

Collaboration for Community and Forest Well-Being in the Upper Swan Valley, Montana

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When anxieties over diminishing employment and increasing degradation of the local forest environment became so intense that neighbors screaming at neighbors was no longer the exception but the rule in western Montana's Swan Valley, some people decided it was high time to do something about it. Armed with a love of place and the knowledge that neighborly relationships can still be a key to survival in the rural West, they formed the Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee.

The Swan Valley lies between the Mission Mountains and the Swan Range. Grizzly bears, mountain lion, elk, moose, deer, coyote, and cold-water fish describe something of the ruggedness of the terrain and the reasons why a few hundred permanent and seasonal residents fight to stay there. There is wildness and a kind of territoriality that goes beyond ownership and law and seeps into the people who inhabit a place like this until they feel as rooted to it as the trees.

Corporate and administrative boundaries that overlie the physical landscape make land management and decision making not only complex but also potentially explosive between neighbors, absentee owners, and others whose decisions affect the land. The Mission Mountain and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Areas, the Flathead National Forest, the Plum Creek Timber Company, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation dominate land management decision making in the area and in the lives of the people who live there. In the late 1980s, when harvests declined regionwide, neighbors took sides in a simplistic jobs-versus-environment debate. Loggers and others whose livelihood was related to timber wanted the allowable annual cut increased. Environmentalists, however, appealed timber sales and demanded greater environmental protections. Others felt that the clear-cuts visible from the road and the fisheries degraded by logging and road building threatened an emerging tourism industry that they wanted to see grow. And others, as a matter of principle, simply did not accept that government has any right to tell communities what to do.

In 1990, the Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee called for a moratorium on the hostility and anxiety that permeated the valley and appealed to neighbors to be neighbors, saying they all needed to work together if they all wanted to live there. The committee provided a public forum for valley residents to voice their opinions. As a result of ongoing community meetings, the animosity began to give way to civil dialogue. These exchanges led to discussions that in turn led to questions and field trips. Resident volunteers spent hours studying fire ecology, logging, and U.S. Forest Service regulations, and for the first time, working relationships developed between valley residents and nonlocal corporate and federal land managers.

As residents gained some hope that they might influence the corporate and land management agencies affecting their lives, they began to treat one another in a more neighborly fashion, and the death threat to an environmentalist that came at the apex of community anxiety seemed an aberration born more of frustration than of chronic problems deeply rooted in the community. Whether or not that is true will depend on how dialogue and land management continue to develop.

To what extent community, corporate, and environmental needs can be successfully integrated into a sustainable management plan is a question as much about power, flexibility, and responsiveness to local concerns as about planning. In this effort, land management agencies will be required to open management processes, and industries will need to be more responsive to local needs.

Travelers driving Route 83 through western Montana's Swan Valley might be out of town before they realize they have reached Condon. All that marks the town's physical presence is a log community hall, a small diner, and a combination market and gas station. Yet Condon is the meeting place for the residents of the Swan Valley. For the past twelve years, loggers, environmentalists, outfitters, retirees, and businesspeople have gathered in Condon to talk about the related health of their community and environment in this relatively remote, forested valley. The town has also become a center of attention for people outside the area in search of models of communities with "social capital"—the social ties and civic dialogue that enable conflicts that accompany local community development and natural resource management to be collectively resolved.

One reason for Condon's "place on the map" are the activities of a small group of Swan Valley residents calling themselves the Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee. Formed in 1990, the ad hoc committee provides a public forum for valley residents and other interest groups seeking practical and collective solutions to the valley's increasingly contentious economic and environmental problems. The story of the Swan Valley Citizens Ad Hoc Committee has only recently been documented (Cestero 1997). This study explores a part of that story: the history of the ad hoc committee's formation, its accomplishments to date, and some of the challenges it currently faces. As an environmental studies graduate

student and a professor of rural and environmental sociology at the University of Montana, we attempted to document this story through the multiple perspectives of people closest to the ad hoc committee and its work. Thus, the story includes the voices of the ad hoc committee's leadership, valley residents who have not been involved in the committee's activities, the U.S. Forest Service employees familiar with the committee, and other stakeholders with an interest in the committee's decisions, such as environmental advocacy groups.¹ To construct this case study, we consulted the growing literature on collaboration and community stewardship efforts as well as local newspapers and archival material relevant to the history of the Swan community and the Forest Service in the region.

The Ecological and Social Setting

Nestled between the Mission Mountains to the west and the Swan Range to the east, the Swan Valley in northwestern Montana is a long, narrow corridor of human development through rugged and relatively pristine country. The glacially carved valley measures fifteen miles wide and seventy miles long and is separated from the Clearwater Valley to the south by a small, almost imperceptible divide (Seeley/Swan Economic Diversification Action Team 1993). Montana State Highway 83 runs the length of the valley, but it is the landscape, not the highway, that first catches the traveler's eye. Snow lingers late into summer on the steep slopes rising to the rocky summits that define the valley's borders. Alpine lakes tucked against the mountains gather melting snow and spill into the headwaters of the valley's river system. Below, the Swan River meanders through a forested valley, snaking its way around the Missions to join Flathead Lake and the larger Columbia River watershed.

