Collaborative Decision-Making: Guiding Principles

Summary

This guide introduces objective guiding principles, a key aspect of many collaborative operating protocols.

Links

- Jesse Antuma, Bryce Esch, Brendan Hall, Elizabeth Munn, and Frank Sturges. *Restoring Forests and Communities: Lessons from the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program* (University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources & Environment, 2014).

- The Blue Mountains Forest Partners

- Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group

- Panhandle Forest Collaborative

- Chattahoochee-Oconee Collaborative Trails

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Using objective guiding principles to improve efficiency

Collaborative groups are increasingly developing creative tools to streamline, simplify, and increase the efficiency of decision-making processes. This trend was identified in Restoring Forests and Communities: Lessons from the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (2014). After studying all Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) collaborative groups, University of Michigan students recommended use of these tools, noting,

> Tools that groups have found helpful for simplifying the decision-making process include sideboards for projects, which set upper and lower bounds on project characteristics...these options can help each collaborative group maintain involvement without overwhelming participants (p. 141).

This best practice guide focuses on guiding principles, which often capture early agreements made by a group, and serve as a filter through which to evaluate projects or activities. This guide includes excellent examples pulled out of operating protocols from the Blue Mountains Forest Partners, Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group, Panhandle Forest Collaborative, and Collaborative Trails.

As you read each example, consider how the principles can be used objectively to narrow a group's focus and build agreement. As Matthew McKinney explains in "Best Practices: Deliberating and Deciding" (2011), reaching consensus on objective principles is one strategy a group can use to make decisions. By evaluating potential projects or activities based on a set of objective principles, collaborative participants can evaluate a range of options. The principles can be used to filter projects or activities through discussion, or a more methodical approach could be taken by using a checkerboard (criteria across the top, options down the side).

Collaborative Tools: Guiding Principles

From the Blue Mountains Forest Partners
Malheur National Forest, Oregon

The Blue Mountains Forest Partners rely on an *Operations Manual* to guide organizational structure, communications, and decision-making. The following principles are included in the *Operations Manual,* and represent a general zone of agreement among members. The principles represent a first step towards increasing the efficiency of decision-making. However, more specific sideboards are also included in the *Operations Manual* to guide project-level work.

Guiding Principles:
- Every effort should be made to ensure diverse participation of stakeholders; the process will encourage participation, and be open and inclusive
- Decision making processes for the group should focus on producing outcomes that strive to meet the needs of all participants
- Project scope, complexity and objectives should be appropriately scaled
- Projects will be selected that are of mutual concern and are agreed upon by the group
- Projects will include a monitoring component
- Projects will honor the complexity of forest ecosystems
- Projects will focus on enhancing forest ecosystems, protecting the built environment, and generating economic opportunities.
- The success of our work is tied to long-term sustainability of forests and communities

From the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group
Eldorado and Stanislaus National Forests, California

The ACCG developed guiding principles, another example of a broad zone of agreement that may increase efficiency within the collaborative group. The principles are supplemented by more specific policies intended to guide operations.

Guiding Principles:
- Design and implement activities that protect and restore forest ecosystem resiliency, structures, processes and functions within local watersheds.
- Seek forest and watershed planning solutions that benefit all three components of our vision: the local environment, community and economy.
- Use adaptive management best practices supported by the most appropriate peer-reviewed, ecology-based science available.
- Plan forest activities using the most comprehensive and current assessment of local watersheds and forests and the communities and economies they support.

Collaborative Tools: Guiding Principles

From the Panhandle Forest Collaborative
Idaho Panhandle National Forest, Idaho

The guiding principles below are part of the Panhandle Forest Collaborative's operating protocols, and supplement the group's vision and approach.

Guiding Principles:
- Every effort should be made to ensure participation of our diverse stakeholders; the process will encourage participation, and be open and inclusive
- Decision making processes for the group should focus on producing outcomes that strive to meet the needs of all participants
- Project scope, complexity and objectives should be appropriately scaled
- Projects will be selected that are of mutual concern and are agreed upon by the group
- Projects will include a monitoring component
- Projects will honor the complexity of forest ecosystems
- Projects will focus on restoring and enhancing forest ecosystems
- Projects will support the current infrastructure, and generate economic opportunities
- Projects will contribute to enhancing recreational activities

From the Collaborative Trails Initiative (CoTrails)
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, Georgia

The CoTrails guiding principles were used to describe the broad zone of agreement around trail system development and maintenance., and supplement the mission in the initiative's strategic plan. In addition to the basic principles below, CoTrails also developed more detailed organizational protocols.

Guiding Principles
1. A diverse, quality trail system meets expectations of a range of users, is safe within those expectations, has a variety of terrain and routes, and is located in a natural setting. The trails include appropriate infrastructure that provides users access to a range of opportunities.
2. A maintainable trail system has the long-term commitment from the public, volunteers and the agency. Resources, including financial and volunteer, are available to provide trail system management while protecting the natural and cultural resources.
3. An ecologically sustainable trail is maintained so negative impacts to natural resources are minimized to acceptable limits. Any new trails or reroutes will need to be properly designed and constructed.