

# VOICES FROM THE FIELD: CONFESSIONS OF A FOREST SERVICE COLLABORATOR IN NORTHERN NEW MEXICO

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*"The bureaucracy is expanding to meet the needs of an expanding bureaucracy."  
Unknown*

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In early May of 2004, I was sitting in a coffee shop just north of the plaza in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was my first day conducting research on forest conflicts in New Mexico, a topic that eventually would become my dissertation. I was there to interview one of the most prominent environmental activists in New Mexico. I was nervous because during the 1980s and 1990s, he almost single-handedly shut down the forest-products industry in New Mexico. In return for his efforts, his life was threatened, his likeness burned in effigy, his office targeted by pipe bombs. By the end of the 1990s, he had even become a pariah in some environmental circles. Forest conflicts in New Mexico are entwined with the long history of conquest and injustice to the Native American and Hispanic populations in the region. The expropriation of Spanish and Mexican land claims following the Mexican-American war, and the entrenched poverty of Hispanic communities in the region since that expropriation, remain a volatile political issue in the state. Throughout the interview, however, I was amazed to hear him continue to dismiss this history. "What's done is done," he said. "It's all of our land now," he argued. The Hispanic traditions are quaint but "they're a thing of the past."

It was a fascinating interview for me because earlier that day I had interviewed a land grant activist who had spent his entire adult life fighting against the Forest Service—the agency that came to control the lost land grants. In addition, he fought against commercial timber operators who profited from their relationship to the Forest Service; during the 1990s, he fought



against the same environmentalist I interviewed at that coffee shop. They differed, of course, these two men, in the way they argued for one kind of environmental ethic over another. They criticized each other's motives and interests. They disagreed on just about everything. But what was most remarkable was how similar they described the Forest Service—so similar it seemed as if they compared notes before talking to me. They blamed the Forest Service for serving the interests of corporations; for ignoring the interests of local communities and ecologies; for lacking commonsense in the administration of the forest. The environmentalist called the USFS "inscrutable," and the land grant activist called it "impenetrable." Both men described an agency that had slowly ground them down, destroyed the alliances they had constructed and disrupted the organizations they led. It was a memorable day.

Seven months later, when I arrived in the small village of El Rito, New Mexico in December of 2004 to begin long-term research, a group of livestock permittees approached me and suggested that I could help them in dealing with the Forest Service. At the 2005 CFRF workshop in California, Isaac Suazo, my community partner, and I described our project. We proposed a study in which livestock permittees, two New Mexico state university agricultural extension agents, and myself would engage the Forest Service in a project to compare grazing impacts on three study plots on two livestock allotments in the El Rito District of the Carson National Forest. The Forest Service has done little ecological research on the impacts of grazing on national forests in the region, yet year after year

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they have blamed small-scale livestock permittees for overgrazing. In May of 2005, I contacted the District Ranger to set up meetings to discuss the project and involve range conservation staff. I had mentioned the planning previously to her. She appeared interested, particularly because the District was, for the first time, preparing Environmental Impact Statements for each allotment. The District Ranger was concerned about her ability to devote staff time to write the EIS and was pessimistic about defending an EIS in court. The Forest Guardians, a Santa Fe-based environmental organization, had already indicated, both to me and to the El Rito District, that they would litigate every EIS on the Carson. It appeared to Isaac and myself that perhaps we had successfully stumbled into a participatory project with what most considered a most un-participatory agency.

We were wrong. In early 2006, the District decided not to allow staff to participate in the study. They offered only to include the study findings in the “public comment” section. Following the decision, the permittees elected to delay the study (they agreed that Forest Service participation was critical and thought perhaps we could change their minds). The delay added to the already vexing political and practical problems of doing participatory research with bureaucratic land management agencies. But the delay was just the first of many problems. The next unanticipated problem was related to my temporary status. In March of 2006, I accepted a position at the University of Maine at Farmington. The job, and relocation that it required, delayed the project even further. I’m not sure why that was an unanticipated problem. It seems pretty obvious to me now that I had to leave sometime. At the 2006 CFRF workshop in Montana, I discussed the personal dimensions of doing participatory research and the difficult ethical questions that arose for me when I became the source of additional delay. The point I made at the time was that I had spent so much time developing relationships and making commitments that I never even considered how I would go about leaving the area. Leaving felt

like a violation of trust. For many people in Vallecitos, it was a violation of trust. I suppose, for convenience sake, I ignored the concern because I thought I’d just find a job in the area (that’s not an easy task in the American Southwest, with few Universities and even fewer geography departments). Nonetheless, I failed to incorporate those concerns into my research.

I was still committed to the project, however, and spent time this academic year staying in contact with Isaac, the Forest Service and potential collaborators. The plan was to complete the fieldwork on the project this July and August. In May of this year, I called Isaac to discuss research plans. That phone conversation transported me back to the coffee shop interview of three years earlier. Isaac told me of his increasing frustration. He and his wife, Annabelle, were tired of fighting the Forest Service. They felt overwhelmed leading the grazing association. The battles with the Forest Service had ground them down and destroyed the alliances they had slowly built with other allotments. Over the winter, they decided to sell all of their livestock permits to another permittee in the area (the word “permittee” is one of those brilliant bureaucratic inventions: Annabelle’s family traces their heritage to the original settlers in the valley. They grazed animals on the ranges in the area long before the Forest Service “permitted” them to do so). They were done raising livestock and, therefore, were done with the project.