A moist climate endows the valley with diverse, thick coniferous forests that include Douglas fir, Englemann spruce, lodgepole pine, western red cedar, and grand fir. In the fall, yellow on the hillsides reveals stands of western larch. Some large-diameter ponderosa pine still rise along the highway and from the remaining mature forest stands scattered throughout the valley. Cottonwood and willow mark the riparian areas that, along with the forests, provide habitat for a diversity of species.

The habitat quality of the valley's forest and aquatic ecosystems is high. Grizzly use the valley bottom to travel between the Missions and the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and black bear, mountain lion, elk, moose, mule deer, and coyote make the Swan Valley home. The river system provides habitat for cold-water fish species, most notably one of the last populations of native bull trout, an important indicator of healthy aquatic ecosystems (Frissell et al. 1995). The valley also supports the highest known concentration of rare plant populations on

the Flathead National Forest, including the locally endemic plant water howellia (USDA Forest Service 1994).

The political boundaries that overlay the valley's physical landscape make land management in the Swan Valley a complex task. The rugged mountains mark the boundaries of two federally designated wilderness areas—the Mission Mountain and Bob Marshall Wilderness Areas—a designation that protects the Swan from development and resource extraction above the valley bottom and foothills. The Swan Lake Ranger District on the Flathead National Forest is responsible for the management of these wilderness areas.

Land management between the two wilderness areas is complicated in part because it is divided. The Plum Creek Timber Company, the Flathead National Forest, noncorporate private landowners, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation own or hold management authority over alternating sections of valley (Seeley/Swan Economic Diversification Action Team 1993). The Plum Creek Timber Company owns approximately 18 percent of the land in the Swan Valley, a legacy of the 1864 land grant to Northern Pacific Railroad. The Flathead National Forest manages 73 percent of the valley, some of which is designated wilderness. Private, nonindustrial owners hold less than 10 percent of the Swan's land with their properties concentrated along the valley bottom. The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation is the remaining landholder, with management authority over several sections at the northern end of the valley (Swan Valley Community Club 1996).

Approximately 550 permanent and seasonal residents call the Swan Valley home, even though most of them agree that it is a hard place to "make ends meet" (Lambrecht and Jackson 1993). "When I first moved here I did anything that was legal and moral available to make a living," declares Mary Phillips with a laugh, "That's the way it is here." Residents share a fundamental ethic of "whatever it takes" to remain in the valley. Because there are no single, large-scale employers in the Swan, earning a living requires independent initiative and an entrepreneurial spirit. A 1993 community profile study found that 25 percent of the permanent residents held more than one job and that about half the valley's employed permanent residents were self-employed (Lambrecht and Jackson 1993). Thirty percent of the valley's total population, the largest and fastest-growing segment of the community, is retired (Lambrecht and Jackson 1993). Some retirees become small-business owners or artists after leaving lifelong occupations as teachers, government employees, or loggers.

These characteristics of the Swan Valley—its relatively pristine landscape, its forest resource-dependent community, its demographic characteristics, and its large, absentee landholders—together set the stage for conflict.

The late 1980s was a contentious, volatile time in the Swan. A combination of economic uncertainty and environmental degradation pushed this quiet,

neighborly community into battle over the jobs-versus-environment debate. Forces seemingly beyond the control of local residents threatened to tear the community apart. Nationally, the timber industry was in decline, and rural areas like the Swan felt the effects. More than 100,000 workers in the wood products industry had lost their jobs. In the Pacific Northwest, mill employment had declined by 2 percent each year even while production rose (Power 1996). Northwestern Montana faced a 25 percent decline in its annual timber harvest, while the western and southwestern portions of the state showed declines of 24 to 39 percent, respectively [Au: Pls. add this to Refs. ce] (Flowers et al. 1993).

Closer to Swan, the local newspaper, *The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder*, painted an equally gloomy picture of the timber industry's future. The volume of timber sold by the Forest Service in the region was steadily dropping (*Seeley-Swan Pathfinder* [Au: 1989 not in Refs. now. Wlaos, what is Gary Noland?]1989). Headlines announced, "More Unemployment Likely in Timber Industry," over stories with sobering statistics: 2,000 to 2,500 of the region's jobs will be lost to increasing mechanization and structural changes in the timber industry (*Seeley-Swan Pathfinder* 1989). An estimated 27 percent of the valley's permanent residents worked in timber-related jobs in 1980. By 1993, however, only 16 percent were employed as loggers, sawmill workers, log home builders, log truck drivers, Forest Service employees, and foresters, and 10 percent worked in the recreation and tourism industry (Lambrecht and Jackson 1993). This economic transition increased fear and anger among the valley residents connected to the wood products.

During this same period and as evidence of ecological degradation was mounting, valley environmentalists grew increasingly concerned about the ecological and aesthetic impacts of logging in the Swan. In 1987, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks released studies showing that the native west-slope cutthroat trout had disappeared from the Swan River and as a result instituted new fishing regulations. The state agency cited sedimentation from forest roads as one factor in declining trout populations and deteriorating habitat (*Seeley-Swan Pathfinder*[Au: 1989?]1989), as when, for example, sediment from a logging operation along Jim Creek washed into a stream, severely damaging its bull trout population (Schwennesen 1990). Large clear-cuts visible from the highway drew sharp criticism from those who cared about the valley's scenic beauty (Vernon 1987), and other residents involved in the valley's tourism industry worried that clear-cutting would jeopardize their livelihoods (Dahl 1990).

