Cultural Descriptor: Networks

A network is comprised of individuals who support each other in predictable ways and have a shared commitment to some common purpose. Networks may be informal arrangements of people tied together for cultural, survival, or caretaking reasons. Networks may also be formal arrangements of people who belong to an organization, club or association, which have has a specific charter or organizational goals. Networks may function in a local geographic area or may influence resource management activities from regional or national levels.

Information in rural communities flows primarily through informal networks that involve work routines, recreational activities, kinship, neighborhoods, civic organizations and gathering places. By example, informal social networks have been in place in the farming and ranching community over a very long time. The Tuesday livestock auction in Breen (La Plata HRU) and the Wednesday auction in Cortez (Montelores HRU) are as much about exchanging information and formulating opinions as they are about selling livestock. Likewise, a great deal of information is exchanged about children, the schools, and sports standing around the edge of youth soccer games on Saturday. Bars and restaurants can also serve as "gathering places," for informal networks of people that tend to frequent certain places at certain times of the day. Some gatherings may be even less formal (stopping on the side of the road to visit with neighbors, or running into people on Main Street, the feed store, the bike shop or at the post office). Other gathering places are more formal, such as regularly scheduled civic clubs, church or association meetings. Informal networks may also function at a regional and national level. For example, people that stay in touch on the pow-wow circuit, at car shows, or environmental gatherings.

The importance of these networks and the gathering places where interaction takes place is the frequency with which information is exchanged, and the rapidity with which information (and in some cases misinformation) travels. Community networks operate in "real time" and offer a sense of the current and emergent issues and perspectives within the community. While informal networks are relatively egalitarian, there are "caretakers" who people turn to for advice and information in times stress, change and opportunity. Caretakers are not necessarily part of the formal power system, and may be relatively low profile.

By contrast, formal organizations tend to be more hierarchical with processes that must move slowly in deference to formal procedures and the chain of command. The more hierarchical the organization or agency, the less likely it is to be able to operate in real time. Formal processes tend to be drawn out and slow moving. The mismatch between the way information moves, opinions are shaped and caretaking occurs within informal networks, and the way information, policy and issue resolution occur within formal systems is a major source of disconnect between formal and informal systems. This disconnect is a source of discord, miscommunication and misunderstanding that tends to crop up in public land planning and management.

People that are most effective in bridging the gap between formal land management systems, and between communities of place and communities of interest tend to be those that are connected to informal networks. Such people are able to take information off of the informal networks that is useful in the agency process. Such

people are also able to put timely and accurate information onto the informal networks, and correct misinformation promptly.

San Juan Plan Revision Applications: Networks

1. Informal networks have played a very critical role in getting people engaged in the SJRP Study Group process. Information announcing the process went out through formal media announcements as well as written and electronic invitations. Many people decided whether or not to participate based on perceptions circulating through their informal and caretaker networks.

2. Since it was anticipated that recreation would be a major topic of consideration a series of informal interviews were conducted within recreation networks with caretakers identified by District recreation staff, and by referral once the interviews commenced.

3. As the Study Group process has unfolded, people have used informal networks to digest information, share opinions and keep others up to date, who were not at the meetings.

4. A potentially significant outcome of the Study Group process is a cross-over in communication among people in what had previously been in communication networks with no or very few inter-connections. After the conclusion of formal Study Group activities, people, who very likely have never communicated before, can be seen informally visiting, getting to know one another and sharing perspectives, often discovering common understandings that are unexpected.

5. This cross-over informal communication is also very apparent between Study Group participants and those participating from the public land agencies. The relationships being built in these informal exchanges are likely to have residual of increased mutual comfort and trust, resulting in increased capacity to problem, solve and explore opportunities.

6. The cross over among communication networks that can occur through the Study Group process is supported by an environment which is egalitarian, respectful of all opinions, and accepting of differing opinions. Ultimately, plan decisions will be made that won't please everyone, but they are more to be accepted or tolerated if all perspectives have been expressed, listened to and taken onto account.