking, and
planning with respect to the public lands. This opportunity to be involved includes the option to attend public meetings held at locations near the affected lands and also demands implementation of other procedures to assess public comment if individuals cannot attend meetings. Essentially, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 requires the forest service and other government agencies to recognize the public as an integral party in creating land use documents. It does not, however, stipulate how this process should be undertaken or what are the most effective ways to have public voices be heard.

The case of the Florida forest management plan will be analyzed by two perspectives. One perspective comes from forest service administration. Head of public relations Denise Rains and forest planner Richard Shelfer have been an integral part of the planning process since the project began in late 1993. Interviews with these two individuals have provided key information as to how the public was informed of workshops and meetings, participant turn out at pubic forums, current issues of debate within the plan, and also general public process logistics. The other perspective of the planning process is from Judy Hancock, a representative from the environmentalist user group and representative of the Florida chapter of the Sierra Club. Judy Hancock was chosen as a representative for the public user groups as she has played an avid role in participating within the process. Not only did she attend every meeting held for the public in regards to this process but she has also been heavily involved with other environmental public forums. Examples of this can be seen in a controversial case involving the Florida panther and also a further extension of the forest plan to create access designation policy in restricted areas of the Florida national forests. With this extensive background, Judy Hancock has had ample experience within public forums and thus holds valuable insight in the public participation process of policymaking.
From the standpoint of administration, the hope was that the public involvement process would lead to informed and collaborative dialogue among stakeholders holding diverse values about national forest economy, local communities, resources, and natural environment. Public involvement is also considered to be an important tool for developing ownership, partnerships, understanding, and commitment which are necessary for implementation of the final plan.

To initiate these important elements, it is of primary importance to establish how the public was informed that the process was taking place. In January of 1995, a press release was issued to all local newspapers to inform the public the schedule of a series of public workshops. These were held in cities throughout the state to assess general concerns and issues affecting the public. The workshops were facilitated by the federal forest service rangers and were held at all major stages of the process. Those who attended not only were able to record voiced concerns but were also encouraged to fill out comment cards so issues could be properly documented and included in a comprehensive record. In addition to the workshops a newsletter entitled “Future Forests” was sent out on a monthly basis throughout the process of plan creation to inform participants of current forest events, future workshop dates, and updates on the completion of the forest land management document.

A frustrating part of sending out the news releases to the papers, according to Denise Rains, was the level of importance and priority local papers gave to the issue. Once the forest service gives the press release to the newspapers they have no control over how that information will be presented. What occurred in this process was that often times the press release would appear in the back sections of the paper and was very easy to miss unless an individual read the whole publication from front to back. Suggested reasoning behind these actions is that newspaper staff themselves do not understand the process that is going on and are not informed about public involvement issues (Hancock 2000). Although the forest service has minimal
control over the level of importance local editors grant public forums, it has the potential to have lasting ramifications on the effectiveness of the process. If people are not aware that these public meetings are going on it defeats the purpose of the effort to hold the workshops. Fortunately, other methods were utilized to reach a broader portion of the public. The forest service newsletter titled “Future Forests” was sent to key contacts of broad user groups within the area and also to people that were on forest service mailing lists. These individuals included people that have actively been involved in previous forest service activities or took the initiative themselves to add their address to the list. In addition to publications, the forest service also made efforts to post flyers around the community to encourage people to come to the initial scoping meetings before a draft of the plan was to be released. These efforts resulted in a total turnout of over 2,000 for the initial scoping meetings and over 1,000 for the workshops that were held after a draft of the plan had been released.

Within the actual workshops and meetings the public was informed of the basic issues affecting the management plan concerning resource management and environmental concerns. The initial scoping meetings were attended by the ‘forest management team’ which consisted of the forest planner, recreation specialist, wildlife biologist, computer analyst, forest ecologist, forest botanist, and also the forest hydrologist. These individuals were there for the public to answer any specific questions that might arise concerning forestry or how their presence pertained to the plan.

The basic strategy the forest service used in implementing these meetings was an open forum format with specific consideration taken towards structural characteristics of the process and personal behavior of individuals taking part in the process. The structural characteristics of the process were based on effective information exchange and an open forum for new ideals. The goals towards personal characteristics of the meetings were to ensure that all individuals had the chance to speak if they desired and that each party maintained mutual respect for the other. These were defined by general ground rules of
taking turns to voice concerns and also stipulations requiring that all comments were to pertain to the task on hand. Comments made by the public were recorded into the record of the meeting and taken into further consideration with the members of the forest management team.