The news in the local paper divided Swan residents. Advocates for continued timber extraction traded irate letters to the editor in the *Seeley-Swan Pathfinder* with those demanding protection for the valley's remaining forests. Between 1987 and 1990, the community grew progressively polarized. Both sides staked their positions and screamed accusations at the other. Green wooden signs appeared at the end of driveways proclaiming, "This family supported by

timber dollars." Mill workers and their families went to Missoula to demonstrate against Montana congressional representative Pat Williams's Wilderness bill. In 1987, Friends of the Wild Swan, an environmental advocacy group headquartered in the town of Swan Lake, launched a fight to protect the Swan Valley. Led by Swan Lake residents, this group began to challenge logging and road building on state and federal public lands through successful administrative appeals and litigation.

Public meetings that addressed any natural resource issue drew up to two hundred people to the Condon Community Hall on several occasions (Woodruff 1987). Described by one resident as "disastrous, with lots of screaming and yelling about logging, environmental issues, and national forests decisions," these meetings are legendary. Hostility was such that one local environmentalist allegedly received a death threat from a group going by the name V.E.T.S. (Victims of Environmental Terrorism and Subversion) (Vernon 1990).

Amidst this rancor, a few residents began sowing the seeds of what would become the Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee. A 1990 meeting sponsored by Scenic 83, a short-lived, local group advocating management of the highway corridor for scenic qualities, was a watershed event. Those who endured the marathon meeting, featuring speakers from Friends of the Wild Swan and candidates in an upcoming election, began calling for an end to the polarization (Dahl 1990). The *Seeley-Swan Pathfinder* carried a story about the meeting, capturing the sentiments of these battle-weary residents. "I want to appeal to neighbors to be neighbors," commented one resident. Neil Meyer, one local logger who would become active in the ad hoc committee, observed, "We need to quit drawing lines between environmentalists and loggers. I'm an environmentalist." The feelings of those weary of fighting were summed up with: "We all need to work together on these things because we all want to live here" (Dahl 1990).

When two widely respected valley residents together decided it was time to build a broad community dialogue on the natural resource issues dividing the community, they initiated several meetings and invited residents whose opinions were diverse but who were willing to talk with and listen to each other. This small group of people evolved into the leadership of the ad hoc committee. It was motivated by a desire to reduce the hostility and anxiety that permeated the valley. According to Sue Cushman, a current ad hoc participant, "It was an attempt to prevent division in the community, to come to middle ground." Ecological concerns also motivated the ad hoc committee's founders. Members of the group were concerned about road building and timber harvest in the Swan. According to Bud Moore, a founding participant who operates a small sawmill after retiring from the Forest Service, "People began to fear that we'd screw up the habitat of the Swan badly trying to keep the mills going. We were afraid that in desperation to keep the money flowing we would damage what brought us here to

live." The ad hoc founders wanted to integrate environmental protection with residents' ability to earn a living in the valley. These neighbors tackled what they understood to be the immediate issue: the declining timber economy. Meeting in people's homes, this small, self-appointed group began brainstorming alternative business ideas. In the words of Bud Moore, "We needed to think through converting the economy to lesser dependence on timber. Right from the beginning we had the idea that we needed representatives from all the interests in the valley . . . so we called together the 'think group.'"

In what was perhaps their single most important action, the ad hoc founders invited individuals of widely divergent viewpoints whom they felt could together rationally and civilly discuss the valley's problems. While having their own individual interests, these individuals demonstrated concern for the greater community. Many of these original participants remain active ad hoc committee members after twelve years of monthly meetings. In the fall of 1990, after a year of informal meetings, a professional facilitator who lived in the valley volunteered his services. Alan "Pete" Taylor became the "neutral traffic cop" who kept people with diverse viewpoints talking rationally and listening to each other at meetings. He initiated a strategic planning process to help the group define its role, and the Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee was born.

The Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee

ORGANIZATION AND PROCESS

The mandate, mission, and goals statement that the founding participants created using Taylor's planning process still guides the ad hoc committee today. In January 1991, the group presented its vision to other Swan Valley residents during a meeting with the Community Club and in an article in the Seeley-Swan Pathfinder. The one-page document states that

this ad hoc group of citizens has a self-imposed mandate to: address the economic, environmental, and cultural problems related to the decline [in the valley's natural resource base] . . . and to suggest to the full community possible remedies that maintain or enhance economic livelihood and the quality of life in the Swan Valley. (Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee 1991).

According to this guiding mandate, the ad hoc committee will also "assist the community in resolving, collaboratively, the conflicts affecting the Swan Valley" (Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee 1991). The group explicitly excluded "serving as a spokesman for the community" as one of its roles.