For the past few weeks, as I prepare to return to New Mexico, I’ve been thinking about the trajectory of this project and the politics of participatory research in New Mexico. The literature on participatory research often highlights the successes, the empowerment, and the transformations within the context of the thorny politics and stiff constraints of doing participatory research. I’ve been thinking about three issues and would like to discuss them within a different kind of context: the context of a failed participatory project (or, at best a stalled project). There are three points

I'd like to briefly discuss. The first relates to dealing with land management agencies that manage the lands of conquered people (repeatedly the Forest Service has been described to me as an occupying force in New Mexico. One of the characteristics of an occupying force is its ability to outlast opposition). The second issue relates to negotiating inclusion and collaboration among people who may be very well acquainted with fighting bureaucracies that tend to conquer rather than collaborate. The third issue relates to the ethics of conducting research in a place like New Mexico.



The first point, the problem of negotiating and legitimizing inclusion with the Forest Service can be illustrated by an exchange at a public meeting in Vallecitos, New Mexico in August of 2005. The Forest Service hosted a public meeting to discuss the future of timber production in Vallecitos. In 1948 the Carson established a special timber unit in the area as a means to offset the economic hardships of grazing reductions. Most of the 60 or so people at the meeting were livestock permittees concerned that any change in timber policy on the Unit would also mean a change in grazing policy, a frequent pattern on the District. At the meeting, the District Ranger began by saying that, “The decisions that are made [here] are not done locally,” She continued by telling the attendees “it’s a hard sell for the Forest Service. There are some strong feelings, people who’ve been involved... from the Forest Service are very skeptical we can overcome all these hurdles.” When a local resident wondered what exactly those hurdles were and why the Forest Service would want to get rid of the unit, the Ranger replied that timber production had become “a focus point for environmental groups” and years of costly litigation had convinced many in the Forest Service that a local production economy could never serve its intended purpose.

The exchange made clear a critical point in participatory research design. Specifically, collaboration at the local level in El Rito required the participation of Forest Service staff facing the

dilemma of balancing multiple agendas and reconciling a series of policy imperatives—all of which contradicted the goals of a participatory research agenda. In other words, beyond questions of power, the question of bureaucratic position is critically important and ultimately beyond the ability of local resource users in New Mexico to account for. The questions that we have struggled with in our efforts to implement a participatory ecological project relate to the politics of inclusion, the divide between scientist and citizen, and

defining acceptable forms of scientific knowledge. I’m concerned with participation at the local level and the limits to institutional acceptance of participatory research that constrain non-institutional forms of participatory research. This is a key methodological distinction because unlike participatory research methods or development projects initiated by institutions such as NGOs or the United States Forest Service, a different set of problems, or suspicions, can arise when resource users themselves suggest the methods of analysis that will codify the contours of resource distribution. In the case of the Forest Service, a lack of data on grassland conditions was preferable to knowledge of grassland conditions produced in collaboration with livestock permittees. For the Forest Service, knowledge is supposed to be imposed on resource users, not acquired in collaboration. To do it otherwise places in stark relief the power relations the Forest Service seeks to obscure behind slogans like “caring for the land and people.”

The second issues related to dealing with the “occupying force.” The Carson National Forest currently administers a grant program in which local groups can propose collaborative community-based economic and ecological projects. Throughout our efforts a number of District staff suggested our project should be proposed to this program. Our group decided that to propose the study to this program would require sacrificing any chance at real collaboration. It became clear to many in our group that the proposed participatory study produced anxieties for the Forest Service at multiple scales. At the local level, the study would require that range conservation staff give up the power to declare ranges

overgrazed based on visual inspection. At the Forest-wide level, the proposal would mean that policy-making could not occur in its current top-down form, but rather would emerge from a collaborative process based on environmental science. In other words, many of the permittees considered the collaborative program a disciplinary, not participatory, mechanism.

The last methodological concern relates to the ethics of participatory ecological research. In our project, the participatory research design for the collection of quantitative data provided an effective alternative to the ‘count whatever you can see’ tendencies in the history of bureaucratic range monitoring on the El Rito District. Despite the obvious improvements our methods provided as compared to the methods historically and currently utilized by range conservation staff—we were unable to persuade them to adopt a research design that included permittees in the collection and analysis of data. The District Ranger argued that any results would be tainted and indefensible in an appeal or court case regarding the Environmental Impact Statement (under any scenario, she pointed out, other than one in which the study resulted in policies that negatively affected the permittees). I don’t have the space here to consider this claim—dissertations could be written. She was right, however, to suggest that this would become an issue if our study became a rationale for grazing policies on the District. This raises another concern—specifically regarding the legal context of participatory methods in environmental science. Within the institutional structure of grazing management on the Carson National Forest, authority is diffused along a clearly established hierarchy. Challenges or defenses to that authority exist only in as much as they don’t challenge the structure of policy-making. This cuts both ways. Effective environmental challenges to Forest Service policies and practices on the El Rito District have long started with the assumption that Forest Service scientific staff are the only legitimate authority relative to ecological function on the District. For example, a recent lawsuit by the Forest Guardians succeeded, after almost 15-years of litigation, to shut down an extremely controversial timber sale. The Forest Guardians used Forest Service studies of Hebert Squirrel habitat and ecology as the foundation for a challenge to current timber sale patterns. This lawsuit relied on Forest Service science, and as such further legitimized the location of scientific expertise.

Our study, however, could have relocated scientific authority.

The politics of participatory research in New Mexico require navigating a minefield of historical, racial and bureaucratic dimensions. Each decision cascades down through these various dimensions. When I hung up the phone with Isaac I wasn’t really surprised. I was just thinking about the Forest Service and the only thing I could summon were words like “inscrutable,” and “impenetrable.”