

## Reaching the Real Public in the Public Involvement Process:

### Practical Lessons in Ecosystem Management

#### Introduction

Since 1983, Yellowstone National Park has conducted a series of informal but quite intentional experiments in public involvement methodology, involving fire management, wolf reintroduction, bison management, and other aspects of ecosystem management. Because of the disjointed nature of progress on these several resource fronts, we do not consider these to be in any sense tightly controlled experiments, but they are often suggestive, and sometimes conclusive. In this paper we summarize our experiences and conclusions in several categories, including: 1) Recognizing and accepting the "reachability" of a given public, which is in part a matter of accepting the non-reachability of those portions of the public on the extreme edges; 2) Breaking through the "information barrier" by producing or sponsoring enough credible scientific information to actually affect and heighten public understanding of an issue; 3) Developing communication devices to reach past the special interest filters and commercial media, to get your message directly into the hands of the general public; 4) Keeping sight of the measurable, even profound, contribution a concerned public can make to a planning process; and 5) Persisting in attempts to advance a cause through a variety of other devices, such as "changing the messenger," "empathy exercises," and other ways of reassuring a public that you really do have their interests in mind.

#### Who is Your Public?

An intriguing sidelight to the intermittent but undeniable success of the environmental movement over the past two decades has been a steady increase in the complexity of the relationship between resource managers and the public. As has so often happened in the past century of conservation struggles, Yellowstone National Park has found itself involved, sometimes reluctantly, some-

times grumpily, in a rapidly evolving public-policy process arena.

Public-policy process is dictated to federal agencies by a series of landmark legislative acts, for our purposes the most notable being the National Environmental Policy Act and perhaps the Endangered Species Act, but including many others that in some way compel managers to communicate their plans to the public.

For the purposes of this paper, we will assume that readers have a familiarity with the essential mandates of such legislation, and move directly along to the foggier but far more engaging realities of actually accomplishing something. Our definition of accomplishing something has two parts: 1) doing good for the resource, and 2) doing justice to the public's right to take part in doing good for the resource, both in deciding what is good, and in deciding how that good will be achieved.

In any given issue that generates significant public interest, it is a given that a full spectrum of opinion will exist on the subject. Except in extreme cases, this body of opinion will feature a great many people of lukewarm opinion. These people represent the high middle of the bell curve. They may be mildly opposed to or in favor of what you think you should do, or they may just be mildly curious about it, or they may not care at all. Their indifference, however, should not be reflected in your treatment of them, because several very ironic things are true of them:

1. They are the only group you have much chance of enlisting to your cause as the dialogue continues.
2. They are the group that traditionally you will tend to spend the least time communicating with, because so much of your energy will be absorbed by the more determined personalities on the right and left ascending and descending arms of the bell curve.
3. They may be the most numerous,

but they are the hardest for anybody to communicate with directly because they aren't on the customary mailing lists and, generally, they must be reached through the dimming and distorting filters of the commercial media.

4. They are the people who most need to hear from you, and whose concern you most need to activate.

Notice that our first point here implies (or at least assumes) that the people on the right and left low ends of the bell curve are unreachable, or at least are relatively inflexible in their views. This is, of course, a gross oversimplification, because usually one of those ends is more on your side than the other (this assumes you have a side; if you don't, you ought to quit and perhaps lay bricks for a living). But it brings up our first important point, one that most experienced toilers in the fields of resource debate recognize: There are going to be people out there who are simply unaffected by your needs, your reasoning, or the best interests of your resource, but you cannot ignore those people. In fact, all too often they are pivotal in the process because of their political position or influence. But it is important, especially for newcomers dealing with major resource issues, to recognize that hostile, powerful opponents to your best judgment are like the Biblical poor: they are always with us. The corollary to this important realization is that if you aren't careful, you can waste time

on them that would be infinitely better spent elsewhere.