With the exception of the mandate, mission, and goals statement, the ad hoc committee has no formal structure. There are no bylaws or official members, and officers have no designated responsibilities. Membership is open to the community, requiring no dues or any explicit commitment of time. As meetings begin, Alan Taylor explains, "If you walk in the door you're a member for as long as you want. There are no permanent fixtures." This loose structure and fluid membership is intended to prevent the domination of any specific special interest and to encourage the broad-based participation of valley residents. Two simple ground rules guide the group: Each participant must listen respectfully to the others, and those present at a given meeting must reach consensus in order to advocate a specific position. Consensus is attained once everyone is comfortable with a decision.

General meetings of the ad hoc committee usually occur monthly. These meetings consist mainly of information sharing and feature presentations by land managers, public officials, or interest group representatives who serve as "resource people." Controversial topics draw the largest crowds. Grizzly bear conservation and Plum Creek's land use plan in wildlife linkage zones produced the largest turnout during the year-and-a-half period in which this study was conducted. If an issue or project emerges during these general meetings that participants believe warrants more attention, volunteers form subcommittees to work on these specific topics. For example, smaller "working" groups tackled a ponderosa pine restoration project, Forest Service road closures, an economic diversification plan, and the threatened closure of the Swan Valley Forest Service facility.

While the ad hoc committee's founders sought to include the valley's many diverse perspectives by inviting specific individuals who could speak for a particular viewpoint, the valley residents who participate in the ad hoc speak as individuals, not as representatives of formal groups or organized constituencies ("stakeholders"). Volunteers, committed to their community and landscape, are the driving force behind this collaborative group. To foster broad participation throughout the valley, they try to "talk up" their activities among neighbors using what Taylor calls the "dispersion model." The ad hoc committee is continually challenged to achieve broad public participation but has made some tangible accomplishments.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In 1992, the ad hoc committee initiated a communitywide survey of the Swan Valley's human resources, residents' visions for the future, and their attitudes regarding valley issues. This survey was conducted by the University of Montana's School of Forestry, and the results continue to provide the committee with an

empirical foundation for understanding community demographics and attitudes (Lambrecht and Jackson 1993).

The community survey contributed directly to an economic diversification plan developed in conjunction with residents from Seeley Lake, an adjacent community. Three ad hoc committee participants and three Seeley Lake residents worked with technical advisers from the Forest Service and a Missoula-based regional economic development group to produce the plan. This sixty-page document describes the 1993 status of the area's economy, quality of life, and environment as well as its "desired future conditions" (Seeley/Swan Economic Diversification Action Team 1993). The Action Team developed a variety of potential opportunities for economic diversification in keeping with the community goals of maintaining the valley's rural character. Projects resulting from the creation of the diversification plan include a visitors' guide to the valley; an interpretive trail and exhibit at the Swan Ecosystem Center, which is committed to hiring local people rather than outside experts whenever possible; and the Swan Valley Arts and Crafts Gallery.

Also in 1992, ad hoc participants identified the Elk Creek drainage as a high priority for protection because of the pristine bull trout-spawning habitat in the creek's upper reaches. The ad hoc committee reached consensus to support public acquisition of three sections of Plum Creek Timber land along the creek, and when Plum Creek refused a direct sale of the property, the Forest Service proposed a land exchange that the ad hoc committee supported. According to committee participants, the group's ability to reach consensus on removing some forestland from the valley's timber base to preserve bull trout habitat is a major accomplishment.

Ad hoc subcommittees worked with the Flathead National Forest on a number of local, forest-related issues and gained limited flexibility with road closures on the valley's Forest Service land when it opened select roads for a fourteen-day period so that residents could gather firewood. The newly created Swan Ecosystem Center is perhaps the most far-reaching of the ad hoc committee's tangible accomplishments. In an attempt to prevent the complete closure of the Swan's remaining Forest Service facility (the Condon Work Center), an ad hoc subcommittee established the Swan Ecosystem Center in the fall of 1996 as a non-profit organization that will, among other purposes, "represent the community in partnership with the Forest Service" (Swan Ecosystem Center 1996).²

Finally, another subcommittee collaborated with the Flathead National Forest on a ponderosa pine restoration project behind the Condon Work Center. This specific project and a similar one on private land, illustrate the links between community well-being and forest health in the Swan Valley. Restoration of the "open parklike conditions" that once characterized the valley's ponderosa pine forests was the goal of the thirty-acre Forest Stewardship project. In conjunction

with Forest Service officials, ad hoc committee participants selected a stand of old-growth ponderosa that was choked with Douglas fir and lodgepole pine saplings for their first experiment with forest stewardship timber management and logging. Specific project goals included using commercial logging to thin the stand, returning low-intensity fire to the area, and ongoing community involvement in the long-term monitoring of the site [Au: Pls. add this to Refs. ce] (Harris 1995).

According to ad hoc participant and Swan resident Sue Cushman, the Swan residents involved in this project are "taking responsibility to make sure it's done right." During the actual logging, participants monitored the operation to ensure it was done well; one post and pole business, assisted by an ad hoc participant, salvaged post and pole material from the slash piles left by the logger. Residents involved in this project established study points to monitor changes in vegetation over time as well as among the bird and animal populations. These resident volunteers have spent countless hours educating themselves about fire ecology, forest stewardship logging, and Forest Service regulations in the design and implementation of the project.

FOSTERING COMMUNITY WELL-BEING: THE ENDURING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

While the tangible projects are expanding, there are also less tangible but essential outcomes that laid the foundation for the on-the-ground work that the Swan Ecosystem Center is now accomplishing. During the research for this chapter, the committee's leadership, as well as many of the nonparticipating Swan residents who were interviewed, ranked the new relationships built through the collaborative problem-solving process as the ad hoc committee's most important accomplishment. Creating a civil dialogue and building trust among former adversaries also topped the list of important outcomes. Finally, the relationships forged between valley residents and the area's nonlocal, land management decision makers were among the less quantifiable but vitally important benefits of the ad hoc committee. The valley residents interviewed during this research saw these outcomes as the first steps toward protecting the Swan's rural character and landscape. The growing list of on-the-ground accomplishments is testament to the importance of this relationship-building period.

As Anne Dahl, who has been actively involved in the committee since its inception, sees it,

The period of animosity was making people scared. Now I see people starting to listen to each other again. The climate seems less adversarial. There's more will-

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ingness to tolerate. We've learned to listen, to respect each other. Maybe it's filtering into the community, or maybe people gave up the fighting when they realized it didn't get anywhere and [they went] back to being the good neighbors they really are.

According to Tom Parker, a local outfitter and active participant, the committee has

created an environment of positive community dialogue [and] helped to show people there was more common ground than people realized. It brings out better thinking, less judgmental, rational, caring thinking [and] listening [that] tends to force you to give time to think before you speak. The example of others who discipline themselves to [be] calm rubs off.

The connections built between Swan residents and land management decision makers are among the most important relationships fostered by the ad hoc's collaborative efforts. The valley's checkerboard pattern of landownership and management means that residents' livelihoods and the landscape are greatly affected by the decisions of large, absentee stakeholders. The ad hoc committee's general meetings provide a forum for representatives of the Flathead National Forest and Plum Creek Timber to discuss their plans affecting the valley. In March 1996, a Plum Creek spokesperson attended a general ad hoc committee meeting to address rumors that the company was selling some of its land in the valley. Though he emphasized the decision-making rights of Plum Creek as a private landowner, he indicated that the company was willing both to discuss its plans with the community and to consider alternative options. As a result, a subcommittee formed to identify the community's priorities should Plum Creek land become available for future trades into public ownership.

The Swan Lake District ranger now routinely brings his staff from Bigfork to discuss projects proposed for the valley. In addition to the collaborations with the Forest Service already discussed, ad hoc committee participants are actively involved in a Forest Service landscape analysis of the Upper Swan Valley that will become the foundation of future Forest Service land management activities in the area. Many committee members are hopeful that the willingness of both the Forest Service and Plum Creek to attend ad hoc meetings and address residents' concerns means that residents are gaining greater influence in valley land management decisions. Rod Ash, a retired schoolteacher and founding member of the ad hoc committee, believes that

contacts with Plum Creek and the Forest Service might give [us] a little more control over our destiny than other isolated communities might not

have. We all know lots of decisions will get made outside of the valley but now we have contacts. That's important to a community whether everybody realizes it or not.

While ad hoc participants are not after local control of Swan Valley National Forest lands, they do want a greater voice in decisions than they previously have had.

According to many ad hoc participants, the relationships built between the ad hoc committee and Swan Lake Ranger District staff are important steps toward involving residents more meaningfully in Forest Service decision making. The public involvement processes of all federal land management agencies, including the Forest Service, are often criticized for not meaningfully involving the public. Because the agencies present what appear to be already developed plans, public participation becomes public review of decisions already made rather than meaningful public involvement in the actual decision making (U.S. Congress 1992; Wondolleck 1988). As ad hoc participants have become involved in the actual design of Forest Service projects, such as the ponderosa pine restoration effort, their perceptions of the public involvement process are changing.

Ad hoc participants are feeling empowered to affect Forest Service decision making; in turn, this fosters continued involvement. Anne Dahl, for example, participates in the ad hoc committee because "it was . . . about residents working together to decide the future before disaster brings the government in to tell us how to do it. I am uncomfortable with stone throwing. Looking for solutions versus just complaining is important to me."

The persistent efforts of ad hoc participants are building real influence with the Forest Service, in large part because of the close, positive working relationship developed with the Swan Lake District ranger. As Dahl explains, "We are actively helping the Forest Service decide what needs to be done. In the past we were only reacting to the Forest Plan."

Chuck Harris is the Swan Lake District ranger and the primary decision maker for on-the-ground operations. He regularly attends ad hoc committee meetings. For Harris, the collaboration is a welcome relief from the usual adversarial position he experiences in other public meetings. He believes that his involvement with the ad hoc committee is restoring the Forest Service's historic link to the rural communities that district rangers were once a part of. Harris's congenial personality and leadership style, as well as the support of his supervisors for his collaboration with the committee, all contribute greatly to the ongoing working relationship between district staff and Swan residents. One important motivation for his involvement, as well as his supervisors' support, is the hope that collaboration will reduce the number of appeals of Forest Service projects. This institutional motivation to collaborate, while not directly related to community well-being, is important to recognize because it affects the participation of an essential stockholder: the Forest Service.

