



IT'S THE PROCESS THAT COUNTS

How Collaborative Really is "Cooperative Conservation"?

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By Daniel Berger,
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"Cooperative conservation" has been touted as the future-is-now approach to solving public lands and natural resource issues in the West. Conservation groups support it; government and agencies like it; even the [Western Governors Association \(PDF\)](#) and the Bush administration are behind it. In fact, it has become somewhat of a mantra for the Interior Department and Department of Agriculture.

Loosely defined, cooperative (or collaborative) conservation is a process by which a diverse group of stakeholders are brought together to first define an issue and then collectively create a path to solving it. The process acknowledges that there may be more sides to an issue than just a "pro" and a "con"; it gives a voice to people not in a position of power or significant influence; and it plays into the idea of the wisdom of the crowd — the notion that the collective mind is better at solving problems than individual ones, even expert ones.

Much of the discussion about cooperative conservation involves what it should be used for and how we make it work. For example, should it be used to guide the restoration of a major Western watershed that is now a Superfund site, and if so, how do we plug the right people into the process? The resounding answer to the first part of that question is "yes" and the second answer was part of the theme behind the University of Montana's [Public Lands Law Conference](#), which was the subject of a [recent column on Headwaters News](#), by Sarah Van de Wetering.

Though challenges still exist in the restoration and remediation process for the upper Clark Fork River watershed, which was damaged by a century of hard rock mining in its headwaters, many who were part of the collaborative process say the incredible amount of work already completed to outline a restoration and a remediation program should be a model to others around the country for how such a large-scale issue can be addressed.

The devil remains in the details, for sure, but for the most part, area residents and local, state and federal officials are pleased with where this process is going, and they feel the lessons contained are worthy of a larger audience.

This idea of sharing lessons learned has always been a part of the cooperative conservation movement's method for increasing the network of diverse and involved people. Several [groups](#) and [Web sites](#) are dedicated to sharing these lessons and success stories. But some say the idea isn't as rosy as it is made out to be.

Robert Collins, lead attorney and chief counsel for the Montana's Natural Resource Damage (NRD) Program, said in an e-mail that "Milltown was a fine example of a hard-fought settlement negotiation, which was finally successful." But he later added that given that the Environmental Protection Agency takes the position that it is ultimately in charge under CERCLA (Superfund) and that the Potentially Responsible Parties (NorthWestern Corporation and the Atlantic Richfield Company) had their own private agendas, it wasn't a true collaborative process.

"I can say that working with the EPA local office cannot be and has not been, in a number of instances, a truly cooperative effort because of the EPA position that it has final authority over all significant remedial decisions," Collins said in another e-mail. "The EPA position was made clear by John Wardell at the [UM law] conference when he stated that 'EPA's remedial responsibilities cannot be delegated.'"

This begs the question as to whether government-sponsored, or regulated, cooperative conservation is really as democratic as it is presented to be. The Bush administration unveiled its White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation to further explore the ideas and tout some successes. Not long after that conference, a cooperative conservation project undertaken by the Bureau of Land Management in Wyoming began to fall apart.

The Pinedale Anticline Working Group (PAWG) was created by the BLM in 2000 as part of the agency's final plan for the Pinedale Anticline, an area of increasing energy development in Wyoming. The plan called for about 900 more gas wells to be drilled in the mostly undeveloped field during the next two decades.

The group, which consisted of state and local officials, area landowners, ranchers, industry representatives and environmental leaders, was charged with helping the agency with "adaptive management" of the area, meaning they were to collaboratively monitor the drilling activity and make recommendations to reduce the drilling's effects on air and water quality, wildlife and other natural resources.

But when the group began making recommendations in 2004, it quickly fell apart. The group's requests were reportedly ignored while it also lost focus. Meeting facilitators were brought in, but that didn't seem to help. At one point in 2005, one of the members quit and walked out in the middle of a meeting.

Like the Clark Fork River Superfund site, for which the EPA had the ultimate say, the BLM had the ultimate say in how the Pinedale Anticline was managed. But where PAWG fell apart (though it's still around and making recommendations), the Clark Fork collaborations have mostly prospered.

Cooperative conservation is still new, and its proponents in the business, nonprofit and bureaucratic world are still working out the kinks, including deciding what, exactly it is. But as a way of doing public business, it's surely here to stay. It's likely that proponents and participants will only become better at it.

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Comments

By George, 10-28-06

If "cooperative conservation" is just a new word for letting field officials be captured by local boomer interests, it won't go far. Decisions of the federal agencies must reflect the national and regional interest as well as local stakeholders' wishes. We have national parks and national forests precisely because local stakeholders 100 years ago were abusing the land. On the other hand, if diverse stakeholders can get together and resolve differences, with the national interest also being recognized, it may have some promise. Diverse scientific input should also be at the table.

By Colonel Bain, 10-28-06

The salt issue in the Big Gov. Richardson state along the Canadian River.. the "inviroment people" have been battling for a long time. Salting the fresh water lake..Lake Meridth in West Texas..Not only mines contaminate but salt does too. Cooperation and Specialist must look at today. Purchacing that which need to be cleaned up here...Keeping dollars were they belong..O give me a home where the water not brome and the..:)

By Marion, 10-28-06

"We have national parks and national forests precisely because local stakeholders 100 years ago were abusing the land." Evidently they weren't abusing it very bad, if it became an NP. some of that land was donated by landowners or sold for a nominal fee so the brag-a-lots could talk about all they had done. Kinda works the same today, the enviros talk about all they have done, but someone else is paying the tab.

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