### **Forcing Facts on the Dialogue**

How do you make a dent in that ill-defined mass of general, diffident public opinion? How do you spend your time best? One of the best ways we've observed is with information. Now we do not refer to the simple, hopeless-sounding, and seemingly endless mission of somehow "educating the public." We recognize that for most of the public, the issues that seem so central to our lives as resource managers tend to rank well below the latest basketball scores (at least we notice that every newspaper has a sports section, and none have a resources section). So when we speak of public education, we refer specifically to concerted, well-aimed blasts of high-density information—knowledge so overwhelming, persuasive, or even just startling, that it has what publishers looking for best-sellers refer to as "breakout potential." This isn't just information: it's news.

Our best example comes from the long saga of Yellowstone wolf restoration. In 1986, in what may have been either a well-intentioned attempt to advance the process, or simply a way to derail the process while it was "studied further," Congress funded a comprehensive examination of questions concerning the restoration of Yellowstone wolves, their potential relationship with Greater Yellowstone ungulates, their economic impact, and various other aspects of wolf restoration. Thanks to a well-

organized program put together by several agencies and researchers from many universities, this was a good investment. In a two-year period starting in 1990, Yellowstone published four impressive volumes of research findings totaling more than 1,400 pages. We smothered the opponents, proponents, and the undecided in information.

But it wasn't the total weight of these volumes that mattered; it is what was done with this information that made the difference. Rather than just issue these papers to a few libraries, agencies, special interests, and managers, they were published as reports to Congress. Congress, by funding the studies, clearly asked for these answers, and so every single member of that body got them. The submission of all this high-powered and controversial science to Congress naturally involved some fanfare (as much as we could generate), and naturally attracted the attention of the press. To our knowledge, this is the only time a national park dealt directly with Congress in this way, and we later paid dearly for our boldness, but the short-term effect was very impressive, and now in retrospect, we believe it was very positive.

In this case, we generally dealt with the public through the commercial media, who reported on the completion of these gigantic volumes. In short, the media looked at these unsummarizable, highly technical reports, each containing a host of different research findings by dozens of scientists, and, rather than try to di-

gest all this information and summarize it in a short newspaper article, essentially just pronounced that "Wolves is Good." All the vast subtleties and equivocations fell aside, and as a result the reports played very well with exactly those people who needed to hear it most.

As it happened, we happily agreed with the media, and we were eventually proven correct. The reports were indeed very high-quality science; many of the papers were later published in leading peer-reviewed journals, and a whole batch of them were published together as an important monograph. But what mattered immediately is that through their short articles in newspapers, which were incredibly brief summaries, the media let the world know that: 1) No, wolves would not eat any of the children in the Greater Yellowstone; 2) Yes, both wolves and their prey species were indeed native to Greater Yellowstone ecosystem; 3) Yes, an appropriate subspecies of wolf could be found for the restoration; 4) Yes, wolves would eat ungulates but would not wipe them out and would leave plenty for hunters; and 5) No, wolves would not bring economic ruin to the region, but would, in fact, boost local economies more than they cost. (By the way, these five yes's and no's are the shortest summary ever made of those 1,400 pages).

This abrupt flood of carefully researched information certainly did not immediately quash all the myths that wolves fed exclusively on toddlers, or were the instruments of the

devil; indeed, our cultural mythology is almost always more powerful than facts. But the reports resulted in a significant shift in such dialogues. Suddenly, the pro-wolf people had the most science, the best science, and, in many cases, the only science, and they put it to use. Suddenly, the middle of the bell curve was exposed to the existence of a carefully considered body of real information, a kind of information that obviously operated on a higher plane than the fourth-generation rumors and inherited hatreds and myths that had so often ruled the public dialogues. It is always hard to measure attitude shifts in the public, but this one occurred almost visibly. We never would have gotten wolves near the park without this information, and without the commercial media to enthusiastically "market" it for us.

The challenge of this tactic—one of burying your opposition in actual facts—is also its biggest drawback: it is awfully expensive. But in the long haul, when you consider all the costs of trying to make progress any other way, it can be argued that it's really quite cheap.

### **Bypassing the Filters**

Sometimes, however, even information doesn't seem to be enough. In fact, most of the time, in our experience, even with the best information, managers may fail just because it isn't dramatic enough, or accessible enough, or even interesting enough for the media to share it with the public to the extent it must be shared. In that case, you must consider bypass-

ing your friends in the media and going directly to the middle of the bell curve with your very own words.