The agency's motivations to participate are not merely self-serving, however. Agency officials also see the benefits to community well-being. Hal Salwasser, the Northern Region's former regional forester, emphasizes the role of the ad hoc committee in building community or civic capacity, an objective now touted as part of the Forest Service agenda. He defines civic capacity "as a group to leverage other groups to accomplish its projects." For Salwasser, the ponderosa pine restoration effort and the establishment of the Swan Ecosystem Center are evidence of increasing community capacity in the Swan Valley and the role that the Forest Service played in fostering it.

Committee participants also see a change in the way agencies approach public involvement. According to Rod Ash, the Forest Service (as well as Montana state agencies) is approaching the ad hoc committee "at the idea stage of the process rather than in the action stage." He sees agency personnel modifying their ideas on the basis of community input, manifesting the sense of empowerment fostered by a sense that the community can influence decision making.

Challenges

While the ad hoc committee and its collaboration with the Forest Service has produced many benefits, the committee nonetheless faces major challenges. Three "limitations" emerged from an examination of the committee:

1. Limited resident participation in the committee
2. Limits to the committee's power and authority
3. Uncertain results as far as fostering ecological well-being in the Swan Valley

Limited Resident Participation

Despite open invitations to the broader community and the committee's fluid membership, a core group of very active participants is clearly identifiable.³ This group is recognized locally as the leadership of the ad hoc committee and the source of information about the committee's actions. Over the past years of ad hoc committee work, this group has evolved into a cohesive unit with a large level of trust and understanding. Members describe themselves as "a diverse group, one that can be friends now but couldn't for a while." However, despite continued efforts to encourage other community members to become involved in the ad hoc committee, broad, inclusive participation from the Swan community's diverse sectors remains a challenge. Committee leaders

identify three issues that they believe contribute to the wider community's less active participation:

1. The informal structure that defines the ad hoc committee may contribute to the lack of participation of some of the valley stakeholders. According to facilitator Alan Taylor, "The downside of the structure is you don't have someone in charge of getting the word out and advertising meetings like we should." The creation of the Swan Ecosystem Center is helping to alleviate this problem because a paid staff person now has responsibility for mailings, and there is a budget for sending meeting announcements to every Swan resident. Another consequence of the informal structure, however, is the lack of a process to ensure that all perspectives are included. If a participant who brings a unique perspective attends meetings irregularly or drops out, the ad hoc committee has no formal means for ensuring the continued inclusion of that person's perspective. While the informal structure fosters a more participatory (rather than representative) form of public involvement, the informal structure also leaves the group open to the criticism that not all stakeholders are included in a decision.
2. Collaboration involves long hours in meetings over many months before tangible results are achieved. As Rod Ash observes, people "get tired out," and new people must be recruited as older participants "start running out of steam." But because most of the ad hoc committee's leadership is either retired or self-employed—a condition that is not representative of the valley's population—the core participants have the free time and flexible schedules that allow the thousands of volunteer hours dedicated to ad hoc projects.
3. The challenge of participation involves group dynamics among the leadership. After many years of working together, these active participants are comfortable and confident with each other and the collaborative process. Core members tend to speak more frequently during general meetings, questioning resource people two or three times more often than other participants. This dynamic is, at least in part, due to the fact that the leadership attends meetings in higher numbers and is comfortable speaking openly about issues. A downside of this natural outcome of working together to build common ground, as Anne Dahl observes, is that the leadership has "evolved to the point of working together too smoothly. We're more alike than we were at the beginning." Some nonparticipating Swan residents criticize the ad hoc committee for being a group of like-minded individuals. This perception, though not necessarily accurate, contributes to the challenges the ad hoc faces in its efforts to be inclusive.

In addition to the Swan residents who choose not to participate in ad hoc activities, another key nonlocal stakeholder does not participate in the collaboration. The Friends of the Wild Swan, a regional environmental advocacy organization, chooses to remain outside the collaborative process and has twice appealed Forest Service projects that had ad hoc committee involvement: the Elk/Squeezer Creek land exchange and the Forest Stewardship's ponderosa pine restoration project. Formed to "address the impacts to wildlife, water quality, fisheries, scenic values, and other amenities found in the Swan Valley," Friends of the Wild Swan prefers to use the existing public participation process, including administrative appeals, litigation, and public education, to advocate a biologically based ecosystem approach to land management.

Arlene Montgomery, the director of Friends of the Wild Swan, is concerned that local, place-based collaboratives do not conform to the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act because there is no analysis of a range of alternatives within an environmental analysis. She cites the lack of analysis of ecological outcomes of committee projects as proof that the collaborative process leads, more often than not, to the lowest-common-denominator decision in land management. She also doubts that decisions made in the Upper Swan Valley, for the benefit of that particular community, will be appropriate for communities and environments downstream. As Montgomery sees it, all the projects produced by the collaborative groups she is familiar with involve some form of logging. For her, that is evidence that the process does not result in ecological health and restoration. Despite some Swan residents' impression that the ad hoc committee is environmentally oriented, Montgomery feels her ecological concerns were unwelcome during the few meetings she attended.