A major critique of this process was not in the process of public participation achievement but had the overriding theme of a basic lack of information. According to Judy Hancock, most individuals attending workshop meetings were not aware of the legislation pertinent to the forest plan, irreparable environmental damage caused by certain user groups, or even why the forest service was initiating this process in the first place. While Judy felt the freedom to voice personal concerns and felt confident that these issues would be taken into consideration, it was a source of frustration that the forest service did not provide sufficient groundwork to establish specifics concerning the actual process. This resulted in a extreme perceived loss of wasted time in answering questions that should have been covered in the outset of the meetings. Although the forest service made a fair attempt to provide access to information through the variety of experts available within the forest management team perhaps it would have been more effective for the purposes of the process if they had offered the information in a more presentational manner. Suggestions of ways to do this include having the forest planner explain the exact legislation and requirements behind the process (i.e., the basic reasons for updating the plan), show slides or other visual aids to help explain site specific circumstances in the forest, and provide a conceptual basis for the forest service priorities in resource conservation and effective management (Hancock 2000). Not only will this serve to avoid general confusion but it will also provide the public a stronger basis to make more informed suggestions. In addition, the public will also realize the constraints laws such as the Endangered Species Act, the Resources Recovery Act, and the National Forest Management Act put on the forest service that they must adhere to no matter what the public consensus is.
Outcomes

After the long process of holding public workshops, meetings, and analyzing written comments, the forest service found many areas for which the plan could benefit from issues brought about by public concern. A major issue accepted from public input was a proposal to upgrade approximately four recreational facilities per year and make at least 20 percent of these sites accessible to all users including the handicapped. In specific concerns to the environment, standards and guidelines have been added to the plan to minimize ground disturbance such as plowing firelines and mechanical site preparation for reforestation. These previous practices occurring within forest service maintenance work were considered to be exceptional eyesores and increased the risk of disturbing environmentally sensitive areas. Other public inputs addressed within the forest plan include four new rivers to be included into the Wild and Scenic Rivers System and also for the Clear Lake Wilderness Study Area on the Apalachicola National Forest to added to the Wilderness Preservation System.

In addition to the above stated amendments, the public process has not yet reached completion. Even though the document was published and released in May of 1999, it does not stipulate how restricted access within the forest should be stratified among user groups. Since December of 1999 forest service administration and the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium, a professionally hired facilitation team, have undergone efforts to begin the entire public participation process once again. The current efforts not only intend to assess public input in terms of compatibility with other user groups but also seek to define major issues and concerns regarding use within these areas. The newly prescribed access designation policy is hoped to be drafted and implemented by June 2001. It will serve as an amendment to the national forest plan.

Conclusion
There are many facets to be considered when one analyzes components of public participation policymaking effort. Understanding of principles valued by individuals involved is important for both the design and evaluation of future policy processes. It is also essential knowledge for practitioners of participatory policy making efforts as these processes are entities that can continually be improved upon. Using the research previously mentioned by Tuler and Webler, we can analyze the Florida forest management public process to see if it includes the seven normative principles that emerged from their findings. In so doing we will test Tuler and Webler’s research and either strengthen or weaken their ‘theory’ with the introduction of our case.

Previously mentioned above, the seven important principles of the public participation process to be used for analysis are access to the process, power to influence process and outcomes, access to information, structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions, facilitation of constructive personal behaviors, adequate analysis, and enabling of social conditions necessary for future processes (Tuler, Webler 1999). Within the Florida case, participants definitely had sufficient access to the process as workshops and meetings were held on different times and in various locations throughout the state. If individuals could not make the meetings they could still participate by sending in comment cards to illustrate their concerns. The principle of power to influence process and outcomes is evident within the revisions of the plan derived from public input. These processes are still continuing with the efforts to create access designation policy within the restricted areas of the forest. The element of information access existed within the process as appropriate professionals were available to speak to if the public wished. The ways in which the information was delivered within the workshops, however, could have used some improvement. Structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions can be seen within the organizational measures used to carry out workshops. All attending individuals could speak if they wished and ground rules were placed to ensure all parties held a mutual respect for one another. This brings
us to the validation of the next principle which is the facilitation of constructive personal behaviors. The principle of adequate analysis can be examined with the Forest Service efforts to create such an extensive and comprehensive forest plan management team. Professionals from botany, horticulture, and biology were all integrally involved to examine environmental issues within the forest. Environmental impact statements and environmental analysis efforts were undertaken to examine areas where new policy would influence. The last principle defined by Tuler and Webler is the enabling of social conditions necessary for future processes. The forest management plan provides unique evidence for this through the high public turn-out rates for the second series of public workshops for access designation policy. It is clear within public attitude and commitment to these meetings that individuals still want to be involved and be active within the process.

Using the seven normative criteria as a basis for analysis, the Florida national forest land and resource management plan was an extreme success in the realm of public participation. Analyzing this case study with the framework of Tuler and Webler gives strength and validity to their research and thus further evidence to forest service administrators that they are approaching public issues in an effective manner. More research that is done within the realm of public participation will lead to more effective practices within state agencies and ultimately may also lead to specific guidelines for government administrators to follow when initiating efforts to reach the public. This would prove to be especially helpful for agencies such as the forest service who are required by law to initiate public workshops for land management revisions every ten to fifteen years.
Works Cited

Hancock, Judy. Personal Interview. 23 Feb. 2000


Rains, Denise. Personal Interview. 16 Feb. 2000

