

Review article

Understanding public participation in forest planning: a review

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Abstract

Based on a wide range of publications, this paper proposes a review of public participation processes in natural resource management with specific reference to forest planning. The paper proposes an analytical framework which can be used as an analytical tool as well as a series of principles of good practice. Public participation can be considered by the involved stakeholders as an end in itself or as a means to an end and the lack of definition and transparency of chosen processes and objectives often leads to more problems. Power is central to participatory forestry and to engage in a participatory process will ultimately change relationship patterns and affect power relationships. Issues of stakeholders' representativity, transparency of the processes and resource availability to facilitate the process are often underestimated. New models of participatory forestry management are emerging from various countries and the need for considering different approaches in forestry and roles of the forester are becoming more evident. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

A round table discussion on public participation in forest planning — during a meeting of the

Forest Planners Working group in February 1997 at the ANU — revealed a wealth of unexplored and unrecorded experiences of public participation across Australia. It became clear that public participation, which is a legal requirement in most states, was perceived and implemented in different ways by different government agencies to varying degrees of success. The first author who attended part of the meeting, could sense some

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ambient frustration at the ever-increasing energy and resources devoted by the various Forest Agencies to involving the public in planning matters, while the very same ‘public’ never seemed to be satisfied, forever making more and more ‘unreasonable’ demands.

We then decided to research the various public participation strategies followed in four States, Tasmania, Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria, in an attempt to learn the lessons from success and failure and to propose a series of guidelines.

One part of the research was based on reviewing the literature to establish a useful analytical framework. Here we present the lessons drawn from the literature.

2. Participation as an approach or as a management tool?

The literature on participation and participatory processes stems broadly from two major areas: (1) political sciences with discussions around democracy and citizenship especially within the context of regional and local planning (Pateman, 1970; Munro-Clark, 1990; Davis, 1996); and (2) development theory especially within the context of sustainable land use (Wignaraja et al., 1991; Vettivel, 1992; Rahman, 1993; Nelson and Wright, 1995; Chambers, 1997). Interestingly most of the literature concerned with participatory natural resource management stems from developing countries and in the last decade or so, various countries have tried out different models of participatory forestry. From these diverse development and management experiments and theoretical reflections on ‘participation’ the emerging themes in the literature can be largely amalgamated within two bodies of knowledge: (1) participation as an approach, an ideology, a specific ethos for community development (Box 1); and (2) participation as a method, a set of guidelines and practices of involving communities or the general public in specific planning activities. In other terms this distinction could be summarised by the question: is participation an end or a means to an end? This distinction has been described by Nel-

son and Wright (1995) as the distinction between ‘instrumental and transformative’ participation.

2.1. Participation as an end

2.1.1. The nature of democracy

An interesting starting point would be to look at Pateman’s distinction between what she calls ‘modern or contemporary’ democracy and participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970). For her, participation refers to ‘equal participation in the decision-making process and ‘political equality’ refers to the equality of power in determining the outcomes of decisions’ (Pateman, 1970, p. 43). By contrast, in non-participatory democracy ‘it is the participation of the minority elite that is crucial’ (Pateman, 1970, p. 104). We can operate in two different paradigms: either we believe that representative democracy offers effective means of community involvement in public affairs through elections and accept that the number of votes legitimise representativity or else we believe that powers should be devolved to the local level to allow local communities to make decisions about affairs of consequence to them. In the first framework, institutions and professionalism regulate and organise public affairs in a centralised manner designing policies for the ‘common good’. In the second framework institutions and professional agencies recognise local heterogeneity and operate as catalysts or facilitators for the development process (Chambers, 1997).

2.1.2. The role of power

The role of power is central to participatory processes (Slocum et al., 1995). It is also one of the major reasons why people may decide to get involved in forest management issues while at the same time forestry agencies are reluctant to relinquish their control over the resource (Snowdon and Slee, 1996). Although Painter (1990) questions the over-emphasis put on power in decision making, the nature and the levels of participation in a policy or a development process are often measured in terms of power and roles that the different stakeholders have in the decision-making process. This seems to be a constant theme in participatory literature and has inspired a number

Box 1 Participation as an ethos...