As a result of the challenges of fostering broad and inclusive participation, the ad hoc committee is careful to state that it does not represent the full spectrum of interests in the Swan Valley, nor does the committee speak for the community as a whole. Despite this fact, Forest Service personnel closest to the group believe that the ad hoc committee is representative of the Swan Valley community. According to Rodd Richardson, former supervisor of the Flathead National Forest, "It's broadly representative, but it doesn't include the extremes that might not choose to be a part of it." It is important to note that by viewing the ad hoc committee as representative and successful at providing a mechanism for wide public participation, the agency's role in assisting rural communities is legitimized.

The Ad Hoc Committee's Authority

Interviews with Swan Valley residents who do not participate on the committee suggest a cynicism regarding the outcomes of collaboration. Some valley residents

insist that the main benefit of the committee's work is talk, with little authority or power for changing talk into action. One man employed in the valley's tourism industry put it bluntly: "I don't know what those things accomplish. As far as I'm concerned, it's people out of the valley that will make the decisions. Government, business, they will do as they please. It's just a typical scenario—out of state industry trying to force things down our throat, and they don't know a thing about living here and they don't care." Another resident said, "I see the public as having no role unless you're part of a group willing to bring lawsuits to further a political agenda or you're in with political figures." The belief that agency officials make decisions before seeking public input, which is based on past experience with agency public involvement processes, constrains broader participation in committee activities. Continued evidence of the influence of community input through the ad hoc's activities may slowly chip away at this cynicism.

The sense of community powerlessness and the perception of a lack of authority with large corporate interests and the Forest Service are not without foundation. Plum Creek Timber Company, while increasingly willing to listen to residents, has the right to act as a private landowner, and Forest Service officials have emphasized collaboration as a means to build public support for agency projects. Former regional forester Hal Salwasser, for example, told us that he hopes collaboratives will create "a high enough level of trust between the Forest Service citizen groups that the Forest Service can decrease the amount of analysis and planning it has to do to undertake a project and the citizen group doesn't have to spend as much energy on every project" (personal communication, 1997).

Thus, while committee members speak of a substantive sharing of decision-making power, Forest Service officials speak of building public support for the decisions the agency makes; the Forest Service remains the ultimate analyzer and decision maker, while the public provides input.

Agency officials interviewed for this study remain ambiguous about the decision-making power they are willing or able to yield to other parties. On a host of issues, they are unable to yield at all. Indeed, many Forest Service policies and cutting targets are political decisions crafted and legislated far from place-based initiatives. Such contradictions certainly contribute to the cynicism regarding the collaborative process. Though the form of public participation has altered with the advent of community-based collaboratives, the degree to which the public can sway agency decisions remains limited and contingent on personalities, political agendas, and a desire to minimize litigation.

Success in Fostering Ecological Well-Being

A final challenge, unrelated to issues of participation, is to what extent the ad hoc committee's collaborative process has contributed to the valley's ecological well-

being. At the time of this study, systematic procedures to monitor the ecological impacts of committee projects were being developed. As Hal Salwasser observed, committee participants “believe they’re in the best position to determine what concepts like ‘ecosystem health’ and ‘sustainability’ mean in an environment.” Relatively little on-the-ground management has been implemented and even less evaluated over the length of time needed to understand a project’s impact on ecological integrity or forest health. As a result, it is too early to evaluate whether the assumption in Salwasser’s comment is in fact true.

Conclusion: An Enduring Collaboration Responds to New Challenges

Since the original research for this chapter was conducted, the Swan Citizens’ Ad Hoc Committee and the nature of collaboration in the Swan Valley have evolved in response to both the challenges described here and emerging issues within the community. Beginning in 1998, the ad hoc committee actively sought to include more residents and nonresident interest groups in its collaborative process. The successful creation of the Swan Ecosystem Center, with its small staff and budget, has been critical to addressing some of the participation issues. The center, having grown out of ad hoc committee discussions, now functions in many ways at “the action arm of the ad hoc,” and implementing the vision and ideas of the committee is no longer reliant solely on volunteers. As a result, the number of on-the-ground projects has expanded, providing more opportunities for volunteers to get involved, and regular meeting announcements are sent to all valley residents. Thus, participation in collaboration in the Swan Valley has been both increasing and diversifying over the years.

As of the fall of 2002, the ad hoc committee continues to play an active albeit somewhat different role in helping the Swan Valley meet its social and ecological challenges. The purpose of ad hoc committee gatherings in the Condon Community Hall has shifted somewhat, serving more as educational forums rather than focusing on community building and consensus decision making as they did in the past. “The shift in ad hoc meetings is a natural evolution,” says Anne Dahl, current executive director of the Swan Ecosystem Center. “No one made a conscious decision to shift toward more informational meetings and fewer consensus-building meetings. It’s just that we don’t try to reach consensus much anymore. I think it’s because it’s not necessary. People just decide what to do after they have learned enough to make informed decision.” As issues become known, the committee invites experts and other known specialists on a particular topic to meet with the committee and interested members of the valley to hear these diverse views. Decision making regarding proposed actions has tended

to devolve to subcommittees. For example, the committee recently sponsored a series of meetings regarding noxious weeds. The committee organized a series of informational forums where botanists, weed specialists, and community groups presented their perspectives on the problem and proposed solutions. Smaller neighborhood groups continued to meet and work toward a solution that best met the concerns and conditions of their particular place and residents.

