



Cultural Descriptor: Publics

A public is any segment of the population that can be grouped together because of some recognized demographic feature or common set of interests . . . it may reside permanently in the geographic area, or may live elsewhere and have an interest in the management of the natural resources.

Over the past three decades public land planning and decision-making processes have become more formalized and accessible. During this same period, the number and intensity of sharply defined interests and interest groups have increased steadily, with considerably more engagement by interests not residing in communities adjacent to the public lands in question. In response to these trends, public land agencies have adopted the term “publics” to encompass these wide-ranging interests.

From a social standpoint, one of the most fundamental differences in perspective is between those who frame their input in a national perspective (“Every taxpayer in the United States is an owner of every acre of the public lands.”), and the local perspective (“The public lands are in our backyard. We depend on them, and we know best how to take care of them.”) While these perspectives are stereotypical, they drive a great deal of the conflict and debate surrounding public land management. The public land manager is required to consider and attempt to reconcile both of these perspectives.

To compound matters, the local mosaic of settlement patterns, recreational activities, and work routines, described under previous descriptors has created an increasingly diverse array of land relationships and values within local communities. This local diversity is reflected in the membership and association of local residents in regional and national interest groups.

The problem for the land manager in dealing with this diversity of interests as isolated “publics” is that each “public” attempts to persuade, pressure and compel the agency to manage according to their particular interest. In some cases, the agency is able to reconcile these disputes by producing evidence of an ecological imperative for a given management approach that transcends social values. In most cases, however, the complexities of an ecosystem health approach requires the constructive engagement of a wide range of actors local and non-local, particularly with the acknowledgement that “people are part of the ecosystem.”

The emerging legal framework for public land management, reviewed briefly below, reinforces the reality that public land management is an inherently social process. While good biological information is essential, what is accomplished (or not accomplished) with regard to improved land health is largely driven by social dynamics.

Until the 1970s the “publics” interested and engaged in the management of the San Juan National Forest lived

primarily within the three Human Resource Units (HRUs) adjacent to the Forest (i.e. the Montelores, La Plata and Pagosa HRUs). These localized publics tended to be economically related to natural resource production activities such as livestock grazing, logging and oil and gas development as well as emerging tourism oriented businesses. There were also local and non-local publics interested in hunting, fishing, hiking, and camping, as well as wider interests associated with the archaeological resources, which became internationally known through visitation to Mesa Verde National Park.

In the 1970s several “change forces” began to converge. The levels of recreational activity began to accelerate through growth in tourism, “amenity migration” (defined on page 15) and emerging economic opportunities created by these trends. At the same time that people were “discovering” Southwest Colorado, National environmental laws were being put in place including the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act (1960), the Wilderness Act (1964) Endangered Species Act (ESA, 1968) National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 1969), the National Forest Management Act (NFMA, 1976), and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA, 1976). These laws gave “publics” residing within and outside of the area legal standing which substantially increased their influence over public land management and decision making.

Throughout the 1980s the impact of these change forces accelerated as the population make-up of the Montelores, La Plata and Pagosa HRUs continued to diversify, and as regional and national environmental and recreational publics increased their level of organization and clout in public land decision making. The traditional natural resource oriented people responded by increasing their level of organization to deal with the resulting pressures and constraints on their activities. This reaction took a variety of forms, but were most dramatically reflected in local and regional efforts characterized as “the Sage Brush Rebellion” and the “Wise Use Movement.” The exponential growth in motorized recreational technologies and use levels resulted in a push for restrictions on motorized recreation that have resulted in advocacy organizations advocating for motorized use.

Clashes among various “Publics” has been intensified and nationalized by a series of top down initiatives including but not limited to: Rangeland Reform, the Roadless Initiative, the creation of a series of National Monuments and the Healthy Forests Initiative. The result tends to be a clash at the local level by those who strongly support or oppose any given action initiated at levels above local communities.

While these clashes involve important and strongly held beliefs and interests, they tend to drain energy and resources away from landscape specific stewardship needs and opportunities. By contrast, there have been experiments in what has come to be called “Community Based Stewardship”, which attempt to incorporate local land stewardship ethics in a context of open citizen participation, inclusion of all interested publics and the integration of ecological, social and economic knowledge building. A well documented example within Southwest Colorado is Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership in which local environmental and timber industry publics, which were in total gridlock in the early 1990s, began cooperating in science based efforts to restore ecological health to local ponderosa pine forests while sustaining small, local wood products businesses. To date ecological restoration has been accomplished or is in process on approximately 8,000 acres.

While the Ponderosa Pine Restoration effort was locally initiated, the broad base of community support it enjoyed was externalized through the support of outside interest groups such as environmental groups and timber associations thereby insulating the effort from an ideological clash of “Publics.” This capacity was extended to a National Initiative known as the National Fire Plan which has been localized in five County level Community Wildfire Protections Plans which involve strategic collaboration in addressing widely recognized wildfire hazards, made more urgent by the emergency response and the ongoing recovery from the Missionary Ridge Fire of 2002.

The successes of the Pine Restoration and Community Fire Plan efforts has been the ability to align these efforts with local community Networks and Support Organizations which were able to absorb the interests of Publics into a community driven, landscape based, effort.

San Juan Plan Revision Applications: Publics

1. A major effort is being made in the San Juan Plan Revision process to take a collaborative community based approach to identifying issues and exploring alternatives. It is also important that “communities of interest” including San Juan users and advocates who don’t reside in the community, have access to the process. The San Juan Plan Revision web site supported by extensive e-mail and mailing lists are intended to provide transparency concerning community and landscape level deliberations. In addition to input into community and landscape level deliberations, publics can still exercise all the rights of input under the laws outlined above.
2. Alignments that can be discovered and developed in the course of the plan revision process between community based perspectives and those of external publics can result in a more comprehensive, cohesive, and effective strategic and policy framework to guide public land management with in the purview of the plans.
3. **Plan Revision communication strategies should include exploring linkages between those engaged in local stewardship Networks and Support Organizations with regional and national interest group publics, establishing lines of communication with external interest groups and their local chapters, and engaging them as actively as possible in the community based planning and knowledge building process.**