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# INTERDISCIPLINARY AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY PUBLIC EDUCATION BY COMBINING CONSENSUS-BASED PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

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# INTERDISCIPLINARY AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY PUBLIC EDUCATION BY COMBINING CONSENSUS-BASED PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

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In extension, we educate people to improve their lives. In natural resources extension, we educate people to improve life. Resolving issues often does this. In natural resources extension we also resolve issues to educate people.

As educators we steer clear of some issues to avoid the hazards. We may refrain from choosing sides. When we choose sides, we often tarnish the perceived objectivity of our University. Yet issues provide the need for knowledge, the teachable moments, and the set and focus that translates knowledge exposure into learning. When issues involve common resources, shared or conflicting interests, complications from complex or partially understood biology and ecology, significant economic ramifications, and intense emotions, the opportunity for education increases or decreases depending on the means chosen for issue resolution.

Politics often polarizes and leaves people more entrenched with partially or misunderstood, but firmly held, convictions supported by catchy phrases crystallizing half truths. As educators, we've come to realize that once learned wrong, people must relearn 32 times to retain correct knowledge. We'll all need help in the coming disinformation season.

Legal means provide a great opportunity for learning, but often for only the lawyers. Unfortunately lawyers and courts are notoriously poor at teaching and sometimes seem to have an interest in keeping issues unresolved. When courts resolve issues, their precedents often overextend the domain of reasonableness.

Although agencies sometimes milk issues too, their greater impact seems to come from creating mistrust. They set themselves up by gathering public input and then going off to their own corner or behind closed doors for plan creation and decision making. Worse yet is simple adoption of prior plans or secretly held new plans. Environmental analyses that are voluminous but partial, skewed, and inadvertently subjective provide little reassurance to the skeptical. They also provide too much reassurance to most of the public who never become involved enough to either learn nor contribute much.

Having discussed these absolutely necessary and yet insufficient forms of issue resolution, let me suggest an alternative role for extension educators. Alternative dispute resolution in its many forms, such as Coordinated Resource Management, meeting facilitation, and mediation, provide the opportunity for learning by many people, agencies, professions, and interests. All these

should play appropriate roles. Educators are no exception. When educators provide the needed neutrality, others get beyond multidisciplinary planning to interdisciplinary optimization. They grow beyond defending a position or contributing input to creating the understanding for integrating knowledge from several perspectives into solutions that meet the needs of many parties.

We used to say in our Manager of Learning Leadership Competency that it's not what the teacher teaches but what the learner learns that's important. When educators become skilled in helping people resolve issues with all interests working together, learners must apply knowledge to create new solutions. When participants get past trading concessions to meeting mutual needs by inventing integrated, sustainable, optimizing, ecosystem and landscape scale, decisions that build on and build in temporal change, you will recognize that education has happened. When people become committed to these plans and work to carry them out, you will recognize that people have improved their lives and life.

The successful Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) project in White Pine County began 3 years ago and recently concluded a plan for the controversial Duck Creek Drainage of the Schell Creek Range. The CRM Steering Committee has recently expanded to include Lincoln County to cooperatively address the Schell/Mount Wilson elk herd and will address other resource management opportunities with concurrent technical review teams (TRTs). Cooperative extension sees education opportunities in conflict management, negotiation skills, natural resource needs assessment, rangeland and watershed evaluation procedures, livestock grazing practices and grazing effects, wildlife grazing practices and management, and vegetation manipulation such as landscape vegetation management and fire ecology.

Through collaborative conflict management, Steering Committee members from four federal and five state or local agencies and interests including elk, County Commission, family recreation, farming, sportsmen, local control, mining, and wild horses overcame mutual distrust and positioning. Training for collaborative decision making and team building developed negotiation skills. Decisions made by consensus ensure that all interests become understood and satisfied. While difficult at times, the use of consensus among all interests forces the group to create solutions that all are motivated to implement and make work.

At the Nevada Society for Range Management 1996 winter meeting in Ely, participants addressed needs and opportunities for increased range vegetation management for increased forage for livestock, elk, and other wildlife. Such vegetation management could also keep or reestablish the natural variety of plant and animal community types across the landscape. By pursuing these ends, many misunderstood concepts about range condition and the concept of static climax vegetation can be replaced by public awareness of dramatic but slow vegetation changes with great significance to the local economy and the structure and function of these ecosystems. By using the concepts of constant change of alternative steady states, people should improve current management based on the notion that range condition is driven primarily by utilization.

A number of vegetation manipulation tools can produce a mosaic of diverse plant communities across a rangeland landscape: prescribed fire (undoubtedly in combination with unnatural fire suppression); livestock grazing techniques including high-impact grazing, time controlled grazing, rest rotation and others, rather than long seasons of continual use; pasture and water development for improving animal distribution; and direct vegetation manipulation. Each tool will be evaluated for its own merits in each situation before selecting the best combination for achieving the desired landscape mosaic of diverse plant communities and vegetation structures.

The procedure will use CRM and environmental analysis as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (Swanson 1994*a* and *b*). A TRT that includes the technical expertise and on-the-ground practitioners who care and know most about these specific lands will develop plan specifics. Their strategies will be considered by the larger and more diverse Steering Committee before final environmental analysis by the lead agency(ies). Because this form of decision making provides an intense opportunity for public involvement, education, and commitment, it will not meet the needs of those who will

not or cannot participate. In addition, the legal and practical need for thorough but practical environmental analysis provides for additional scoping and documentation of environmental analysis before agency responsible officials select the final alternative for a record of decision. Although responsibility for final decisions cannot be shared by the responsible officials, they can share the process. If they continue to meet with diverse public interests together and make decisions by consensus whenever possible, they can maintain public trust.

As Cooperative Extension works with others to select a pilot project area for rangeland vegetation management, we will seek a place with multiple ownerships and agency responsibilities, affected permittees who are willing to cooperate and become change agents through successful implementation, and a landscape that combines the best opportunity for vegetation manipulation inherent throughout the county.

To further the process and public education, workshops are likely for topics like riparian management, fire, and different grazing techniques to achieve desired vegetation changes on different site types. However, the best and most intense learning will likely come from negotiating with people having differing technical expertise, interests, and needs as they together create plans for complex landscapes that constantly change in response to multiple interacting natural and management factors.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Swanson, S. 1994*a*. Viewpoint: Integrating CRM (Coordinated Resource Management) and NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) processes. *Journal of Range Management*. 47:100-106.
- Swanson, S. 1994*b*. Combining Consensus and Environmental Analysis. *Rangelands*. 16:247-249.