Additional "spin-off" groups also play a lead role in creating a forum for community members to be part of multiparty decision making across the valley. The Swan Lands Committee is one such subcommittee that has taken the lead role in addressing Plum Creek Timber Company's announcement that it will be selling a large portion of its landholdings in the valley for private residential development. Plum Creek Timber owns alternating sections of valley land, a legacy of the 1864 land grant to the Northern Rockies Pacific Railroad. The amount of land to be sold represents approximately half the productive forestland in the valley and as a result poses a significant threat to the community's forest-based activities and livelihoods as well as recreational opportunities, habitat conservation, and overall ecosystem health. A paid community member now leads the effort to keep the Swan Valley community aware of and involved in decisions regarding how this private land may be sold or otherwise allocated. The subcommittee does not claim to represent the valley, nor will it attempt to reach a consensus among its members regarding what it thinks Plum Creek ought to do. Its purpose is to use all communication tools and networks available to keep the community as significantly involved in the land sale process as possible. To fulfill this purpose, the Swan Lands Community Committee will gather community input and will eventually offer recommendations that are likely to be highly controversial. Indeed, a proposal being discussed by the subcommittee involves the Swan Valley community itself purchasing a portion of the land and managing it on a communitywide basis (as occurs in British Columbia and in many rural communities in the tropical South). Recently, this proposal, as well as the authority of the group offering it, has been strongly criticized by a Swan Valley community member in the local newspaper (*Seeley-Swan Pathfinder*). Importantly, the critic admits to never attending any of the public forums organized by either the ad hoc committee or the Swan Lands Community Committee.

Questions of authority, representation, and control over desired change continue to be directed toward the ad hoc committee, the Swan Ecosystem Center, and their many projects. In a series of random interviews conducted in the spring of 2002 in a local bar, those interviewed strongly endorsed the value of local input into land management decisions. Indeed, they argued enthusiastically for what might be called "local ecological knowledge." However, they did not see the valley's key local ecological knowledge represented by those who participate in the organizations noted previously. With a few exceptions, partici-

pants in these groups are viewed as “newcomers” unaware of the long-term ecological changes occurring in the valley (such as the causes and problems associated with fuel buildup in forests prone to wildfire). These “newcomers” are also seen as more economically well off than the group interviewed and largely insensitive to types of recreation that they favor (such as snowmobiling over cross-country skiing). Participants in the ad hoc committee and Swan Ecosystem Center are also seen as a political force interested in controlling the direction of change in the valley on the basis of their particular value systems. However, despite their strong concerns, few of those offering the critiques attend meetings or informational forums organized by the committees or the center. They say they do not attend because they recognize the deep-seated nature of their differences. These conversations, as well as the evolution of the ad hoc committee toward an educational forum rather than a communitywide consensus-seeking body, indicate a practical acceptance of differences across the valley. It is not known how these differences will affect future activities managed by the ad hoc committee and the Swan Ecosystem Center or how the latter will evolve further as a result of them. However, the story of the Swan Valley today strongly suggests the highly social and political nature of community conservation initiatives and at least one community’s attempt over time to recognize and work with these differences.

Notes

1. Nine of the ad hoc committee’s core leadership were interviewed for this project. This “core” was composed of the most active ad hoc participants at the time of the research for this chapter. Thirty-eight Swan Valley residents who do not participate regularly in ad hoc committee efforts were also interviewed. These individuals were identified by the ad hoc committee’s leadership as residents who reflected various perspectives in the Swan and potentially would be willing to be interviewed. Though not a random sample and hence not generalizable across the valley, the interviews provide an in-depth understanding of some positions within the community. Forest Service personnel interviewed included Swan Lake District Ranger Chuck Harris, Flathead National Forest Supervisor Rodd Richardson, and former Regional Forester Hal Salwasser. Arlene Montgomery, director of the Friends of the Wild Swan, a local environmental organization, was also interviewed. In addition to interviews, one of the coauthors was a participant observer at almost all the ad hoc committee meetings between November 1995 and February 1997 (including various subcommittee meetings).

2. The majority of the research for this chapter was conducted during the creation of the Swan Ecosystem Center. This nonprofit community-based organization, with its small staff and budget, has had significant positive impact on the Swan Valley. The center functions in many ways as “the action arm of the ad hoc.” Many of the challenges

pointed out in this story (such as ensuring participation and moving from dialogue to on-the-ground action) are being addressed successfully because of the efforts of the center. Implementing the vision and ideas of the ad hoc committee is no longer solely reliant on volunteers with full-time jobs. There have been significant strides in on-the-ground, community-based forest and wilderness management, and the center's ongoing projects are now too numerous to mention. This chapter offers a snapshot in time of an effort that continued to evolve; as a result, it is more history than current event.

3. It is important to note here that the creation of Swan Ecosystem Center has allowed the ad hoc committee to address this limitation in substantive ways. The expanding number of on-the-ground projects has provided more opportunities for volunteers to get involved. A staff and budget to do mailings have enabled the committee to send meeting announcements to all valley residents. Thus, participation in the many projects spawned by collaboration in the Swan Valley is both increasing and diversifying.

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