Talking reporters into giving you interviews, where you can serve up sound bites or even slip them their headline, will not be enough. You need to be able to talk directly to your entire constituency, and neither the broadcast media nor the print media can accommodate the kind of detail you must share. At least they cannot do so through the traditional 1,500-word articles or 90-second evening news feature. But leaving these frustrations aside, you can still take advantage of the media's unique communications system.

How? In this case, our example is the policy aftermath of the 1988 Yellowstone area fires. For those of you who don't know, those were the fires that caused the suspension of everyone else's fire management plans. For quite a while following the fires, everybody in the United States running a fire plan kept their heads down, but eventually dozens of managers all over the country surfaced with their mandated new fire plans. We in Yellowstone knew that our new plan was one of the most controversial and resource-threatening debates in the park's history, but we also believed that if only we could tell the public what the new plan actually said and did, the plan would have a chance. That also meant the beneficial effects of fires would also have a chance. Our approach was to write, design, and fund a four-page newsprint insert, complete with

maps, summaries of important elements of the plan, and even a section entitled "Are any of these questions yours?" The last page was a blank tearoff comment sheet. That sheet and a 29-cent stamp made almost all adults in the greater Yellowstone a part of the dialogue. Over the course of a few days, we placed more than 150,000 of these inserts in every newspaper published in the greater Yellowstone region. We used the newspapers to get past the newspapers, and talk directly to the public. This was amazingly and surprisingly cheap. The public response was remarkably favorable, and the new plan was put into effect.

### **Putting the Public to Work**

It is simply amazing the difference that a concerned public can make if given half a chance. Yellowstone has struggled for many years with a fantastically complex bison management situation. One of the last strongholds of wild bison in North America, the park was the site of a great conservation victory early in this century when the last wild and free-ranging animals in the lower 48 states were saved from annihilation and the population was rebuilt. But more recently, that success has turned a little sour. In the past 25 years, bison numbers have been allowed to approach a natural equilibrium with native ranges, and one result has been that more animals have been migrating beyond the boundary.

The main problem is that some are infected with brucellosis, a truly hated disease that has been the focus

of a long and popular eradication campaign by various federal and state agencies. Because of brucellosis, and because bison destroy property just by walking around, bison are largely unwelcome outside the park (elk, on the other hand, who also carry the disease, but who earn huge amounts of money by supporting a great hunting industry, are very welcome indeed).

One of the very few moments of promising progress in this contentious issue occurred a few years ago when a singularly diverse group of landowners, conservationists, cattlemen, and other special-interest representatives—all close neighbors to Yellowstone—actually got together on their own and presented the management agencies with a tolerably middle-of-the-road bison management proposal. Their proposal has not yet become policy (and may never), but it was a nearly brilliant political coup: the people on this committee were known rivals, even enemies, in the public dialogues. Thus far their good work has been squelched by the big, organized special interests. It is something of a small tragedy that their teamwork was not more promptly rewarded, but eventually much of what they suggested may work its way into the final management plan as the “reasonable alternative.”

What really needs to happen, however, is for those of us in charge to find ways to activate this sort of effort rather than to wait and hope that it will happen by spontaneous com-

bustion.

The infamous public hearing where you, your plan, and your agency are cooked like so many kabobs may be familiar to most of us, but such events are remarkably inefficient. Like our own evolution in public involvement, the special interests (on either the right or left arm of the Bell curve) have learned to make the public hearing a type of high theatre where you and I are the main course at the barbeque. Clearly we need to develop more and better ways of involving the public in non-confrontational forums. We have experimented with several; open houses, where individual people can sit down and talk calmly with individual representatives of the agencies, were effective at reducing front-page and “film at eleven” posturing in the wolf business, and we have participated in several charettes, which appear promising, but we have a long way to go.

As a side note, in the wolf restoration public involvement, although we used non-confrontational open houses, we scheduled several highly visible and very newsworthy formal public hearings. We suspected that the “black arm band” and “flower children” would never be satisfied without high theatre, so we organized sessions explicitly for them. However, we disappointed many of these people by not offering up any sacrificial lambs; instead they were staged as 1) listening sessions only, 2) they were overseen and run by female hearing officers who were perceived as non-partisan and not stakeholders

in the wolf issue, and 3) we hired the local police departments to maintain order.

