
Evaluating Community-Based Collaboration on Federal Lands and Resources

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The growing interest in community-based collaboration (CBC) has provoked both enthusiasm and skepticism. This article sheds some light on the claims of both proponents and skeptics by presenting data on nearly 50 cases of CBC on federal lands and resources in the Rocky Mountain West. The findings indicate that participants are generally satisfied with the process and outcomes of CBC; CBC tends to be open and inclusive of all interests, viewpoints, and stakeholders; CBC fosters informed decision making; CBC is efficient in terms of time and money; CBC produces valuable outcomes; CBC is often better than its alternatives; and CBC is slowly realigning the roles of citizens and public officials. This article also offers some insights on evaluating collaboration.

As we enter the 21st century, the idea of collaboration is rapidly becoming one of the dominant ideas in natural resources policy and politics (Kemmis 2001; Bricket al. 2001; Keiter 2003; McKinney and Harmon 2004). This trend has provoked both enthusiasm and skepticism.

The proponents of collaboration claim, in part, that it allows participation by all interested and affected parties; takes less time and costs less than more conventional public participation and public dispute resolution processes; results in more informed, creative, and adaptive solutions; builds individual and social capacity to prevent and resolve public disputes in the future; and improves environmental outcomes (Susskind et al. 1999). The skeptics claim, among other things, that collaboration delegitimizes conflict; co-opts environmental advocates; excludes or disempowers national, urban, and other interest groups; and leads to compromise and lowest common denominator solutions (Kenney 2000).

The objective of this article is to shed light on some of these claims by presenting evidence on the merits of CBC on federal lands and resources in the Rocky Mountain West. It also presents a low-cost, yet comprehensive and robust, method to evaluate the relative success or progress of any collaborative process and its outcomes.

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