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CFRF FINAL REPORT
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I. INTRODUCTION

This report is intended as an overview of the activities I conducted under the Ford Foundation Community Forestry fellowship during the 1997-98 academic year. I am currently occupied with data analysis and transcription of tape-recorded interviews, so it should be noted that any analysis presented in this report is very preliminary.

The site where I conducted my research was Montezuma County, Colorado, located in the southwest corner of the state. I benefitted greatly from the insights and assistance provided to me by my “community partners”--Mike Preston of the Montezuma County-Federal Lands Program and the Ft. Lewis College Office of Community Services; Sam Burns, director of the Office of Community Services, and Carla Garrison of the Montezuma County-Federal Lands Program. These community partners involved me in a variety of public meetings relevant to public and private land management issues, including the working groups organized to provide input to the Forest Service for the amendment and possible revision of the San Juan National Forest Plan, the Dolores Valley Watershed Forum, and public meetings held in connection with the drafting and adoption of the Montezuma County Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

The focus of my research as initially described in the CFRF Proposal submitted in February of 1997 focused on the following questions: 1) What are the different social values relating to resource management and the use of the Forest? Are there distinct cultural identities, and if so, what are they?; 2) Who is participating in the Forest Plan revision process and why? What are their motivations and social values? Is any one vision or set of values dominating the process?; 3) Have collaborative decision-making processes changed horizontal and vertical relationships significantly? ; and 4) Was strong social capital (or community capacity) responsible for the pursuit of a dialogue and group decision-making processes? Has the experience of bringing diverse interests together in a dialogue helped to increase local social capital? .

As a result of the year I spent living and talking with local residents and reading more broadly, these questions have evolved to some degree. The “Preliminary Findings and Analysis” section will address how the research questions have changed over the past year, as well as lay out new directions of inquiry.

II. ACTIVITIES

The research activities I conducted as a CFRF fellow consisted primarily of the following: observation and note-taking at public meetings; semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews; a survey of participants in the Forest Plan study groups; informal community observation, and archival work including collection and analysis of newspaper accounts and local histories.

The timing of my residence in Dolores, Colorado coincided nicely with the working group phase of the San Juan National Forest (SJNF) Plan Revision. The Fall of 1997 was spent attending various citizen working group meetings related to the Forest Plan, as well as other public meetings including the Dolores Town Board, County Commission, and meetings relevant to forest and land use planning. Notes were taken at these events with an effort to capture dialogue as accurately as possible. The meetings provided a good overview of participants’ priorities and values relating to forest planning, the public lands, and local politics. Additionally, attendance at public events allowed me to become acquainted with some of the key players who were later contacted for one-on-one interviews.

During the Fall of 1997 I also began reading through newspaper archives kept at the Montezuma County-Federal Lands program offices in Cortez, Colorado. This office has maintained newspaper files over the previous four or five years relating to county land use planning and public lands issues, which provided a good (recent) historical context for various local controversies and public participation efforts. I have maintained a large personal file consisting of copies of relevant newspaper articles, both from the archives and from local newspaper accounts during my residence in Montezuma County, and these will provide an important part of the data for my analysis.

In addition I conducted fifty-one semi-structured interviews with a variety of local residents during the course of my field study. Many of these interviews were conducted jointly with a graduate student from the University of Iowa who was looking at similar issues of collaborative public land use planning in the area. The interviews were “semi-structured” to the extent that questions were prepared in advance, but because these interviews were tape-recorded, often the interviews took on the quality of a conversation, allowing for pursuit of other areas of inquiry in response to information provided by the participant.

Tape-recording of interviews holds many advantages, but certainly some disadvantages as well. The primary advantages are that it allows for the capture of everything that is said, and the transcription process itself is bringing out issues and links that might have been missed the first time. Most importantly I found that tape-recording allowed me to listen more carefully to what was being said at the time, which made it easier to ask follow-up questions. The obvious shortcoming of this approach is the considerable time required to transcribe the interviews. There is also the very real possibility that taping interviews might limit the frankness of the responses. However in the majority of cases I found people to be very enthusiastic about sharing their viewpoints, and only one person objected to being taped. In a few cases participants asked for the tape recorder to be turned off momentarily, particularly when they wished to speak about an individual by name, or wished to say something “off the record”. Still, most of the interviewees were seemingly very candid about their views, often making statements like “I’ll tell anybody what I have to say”.

My goal in selecting persons to be interviewed was to hear from as many different perspectives as I could with respect to the categories of gender, ethnicity, duration of residence, occupation, age, participation/non-participation in organized land use planning efforts, and socio-economic status.

In addition to the interviews, I designed a survey in cooperation and with assistance from Randy Wilson, Sam Burns, Mike Preston, and Shannon Manfredi of the Ft. Lewis Office of Community Services, and two Forest Service Planners, Jim Powers and Thurman Wilson. The survey was mailed to everyone who attended at least three meetings during the SJNF working and

study group process. A total of 125 surveys were mailed out, in addition to 33 which were handed out to participants at the “wrap-up” meeting for the working groups. A total of 51 surveys were completed and returned.

The purpose of the survey was to gather information on participants’ evaluation of the working group process, to assess their values relating to the national forest, their reasons for participating in the forest planning process, and to determine the demographic representation of the participants with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, income, duration of residence, land ownership and occupation.

Finally, other research activities included informal observation of day-to-day community life in Dolores, Cortez and surrounding areas (primarily consisting of “hanging out” in public meeting places such as restaurants, coffee shops, bars, etc.), and reading and taking notes from historical accounts written about the area.

III. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section will address the four research questions outlined above, and explain how the focus for each has changed to some degree after spending a year conducting field research. The end of this section will outline new areas of inquiry beyond these initial questions.

Question 1: “What are the different social values relating to resource management and the use of the forest? Are there distinct cultural identities, and if so, what are they?”

This continues to be a fundamentally important question, but the literature I will be drawing on to answer the question has expanded to include writings on the “social construction of nature”, that is, how people view nature based on their particular historical-cultural positions and values (Greider and Garkovich, 1994; Cronon et. al, 1996; Soule and Lease, eds., 1995; Urry, 1997; Evernden, 1992; Berger and Luckman, 1966). Analysis of interviews and meeting notes will focus on the different values and perspectives people have about “nature”, with a focus on better understanding how much “common ground” is really possible given potentially radically different perspectives and goals.

In addition to the use of social construction as a tool for understanding differing perspectives on nature and the environment, the concept will also be used to understand how different conceptions of local identity, or “place myths” are in competition with one another in southwestern Colorado (Urry, 1997; Shields, 1991). Urry has referred to this as the “cultural construction of space” and the competition over these constructions is becoming evident given the increasing importance of tourism and quality of life relocation as forces for cultural and economic change in the region. As Urry asks, “How are identities constructed amidst the processes of globalisation and fragmentation, especially when part of the image of place is increasingly produced for actual or potential visitors?” (p. 165) An analysis of the history of southwestern Colorado will provide an important component in understanding how different groups construct these “place myths”, and how historical claims of access to and use of natural resources play into these visions of place.

With respect to the question of common goals being identified through the process of dialogue, it seems evident that some agreement is occurring on a few resource management activities, perhaps in spite of different objectives and values. This has been particularly evident with regard to issues of restoration forestry in the Ponderosa Pine cover-type, where representatives from the Forest Service and Montezuma County government as well as timber mill operators, loggers and local environmentalists have identified a common need for thinning of overstocked stands, perhaps in spite of different underlying motivations for supporting this action. The same could also be said about an emerging consensus for farmland preservation, (often expressed as the “Cows not Condos” slogan in southwestern Colorado) which has coalesced support across a spectrum of different values.

Question 2: “Who is participating and why? What are their motivations and social values? Is any one vision/set of values dominating the process?”

These questions remain very relevant, but I am expanding them to look at participation in terms of different strategies people are using to ensure that their particular vision for the resource

base, (or their continued access to it as the case may be), is being addressed. Some of the strategies I see people using include the following:

1) Working with the System: This would describe the strategy of working with local initiatives such as the SJNF study groups or the Dolores Watershed Forum. Participation may be motivated by a desire to localize solutions or simply to reach a greater understanding of opponents' values.

2) Lashing Out: This strategy is being taken by groups such as the Montezuma County Landowners Association, which was formed in opposition to the drafting of a County Comprehensive Land Use Plan. This group has a great distrust of any influence they see as coming from the "outside", and are especially distrustful of federal government actions relating to land use or resource access. It is primarily a social network of people possessing strong beliefs in the sanctity of private property rights, and it brings influence to bear through public meetings, editorial and letter-writing campaigns to local newspapers, and citizen petitions.

3) Constructive Engagement: Such a strategy would describe the approach being used by some local environmental groups, particularly the San Juan Citizens Alliance. This group is drafting its own "Citizen Management Alternative" for the San Juan National Forest, while at the same time participating in the Forest Service-initiated SJNF Forest Plan Study Groups.

Question 3: "Have collaborative decision-making processes changed horizontal relationships significantly? Have they changed vertical relationships significantly?"

This also remains a very relevant question to the final analysis. However, the focus of the question will be on inter-agency and institutional relationships, rather than on personal relationships. The reason for this broader level focus is twofold: 1) it is at the institutional level where the strongest evidence for changing relationships has occurred; and 2) the difficulty of identifying a reliable aggregate measure for changes in interpersonal relations within the broader community.

There appears to be a great deal of preliminary evidence in the form of increased dialogue and program development to support the idea that both horizontal and vertical ties between agencies, governments and other public institutions have increased. On the horizontal level, this is particularly evident in initiatives undertaken between the Forest Service, BLM and the Colorado State Department of Wildlife (DOW). On the vertical level, relationships between various government agencies and institutions have increased, such as between the Montezuma County government, the Colorado State Office of Economic Development, and federal agencies.

Question 4: “Was strong social capital responsible for the pursuit of dialogue and group decision-making? Has the experience of bringing diverse interests together in a dialogue helped to increase local social capital?”

There will be a continued focus on making an assessment of the level of social capital prior to collaboration, and in looking at how collaborative efforts and community dialogue have created new networks, or more accurately “weak ties” among sectors of the community that may not have interacted without a formal process (Granovetter, 1973). However, the principal tool for making some assessment about increased “weak ties” will be the responses from the survey which was administered only to persons who participated in the SJNF Forest Plan Revision study groups. In addition, a question about increased outside interaction and changed relations was posed during a number of the semi-structured interviews. The point to be made here is that there will be no effort to come up with an aggregate measure of community-wide social capital before and after the various dialogues and community study groups were started. It is my sense that the difficulty in isolating causality as well as in devising a reliable tool that could capture the breadth of relations within the community would make such a measure virtually meaningless.

In addition, literature on social capital will not provide the only theoretical context for addressing this question of community capacity and the effectiveness of dialogue as a community-building force. Other literatures will also be used, including Kenneth Wilkinson’s writing on interaction as a force for creating a “community of mutual identity” (Wilkinson, 1991) It is felt that the focus on different social and cultural constructions for nature and the locality will

also play a powerful explanatory role in understanding the extent to which such mutual identity is in fact being created.

The idea of “social capital” as a potentially divisive force will also be addressed. To the extent that there are divisions within the community based on different cultural values and affinities, it could be argued that pockets of social capital, or “strong ties” within particular groups such as the Montezuma County Landowners’ Association are increasing and having a negative impact on overall community cohesion. On the other hand, the creation of public forums for dialogue may be providing a healthy means of “venting the spleen”, allowing for greater acceptance of controversy. This aspect of social capital has been referred to as increased “symbolic diversity” (Flora and Flora, 1993).

In summary, the primary change in the analysis from the original questions outlined in the proposal are the focus on different values and objectives for land and forest management as viewed in the context of literature on “social constructions of nature”, and an emphasis on strategies used by different groups to realize their objectives for the forest and for land use, in particular the use of political organizing, cultural identity and history.

IV. NEXT STEPS

The obvious “next step” in this research process will be to complete the writing of the dissertation. It is planned that the dissertation will be completed by August of 1999. The next step will be to write summary articles of the dissertation for submission to journals. Some likely journals to target would be “Society and Natural Resources” and “Rural Sociology”. In addition I plan to write a report and summary of my findings for distribution to interested persons in the towns of Dolores and Cortez. Some likely places to send the report would be to the Montezuma County Courthouse (the Federal Lands Program), the Dolores and Cortez libraries, the Town Halls, and the local newspapers.

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