



COLORADO

Parks and Wildlife

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To: Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission

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Re: The Importance of Stakeholder Engagement: Overview and Best Practices

Background

Stakeholder engagement processes are critical to the successful implementation of, and outcomes related to, wildlife and natural resource management efforts (Beierle, 2002). Stakeholder engagement refers to both the process of, and approaches used for, involving citizens in decision making efforts (Loker et al., 2008; Reed, 2008). Given the importance of situation-specific or contextual factors in any natural resource management planning process, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to engaging stakeholders (Wilson et al., 2017). However, scholars have identified attributes of “successful” stakeholder engagement, as well as criteria used to evaluate the processes and outcomes of that engagement (Chase et al., 2004; Chess & Purcell, 1999). Scholars have also identified challenges and barriers associated with engagement processes which, when not adequately addressed or taken into consideration, may lead to flawed processes and corresponding outcomes.

Best practices and benefits associated with robust stakeholder engagement processes

Throughout most of the literature on stakeholder engagement several commonalities or best practices are described in detail. These attributes often transcend disciplinary field (e.g., urban planning, anthropology, public policy, and natural resource management) and often focus on the *process* of stakeholder engagement rather than the method (or tool) used to engage citizens (see Chase et al., 2004 as an exception). The latter are important but as Reed (2008) argues, successful engagement processes should strive to “replace the ‘tool-kit’ approach to participation, which emphasizes selecting the relevant tools for the job” because “the quality of a decision is strongly dependent on the quality of the process that leads to it” (p. 2421-2422). Ultimately, successful stakeholder engagement processes are inclusive, equitable, efficient, collaborative, participatory in nature, and, in the context of natural resource management, include biological/ecological as well as social goals (Blahna & Yonts-Shepard, 1989; Lauber & Knuth, 1999; Lord & Cheng, 2006; Renn et al., 1995; Smith & McDonough 2001; Susskind & Cruikshank, 1987). Additional best practices include: engaging the public early and often in meaningful ways (so as to empower participants); incorporating public involvement opportunities throughout the entire planning process; obtaining data from representative stakeholders using a variety of methods; and using these data in decision making processes (Blahna & Yonts-Shepard, 1989; Chase et al., 2004, Reed, 2008). Lastly, scholars emphasize the importance of having a neutral and skilled, third party facilitator to moderate engagement efforts (Reed, 2008).



When these aspects are meaningfully integrated into stakeholder engagement processes they help minimize conflict, reduce the likelihood that stakeholders or groups are marginalized, legitimize planning processes and outcomes, empower stakeholders, improve trust (especially when processes are transparent), promote social learning, lead to higher quality decisions, and increase knowledge, awareness, and overall support for decision making (Plummer et al. 2017; Okali et al., 1994; Richards et al., 2004; Serenari et al., 2018; Smith & McDonough 2001)

Common tools or approaches used to engage stakeholders

A variety of methods exist to engage stakeholders which differ depending on the level of engagement required of participants (Reed, 2008). For example, informational tools often include educational “tours,” open houses, Commission/governing board meetings, or public meetings. Social science surveys, focus groups or one-on-one interviews often serve as a means to “consult” with members of the public; while citizen juries, community advisory boards, roundtables, or citizen task forces represent more participatory approaches (Laurian, 2007; Loker et al., 1998; Lord & Cheng, 2006; Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Stoudt et al., 1996). When determining which approach or combination of approaches is appropriate, several aspects should be taken into consideration. Specifically, the method or approach should align with the broad goal(s) and specific objectives for each effort and the socio-political (and cultural) context should also be taken into consideration (Waters & Mars; Reed, 2008; Serenari et al., 2018; Walker & Hurley, 2004).

Detrimental outcomes associated with minimal or limited stakeholder engagement

Even the most well-intentioned and carefully planned engagement processes will present challenges. Decision makers must incorporate ways to overcome such barriers in the planning process. Scholars have identified several barriers to effective stakeholder engagement spanning the entire lifecycle of the process (i.e., before, during, and after). Examples include: lack of public interest or awareness; limited or lack of broad participation; concerns about (or an unwillingness to devolve) power; lack of direction, commitment, or leadership from those involved in managing the process; poor (i.e., one-way) communication between agency/organization leads and the public; shortages of funding, time, and other administrative resources; perceptions of or concerns about special interests/politics driving the process and decision making; and distrust among stakeholder groups (Loker et al. 1998; Lord & Cheng 2006; Hiroyasu et al. 2019; Lauber, 2010; Lute & Gore 2014; Margerum, 2005; Mortenson & Krannich, 2001; Pomeranz & Decker, 2017; Wondolleck & Yaffee 2000). When these attributes are not taken into consideration or public opinions and values are excluded from engagement processes, unintended consequences can occur. These include mistrust in the managing agency, disregard for process outcomes, and in extreme situations, intentional derailment (Heberlein, 2004; Homsy & Hart, 2019; Walker & Hurley, 2004).

In order to implement a robust stakeholder engagement process that aligns with best practices identified above, CPW is considering a range of opportunities for citizens and the agency to work together to develop a plan for reintroducing wolves in Colorado. Assistant Director Reid DeWalt will go into those in more detail during his presentation at the January meeting.

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