### Keeping the Heat Down

Our leader and mentor in these processes in the past decade was Bob Barbee, then superintendent of Yellowstone and now regional director in Alaska. A point that Barbee drilled home at every learning opportunity was that “perception is reality.” This tired cliché was repeatedly given new life and meaning as we watched him wend his way through the public policy minefields.

For example, very few wolf biologists had any doubt that restored wolves in Yellowstone would fit in just fine, would not kill off the ungulates and the subadult humans, and would not bring Western civilization to an end. But a large part of the regional public believed these very things, and so, though it would have been easy to disregard ignorant public opinion because it was erroneous, we went through the long and costly exercise of formally addressing these and many other questions. In the process we learned much ourselves, and greatly improved our ability to establish a credible wolf management proposal. Again and again, it has proven better to start from what the public knows rather than from what we (either rightly, wrongly, or arrogantly) are sure we know. Again and again, addressing the public’s concerns head-on has kept the heat a little lower.

The public as an audience is a strange combination of naïveté and

sophistication. Most of what they know about a resource issue is learned through the media, and the story tends to develop stereotypes. The major characters tend to become cardboard cutouts of themselves at the hands of the sound-bite broadcasters. After the fires of 1988, for example, a widespread but inaccurate perception had developed that the leadership in Yellowstone National Park were short on sympathy for the people of the region; that the old fire policy was imposed without enough understanding of what the regional economic and social needs were. In order to defuse this inaccurate perception, we opened the newspaper insert with a short introduction by the National Park Service’s regional director. We knew that if these very same words were attributed to the park superintendent, it would have little effect; they needed to come from someone perceived as “outside” of the local NPS establishment.

Of course they were written by us—the local establishment—no matter who they were attributed to.

This little opening message expressed heartfelt and firm concern for the park’s neighbors. It emphasized the need to make sure that the park was a good neighbor in managing its fire plan, just as it was a good steward and honored its mandate to preserve ecological processes. It was the same position the park’s own people had held all along, but because it came from a higher office (we of course got the regional director’s office’s advice and approval to put her name on it), it

was heard more clearly. Editorials appeared in major regional papers, rejoicing that at last someone had taken those Yellowstone people in hand and was making them behave. At least a little of the distrust and resentment was cooled. The park's position did not change; all that changed was the messenger who presented it.

### Conclusion

Mark Twain once said that he had no objection to the truth; that if it works for you, you should by all means use it. That kind of cynicism may be good advice for some elected political figures; some seem to operate under that dictum, anyway. But Twain's quip is certainly not good advice for resource managers. In every case we have dealt with, in all of these major issues with national attention and enormous implications for the future management of the park, we have found that the more facts we could gather and distribute, the better off the resource will be in the long run.

So, since the early 1980s, we Yellowstoneers have tried a few new tactics in the public dialogue arena and we've learned a few good lessons. We can summarize our experiences and conclusions in several areas, including: 1) Recognizing and accepting the "reachability" of a given public, which is in part a matter of accepting the non-reachability of those portions of the public on the left and right

edges; 2) Breaking through the "information barrier" by producing or sponsoring enough credible scientific information to actually affect and heighten public understanding of an issue; 3) Developing communication devices to reach past the special-interest distorters and filtering commercial media, to get your message directly in the hands of the general public; 4) Keeping sight of the measurable, even profound, contribution a concerned public can make to a planning process; and 5) Persisting in attempts to advance a cause through a variety of other devices, such as "changing the messenger," "empathy excercises," and other ways of reassuring a public that you really do have their interests in mind.

We have dwelled on several cases that seemed to work out for us in Yellowstone and we could have added a few more success stories as well. But we don't want to leave the impression that we somehow, very smugly and arrogantly, have this stuff all figured out. We don't, and even if we did, things evolve and what might be good medicine today won't necessarily work tomorrow. We didn't list our failures, and we have had plenty of those too. What we can say about those failures, however, is that each lacked one or more of the five points listed in the foregoing discussion, and that fact should be instructive to all of us.

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