- ‘Participation’ means different things to different people and to avoid potential conflict, disappointment or ‘burn out’ it is important to clearly state or agree on a common definition.
- People participate in part because they want a greater control and participation stops being meaningful when there is no transfer or share of power in decision making.
- Participation can stimulate an ongoing learning process increasing the awareness of collective responsibility within the community. This should be seen as an asset by professional agencies rather than a threat.

of typologies of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 1995; Pretty, 1995) which present a scale of participation (hence the image of the ladder in Arnstein’s paper). Along the scale of participation from ‘co-option to collective action’ (Cornwall, 1995) or from ‘manipulation to citizen control’ (Arnstein, 1969), from ‘passive participation to self mobilisation’ (Pretty, 1995) the greater the control by outsiders (e.g. those outside the local community, the professionals) the less local communities tend to be involved at critical decision-making stages.

Alternatively, as the involvement by the local communities increases, the nature of their role changes. If, for example, they play an active role at strategic points in decision making (resource evaluation), or at an executive level, the nature of their role changes from being ‘subjects’ to ‘directors’ of the process. Different processes may benefit from different methods. The point of the typology is not to decide which level of the scale is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ but rather to provide an analytical frame to enable distinction between processes. It is often implicitly assumed that the more people participate the better the outcome for the community (Munro-Clark, 1990). In fact in the political game, being involved has its caveats too and, as Painter (1990, p. 25) points out, ‘the other face of participation as an encounter between outside groups and authority structures is the ‘co-option’ the ‘buying off’ of opposition through taking spokes-people on board’.

The Canadian Model Forest program offers an interesting example of a partnership between various interests to investigate and develop more sustainable forest management practices. Yet despite a strong emphasis on bringing people together to identify priorities and models of management, the people at the ground-level never get a chance to take part or to influence forest policy

in their respective states. There are no mechanisms within the process for stakeholder groups to influence the integration of their findings into policy and practice, nor has the program been set up for this purpose (Sinclair and Smith, 1998). However, this process has been acclaimed for providing the opportunity for traditional enemies to collaborate and learn from each other.

Therefore if an evaluation of the process was limited to the frame offered by typologies focused on decision-making power, it would dismiss the Model Forest programme as being non-participatory. With cynicism one could even question the motives of the Federal government in promoting a participatory process at state level, when the Federal government itself has no direct power to force change upon state governments. Yet the educational dimension of the experience seems important and beneficial (Poffenberger and Selim, 1998) and in the long term, it may be more important.

2.1.3. Consultation

In all these typologies ‘consultation’ is presented as a process of involvement where people’s opinion is sought, and may influence the perspective but in no way guarantees an input in decision-making. Of course the timing of the consultation will often determine the weight of the outcome. If people are consulted before the preparation of a new project their opinion is more likely to be incorporated than if they are asked to comment on an already identified and designed project.

2.1.4. Empowerment

‘Community empowerment’, ‘the empowerment of the grassroots’ is a common rhetoric in participatory development and indeed in participatory forestry projects. What is meant is less clear. Like

Box 2 Participation as a management tool...

- Participatory processes come with benefits and costs and these have to be evaluated before engaging in the process.
- Different levels of participation will require different techniques and planners should be explicit about their goals before engaging with the wider community.
- All the partners have to be committed, but the agency in charge is responsible to create the appropriate climate.
- Realistic timeframes are required and a proper management of group dynamics is essential.
- The agency has to effectively address the issue of representativity.

‘participation’, the term can be misused or misunderstood. At some level it may mean that power has been devolved or decentralised and that people have a more effective say in the running of their affairs. At a more strategic and individual level though empowerment reflects more a state of personal development, a state of the mind through which people engage in a learning process, increase their self esteem and confidence and are better able to use their own resources (Chambers, 1997). Empowerment frequently also implies an aspect of increased critical awareness. In the context of successful empowerment, the meaning of ‘power’ has shifted from power ‘over’ to power ‘to’, designating an enabling power (Claridge, 1997).

The educative dimension of taking part in the running of the democracy is a very strong attribute of participatory democracy theories (Davis, 1996). Pateman claims that ‘evidence has now been presented to support the argument of the theory of participatory democracy that participation in non-governmental authority structures is necessary to foster and develop the psychological qualities (the political efficacy) required for participation at the national level’ (Pateman, 1970, p. 50). In other words the whole nation would benefit and the running of the state would improve as citizens, learning to be involved in civic duty, would themselves become better citizens. Similarly Putman emphasises that for a vibrant civil society, active community networks supported by a strong ‘social capital’ are needed to protect the democracy (Putman, 1995). The more people are involved, the more they will take part. If communities reach the ‘burn out stage’ it may be due more to a lack of sense of ‘political efficacy’ (Pateman, 1970). This is more likely to happen when participation is construed as a means to an

end rather than as an end itself (Warburton, 1997).

2.1.5. Changing the relationship pattern

The other positive aspect of engaging in a participatory management approach is the improved rapport between the community and the respective government agencies. As different people get involved in a consultation, discussion or negotiation, different parties start to know and understand each other, sometimes even start trusting each other. The improved knowledge certainly improves communication channels which are crucial in participatory processes (Chambers, 1997). At the end of the 6-year-old ‘participatory forest project’ in Sri Lanka, a project which by many definitions would be qualified as anything but participatory, the major positive outcomes commented upon by all parties was the improved relationship between the forestry staff and the wider community as well as the gradual change in attitude amongst some staff (Tacconi et al., 1998). Similar results came out of Victorian research (Hoverman, 1997).

2.2. Participation as a means to an end

2.2.1. The growth of participation

Although not a new concept, there is no doubt that participation as a management approach or methodology (Box 2) has grown considerably in the last decade or so and the growing bulk of literature especially from the development field testifies to this renewed interest. Although Davis thinks that this is due to a mixture of circumstances — ‘increased access to information, a more intrusive media, alienation from traditional structures, protest movements and a new sophistication amongst interest and lobby groups’ (Davis,

1996, p. 2), it could also be due to the realisation that other approaches used in the recent past have failed to deliver. This is very clear in development literature where examples of failed development projects, misused resources and disillusioned communities abound (Rahman, 1993; Chambers, 1997; Warburton, 1997).

It may also be that with a shrinking resource base and increased environmental degradation, competition of views and principles as to how resources should be managed has led to increased conflictual situations between government agencies and the wider community. Conflict resolution and conflict management literature highlights how participation processes based on similar principles play an increasing role in diffusing tensions or entangling crisis (even though conflict may not be resolved) (Solberg and Miina, 1997).

2.2.2. Benefits and costs

Amongst some protagonists there is a tacit perception that participation is a positive and welcome change delivering efficiency and effectiveness (Warburton, 1997, p. 27) with little, if any drawbacks. The appeal of participatory planning or management resides in the assumption that communities' views having been taken into account, the policy or the projects will respond better to real needs, will fit into a social and economic reality and people, feeling a sense of ownership, will be more compliant to bear the costs (Rahman, 1993; Davis, 1996; Chambers, 1997; Warburton, 1997). Yet the costs are not insignificant and the risks can be high. Davis (1996, pp. 14–15) lists these as follows:

- increased time and administrative costs;
- allowing opposition to develop;
- raising exaggerated expectations;
- limited view points expressed through consultation; vocal and organised groups overshadowing viewpoints; problems of representation and legitimacy; and
- wrong or biased information.

From our experience those concerns, though real, are as much the product of mis-implemen-

tion of participation by inexperienced agencies as they are manifestations of the limitations of participation itself. Unfortunately the monitoring and evaluation of participatory processes and programs have been neglected and we have at hand very little information to assess the real impacts of participation on community development of instances of sustainable natural resource management.

2.2.3. A lot to do with the implementation...

Clearly, like any good idea, the benefits will be lost when there is a mismatch between the theory and the implementation. Before reviewing the 'does and don'ts' of participation, we should consider the diagram proposed by Creighton (1986) (in Priscoli, 1997) where he draws along a vertical line, the relationships between the types of techniques used [(1) public information, (2) public hearings, (3) conferences, (4) task forces/advisory groups, (5) facilitation/interactive workshops, (6) collaborative problem solving, (7) assisted negotiation, (8) conciliation mediation, and (9) joint decision-making] and the levels of participation. He classifies levels of participation in relation to the impact on the decision showing that various techniques will respectively allow an impact 'before' the decision (techniques 5 and 6), 'on' the decision (techniques 6 and 7), or 'to' the decision (techniques 8 and 9) while at the bottom of the scale, public information techniques (1–3) will have no impact as they allow only a 'knowledge about decisions'. Of course in reality the cutting points between the techniques used and the level and nature of participation are not so sharp and a lot will depend on the individuals using the various techniques.

Evidence shows that people from the wider community often come to the participatory process expecting to gain greater control over the process while at the same time government agencies rarely want to relinquish control. On the one hand while people expect an outcome towards the upper half of the vertical line or at least expect to be heard before the decision, most consultation processes use techniques like community meetings to divulge knowledge about the decision rather than to seek opinions or to allow influence.

This may also warn the planner that if she/he wants to engage in processes with outcomes leading towards the upper half of the line, specific resources may be needed to marshal particular skills.

2.2.4. Principles of good practice

As already highlighted it is important to choose the appropriate technique for public consultation. Warburton (1997, pp. 44–47) lists about 150 different techniques and approaches that can be applied depending on what the agency is aiming for. Whichever mode of public consultation is chosen, certain general principles of good practice have to be observed. Most of these principles relate as much to attitudes or behaviour as to specific processes or resources allocated (Messerschmidt, 1995; Davis, 1996; Warburton, 1997).

2.2.4.1. Principle 1. Commitment and clarity. The agency seeking people's involvement has to be very specific at the onset about what it is prepared to achieve to avoid misleading the public and raising false expectations.

- Is it informing people, seeking opinion or proposing to share control?

Clearly government agencies have their own mandate to fulfil and have to operate within their own constraints (Warburton, 1997, p. 6). The agency involved and its staff have to be committed to the process and this may mean the development of institutional incentives, 'develop the corporate culture', as well as providing the staff with adequate resources.

- Does the agency maintain specialised staff to deal with those issues?
- Are the staff who engage in consultation issues accorded the same status as their peers within the company, for example, in career opportunities?
- Will the staff be paid appropriately for extended and unusual hours of work?
- Will the staff undergo special training?

In her comparative study of consultation

processes in the Bob Marshall (BM) wilderness complex (USA) and Fitzgerald River (FR) National Park (WA), Moore identified the need to develop a *shared understanding* between the partners which required the agency to develop a specific environment 'where people were able to talk and listen to each other' (Moore, 1994, p. 122). Participation is about partnership and implies that all the partners take their share of responsibility; whenever an agreement has been reached 'participants should hold themselves accountable for implementing the resulting recommendations' (Davis, 1996, p. 40).

2.2.4.2. Principle 2. Time and group dynamics. One measure of commitment is the amount of time allocated to the process. The issue of time is mentioned by most authors either because there is not enough time or the timing is not appropriate. If the participatory process is perceived as an educative process then of course the learning can only happen over time. The theory on group dynamics identifies four stages through which a group usually passes (Pretty et al., 1995):

- *the forming stage* at the beginning of the collaborative process;
- *the storming stage*, which is the crucial one as it will determine whether or not the group will go on to the next stage; this is the phase where personal values and principles are challenged, roles and responsibilities are taken and objectives defined — if there is too much conflict of values and interests, the group will collapse;
- *the normative stage* when the group has settled down and is ready to focus on the task; and
- *the performing stage* when the group is discussing, designing and completing the task.

In her study, Moore (1994, p. 141) used Swanson's analytical frame (Swanson, 1973) to identify eight stages of working together:

- Stage I: People defined the problems.
- Stage II: People weren't sure what to do.
- Stage III: The BM Task Force/FR Advi-

- sory Committee developed an agreed way of doing things.
- Stage IV: People realised they had to work together.
- Stage V: People got excited about the opportunities.
- Stage VI: People became committed to working together.
- Stage VII: People represented the BM Task Force/FR Advisory Committee.
- Stage VIII: The managing agency organised implementation of the plan.

Several major lessons can be drawn here:

- Given the personalities of the people involved and nature and complexity of the issues those stages will take more or less time, but in any case the process will be a long one.
- Considerable facilitation skills will be needed for either an external professional or the agency staff to bring the group from one stage to another. Often very antagonistic groups come to the process with a lot of baggage and bearing grudges from previous unsatisfactory encounters.
- This analytical frame is built on the assumption that the people in the group itself will decide on the way to proceed (stage III), as opposed to the agency having designed the process beforehand.
- Representativity of the consultative bodies is important.
- Responsibility for the implementation of the plan rests in the hands of the managing agency and is not, as is sometimes believed, transferred to the communities themselves (Sarin, 1998).

2.2.4.3. Principle 3. Representativity. The question of ‘stakeholders’ is always very controversial as it is difficult to know when to stop considering a group that wants to be involved as a genuine or minor stakeholder (Colfer, 1995). It is also related to the concept of ‘community’ which sometimes has a geographical, and sometimes a cultural or an ideological meaning (Brand et al., 1996;

Wolfe-Keddie, 1996). The safest way may be to identify the most obvious potential stakeholders without ruling out any groups. The process of selection has to be open and transparent so that at least people are aware of the process being put in place. The next step is then to be cautious so as to not choose processes which will de facto exclude some groups. The comment ‘anybody interested had a chance to participate’ is all too common though unhelpful. The design of the consultative process itself will exclude some groups. Classic groups to be excluded, for example, from 19.00 h meetings will be women and young parents who cannot afford alternative childcare. Writing submissions requires resources that are not readily available within all segments of society. Indigenous groups are often excluded as the communication process chosen will be alien or even perceived as offensive. People relying on public transport cannot attend meetings outside specific timetables.

Stakeholders come to the consultation, not only with a variety of different interests, but with varying resources in hand to support their involvement. Representatives of industrial or corporate bodies invariably have necessary costs of representation compensated by their employers, as indeed do agency staff. Recompense for out of pocket expenses and where at all possible, for the payment of honoraria as sitting fees to community or interest group representatives is important to ensure that this differential ability to meet the transaction costs of representation is not allowed to bias the consultative outcome.

The other important issue to consider is to ascertain the power relationships between the stakeholders (Kelly and Alper, 1995).

- Some stakeholders have more power: will their voices carry more weight?
- Does the agency in charge, as the main and often the more powerful stakeholder, not only carry more weight but also listen to smaller voices?

One important principle of good practice is that ‘the outcome of consultation should not be pre-determined’ (Davis, 1996, p. 40). It may be valu-

able to ask:

- Have the stakeholder groups been clearly defined? (and by whom?)
- Have all the members of a stakeholder group the same voice and opportunity to express their views?
- Have issues of equity been clearly defined and agreed upon?
- How have the views within stakeholder groups been obtained?

Discovering only at the end of a consultative process that not all significant issues have been canvassed and considered, challenges the credibility of the process and appears to squander agency and community time and money.

2.2.4.4. Principle 4. Transfer of skills. Operating as we are in a positivist framework where the ‘expert’ knows and others often just listen, the value of transferring skills to the community is often overlooked or undervalued.

Although a lot of learning happens ‘organically’ through the involvement of communities in the participatory process itself, many more specialised skills may need to be specifically transferred. If we recognise that knowledge is power then we understand that communities able to assess their resource base, for example, are in a better negotiating position than those who don’t even know the extent of their resource.

A growing number of participatory forestry projects in the wet tropics have especially focussed on developing appropriate tools and techniques of resource inventory for communities to use in their community forest management plans (Carter, 1996). In California in the Trinity Bioregion, efforts are being made to rehabilitate former timber communities after the industry decided it was no longer viable to maintain an activity in the area. A strong focus is made on developing skills within the community using for example GIS and

GPS systems (Danks, 1996; Everett, 1996). In Australia one of the spin-off effects of closer collaborative working relationships between natural resource management agencies and community groups which have been fostered under the Natural Heritage Trust arrangements has been a dramatic increase in the acquisition of technical and strategic planning skills within the community.

At the same time, most natural resource management agencies stand to gain considerable insight, information and knowledge from community members, including indigenous and local knowledge, detailed understanding of on-the-ground social and economic impacts of agency policies and procedures and the synergistic effects of multiple agency activities all impacting on the same audience. This should broaden the agency’s restricted view of issues and represents an important transfer of information from the community to agency staff.

2.3. The measure of success (Box 3)

Unfortunately it is impossible to answer categorically whether participation is successful or not as this judgement depends on the definition of ‘success’ and is very much linked to the purpose of participation in the first place (Box 3).

Moore (1994) identified five orientations against which success could be measured: products, politics, interests, responsibilities, and relationships. In the first two the focus is on getting a concrete result, an action plan which will be politically viable; in the third the focus is still on a product but with a shift towards the importance of the process to get to the product, while in the final two the focus is on the process with the product only incidental.

This categorisation is interesting as in a way it translates the differences between participation as a means to an end (product focus) and participation as an end (process focus). Stakeholders

Box 3 The measure of success

- Develop a shared understanding of success.
- Include at the onset a monitoring and evaluation process with criteria agreed upon by the stakeholders.

Box 4 Key attributes of effective public consultation	
Principles	Attributes
Commitment and clarity	Disclosure of interests Agreed objectives and expectations Transparency of the process
Time and group dynamics	Time, timing Continuity and follow up
Representativity	Representativity Equity
Transfer of skills	Resourcing the process Quality of information

come to the table with a specific agenda: some groups will be focused on the delivery of a product while others may be focused on experiencing a developmental process. This is why, Moore (1994, p. 81) tells us, it is important to develop a ‘shared understanding of success’. Criteria for the evaluation of success need to be negotiated between the stakeholders (Warburton, 1997).

The other reason why it is difficult to measure ‘success’ per se is because of the often intangible nature of ‘success’.

- How does one measure whether a ‘transformative’ process has occurred within a community?
- Is it possible to objectively measure whether relationships have improved?

Unanticipated outcomes may sometimes be as important as planned ones. One gap in methodological knowledge has been the absence of monitoring in most participatory projects in the past and it is only recently that researchers have started to focus on measurable indicators and participatory processes in measuring those (Abbot and Guijt 1998; Guijt, 1998).

From her review of the literature Warburton (1997, p. 48) concluded that, in order to measure success, one needs to consider, ‘*efficiency* (ratio of inputs and outputs), *effectiveness* (measuring outputs against targets set) and *equity* (to ensure actions do not affect some people less favourably than others, within an understanding of direct

and indirect discrimination and the role of positive action)’.

2.4. Conclusion: What does ‘participation’ mean for forestry?

This paper has highlighted that participation can be considered as an end or as a means to an end, as an ethos or as a management tool. The standpoint a manager takes will have implications on the type and the level of public participation which will be built into the process. However, no matter where they stand, managers and policy makers cannot ignore that issues of power, representation, and (social) change have to be either addressed or at least anticipated by the processes put in place.

A useful set of guidelines (Box 4) will help the professionals to design or assess a specific process designed to involve the wider public in the planning process.

2.4.1. Accepting the shift

Implicit to the endorsement of public participation in forest planning is the recognition that forestry as a specific management intervention either has been changing or indeed needs to change. Although separate individuals may have divergent opinions about what forestry is or should be, it seems that on the whole a growing number of people are interested not only in having more control over the decision making process but also would prefer to see a ‘different kind’ of forestry

practised. This in turn does not just mean that the wider community expects to dictate to the forestry profession what they should or should not do but rather that the community recognises that various sections of the society can play complementary roles in forest management. In their latest publication on 'Shaping Forest Management: How Coalitions Manage Forests?', DFID (1999) insists that the three sectors (state forest service, private sector and civil society) all have a role to play in the three different capacities of 'enablers', 'deliverers' and 'users'. To be able to endorse those roles the forestry profession needs to consider changes in its practice and in the education of the new generation of foresters. Most of all the challenges will be to foster the development of genuine collaborative practice to support the emerging conviction that state forests ultimately belong to the 'community' from which in increasingly direct ways the forest agencies derive their mandate.

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