Working with Data and the Experts
Managing Natural Resource Disputes - No. 7
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When managing natural resource disputes, it is important to understand that natural resource systems are infinitely variable and dynamic. Whether you are dealing with watersheds, range issues, wildlife, or forests, these living systems are change constantly. Although today we are more knowledgeable than ever before in resource sciences, we cannot produce exact information about the behavior of resources because they are constantly changing and some events are random. Even the amount of data available to use in decision making seems endless. This presents significant challenges for collaborative processes designed to manage resource disputes. Two of the more obvious challenges to arise during a collaborative process are working with data and the experts.

WORKING WITH DATA
Almost any type of negotiation involving natural resource disputes will involve working with data. Although data are an essential ingredient for making informed resource decisions, data can also cause many problems during a collaborative process.

Misunderstanding the data: Data are tools to help people make informed decisions regarding what they care about in the negotiation. Data should be clearly understandable by everyone in the negotiation—not just the scientists or experts.
Contradictory data: In some cases data are understandable but contradictory. For example, one set of data may indicate the need to increase forage on the range while another indicates range forage is adequate. How do you arrive at informed decisions in a negotiation when contradictory data sets produce different answers to the problem?

Lack of data: Lack of data can prevent negotiators from making an informed decision. For example, in a negotiation involving development of an elk management plan, participants may have only an outdated report on herd population numbers. They may lack critical data on available forage, population sizes of competing species, or hunter tags issued per year. Allow the group enough time to acquire sufficient data to make informed decisions.

Too Much Data: In contrast to lack of data is the problem of too much data. This can lead to what is commonly called analysis paralysis. In analysis paralysis negotiations stop because participants are unable to make a decision. They continually feel the need for more information until all uncertainty has been eliminated. It is common for negotiators to experience analysis paralysis. People tend to prefer to have too much information rather than not enough. To alleviate this problem, negotiators must understand what information is necessary to make an informed decision and what information is extraneous.
THE ROLE OF EXPERTS
After considering the potential problems with data, another challenge may involve the technical experts who analyze the data. An expert may not be viewed as credible or unbiased by the group. For example, a scientist may conduct research on the environmental impacts of mining, while at the same time serve as president of a local environmental advocacy group opposed to mining. Everyone in the negotiation should view the expert as credible. In a resource dispute, a scientist or technical expert will probably be given the task of collecting data. An expert will have different roles and responsibilities depending upon two main conditions. These are:

1) The negotiating group hired them to perform a specific task, such as data collection or analysis (i.e., expert outside the process);
2) They are an active member of the collaboration (i.e., expert inside the process).

Expert Outside the Process:
Good communication skills. A responsibility of the expert is to provide valuable information and knowledge to the public and the negotiating group. Experts should explain the results in non-technical language, free from professional jargon, making it easy to understand. Practicing good communication skills may also mean producing two written documents, one in technical form and an executive summary written for the public. No decision-making authority. The expert is not responsible for deciding which option is the best. In a collaborative process, decision-making should be the responsibility of the negotiating group. The expert’s role is to provide objective information. The expert may identify a number of possible options, but only if the negotiating group decides this is an important task for the expert to perform. The negotiating group still has the responsibility for decision-making.

Expert Inside the Process:
Equal Collaborator. When the expert is a participant in the negotiation, then s/he should be an equal collaborator in the process. Often times, an expert can seem arrogant and insensitive to people with differing values and needs. A responsibility of an expert involved in a process is to learn how to be a peer in the collaborative process. Respect local experts. In any collaborative negotiation there will be numerous sources of experts at the table. One of the benefits of collaboration is the joining of diverse backgrounds and expertise. It is important not to overlook the range of experts sitting at the table. These may include those knowledgeable about cultural, historical, industrial or community issues.

ADVOCACY SCIENCE
An often overlooked problem that reliance on data and experts can cause is advocacy science. Advocacy science is best described as science that is used to support or advocate a position. Ideally all data and analysis would strive for a fair and accurate answer to a question. However, during negotiations different interests may produce data or results that reflect their solution to the problem. Relying on data to promote a position creates added disagreements often causing individuals to take sides. Taking sides tends to split rather than unite a group, proving detrimental to the collaborative processes. Addressing the obvious problems that begin with data and the experts will help to prevent some common mistakes in your collaborative process. To help reduce confusion over data and to avoid advocacy science from emerging into your collaboration, engage in joint fact-finding. Joint fact-finding in discussed in the fact sheet Joint Fact-Finding: Managing Natural Resource Disputes No. 8.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:


