

# Regionalism in the West: An Inventory and Assessment

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## 1. Introduction

In 1890, after surveying the West, John Wesley Powell published an essay titled “Institutions for the Arid Lands.” [\[2\]](#) In that essay, Powell articulated his vision that the most appropriate institutions for governing western resources are commonwealths defined by watersheds. He reasoned that, “. . . there is a body of interdependent and unified interests and values, all collected in [a] hydrographic basin, and all segregated by well-defined boundary lines from the rest of the world. The people in such a district have common interests, common rights, and common duties, and must necessarily work together for common purposes.” Powell went on to conclude that such people should be allowed to organize “. . . under national and state laws, a great irrigation district, including an entire hydrographic basin, and . . . make their own laws for the division of waters, for the protection and use of the forests, for the protection of the pasturage on the hills, and for the uses of the powers [created by the flow of water].”

Powell’s prescription to organize around watersheds was largely ignored in the formative years of

natural resource policy in the West.<sup>[3]</sup> His vision of watershed democracies, however, is part of a larger story of how American citizens and communities have attempted to govern public affairs on the basis of regions—defined by Webster’s as “a broad geographic area containing a population whose members possess sufficient historical, cultural, economic, or social homogeneity to distinguish them from others.”<sup>[4]</sup> While the history of regionalism is characterized by a mix of successes and failures, there is a renewed interest throughout North

America in addressing land use, natural resource, and environmental problems on a regional basis.<sup>[5]</sup>

According to a group of regional practitioners that recently met in Salt Lake City, regionalism is by definition an integrative approach to policy and management for at least two reasons. First, regionalism looks beyond political and jurisdictional boundaries, embracing a distinctly trans-boundary approach that recognizes “the natural territory of public issues,” such as watersheds, ecosystems, bioregions, or other organic regions. Second, although regional initiatives typically start by focusing on a specific issue, most eventually touch on a mix of social, economic, and environmental issues.

As defined here, regionalism shares many values and strategies with “civic environmentalism<sup>[6]</sup>,” “community-based conservation<sup>[7]</sup>,” “deliberative democracy<sup>[8]</sup>,” and “consensus building<sup>[9]</sup>.” These disciplines are similar in that they are focused on improving communication and participation in natural resource policy and public decision making through inclusive, informed, deliberative forums.

Using different language, each discipline seems to rest on a common premise: if you bring together the right people in constructive forums with the best available information, they are likely to shape effective solutions to shared problems. What distinguishes regionalism from these other disciplines is its focus on the geography of human needs and interests.

Regional initiatives include countless small-scale projects, such as watershed councils and community-based growth management efforts, as well as larger-scale ventures such as the Yukon to the Yellowstone initiative.<sup>[10]</sup> The focus may be water, wildlife, air quality, federal lands, land use and growth management, transportation, or economic development. Regardless of their scale or objective, regional initiatives share a common set of values and beliefs—the need to think and act regionally, across political and jurisdictional boundaries. They also share a common set of frustrations (and advantages) as they seek to create and sustain effective organizations that do not comfortably fit into the established framework of local, state, and federal governments. For this reason, the conversation about regionalism should not be limited to a particular type of regional initiative, such as those with environmental or economic objectives, but should be inclusive of all types of regionalism.

In response to the emergence of regional initiatives throughout North America, Dr. Charles H.W. Foster convened the Harvard Environmental Regionalism Project in 1994.<sup>[11]</sup> The intent of the Harvard

Environmental Regionalism project is to examine trends in regional approaches to land use, natural resource, and environmental issues; identify key ingredients to success; and to develop research and educational materials to further advance this field.

In October 2000, Dr. Foster invited the Western Consensus Council to join this project and focus on regional approaches to natural resource and environmental issues in the American West. The Western Consensus Council, an independent not-for-profit organization that promotes collaborative approaches to natural resource and public policy in the American West, agreed, and organized The Western Regionalism Project (WRP). The WRP is a long-term initiative to document, evaluate, and promote regional approaches to natural resource and environmental policy in the American West. The basic proposition of the WRP is that regional, trans-boundary approaches to land use, natural resource, and environmental issues often lead to more sustainable communities and landscapes. In this respect, regionalism is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Two corollaries to this proposition are (1) that regionalism offers a supplemental, if not alternative, way to govern natural resource-related issues; and (2) the institutional framework for regional initiatives varies according to the objectives, scale, participants, and timeframe of each initiative. The WRP focuses on alternative institutional arrangements that support and promote regionalism, and different strategies for sharing decision-making responsibility and governing regional institutions.

This article is the first step in developing a research, education, and policy agenda to promote regionalism in the West. In short, this article presents the results of three related projects conducted during the past year: (1) an inventory of regional initiatives in the West; (2) a survey of regional practitioners in the West; and (3) a workshop of regional practitioners and scholars in the West. We hope the information and analysis presented in this article provide a baseline of sorts, a preliminary inventory of regional initiatives in the West and prescriptions—for practice, policy, research and education—on how to support and promote regional thinking and action.

## 2. Methodology

In January 2001, students at The University of Montana School of Law started to inventory regional initiatives in the West as part of Dr. McKinney's class on *Natural Resource Dispute Resolution*. The intent of the preliminary inventory was to identify and create a profile of different types of regional initiatives in the West. For purposes of the inventory, the West is defined as those states located entirely west of the 100th meridian, minus Alaska and Hawaii. It includes the eight federal land states that compose the Rocky Mountain West, as well as the states along the West Coast and the western edge of the Great Plains [\[12\]](#).

We identified and created profiles of 72 regional initiatives. Each profile includes a list of participants, the objectives of the initiative, a description of the institutional framework, the scale or region of

the initiative, and contact information. We tried to include examples of regional initiatives across the range of objectives, rather than focusing on one type of regional initiative. This inventory is by no means comprehensive or complete; it is very much a work in progress.

To learn more about the 72 initiatives, the Western Consensus Council distributed a short survey in August 2001. This survey asked regional practitioners to explain why their regional initiative was started; what it has produced; the key ingredients to success; the obstacles and challenges they face in terms of sustaining an effective initiative; and suggestions on the types of services that a “center of excellence” might provide. As of September 11<sup>th</sup>, we received responses from 46 of the 72 initiatives surveyed, for a response rate of 64 percent.

During August, we continued to identify additional regional initiatives in the West. In addition to the 72 cases, the National Association of Regional Councils lists 60 councils of government or metropolitan planning organizations in the West.<sup>[13]</sup> Not surprisingly, California has the greatest number of regional councils, at twenty-four. Only Montana and Wyoming do not have any regional councils. We did not survey all 60 of the regional councils of government or metropolitan planning organizations, but we have completed preliminary profiles on many of these regional initiatives. Based on the inventory and survey, we convened a workshop in December 2001, in Salt Lake City, to learn more about the status, trends, and possibilities of regionalism in the West. Twenty-two people, including 18 practitioners (people who lead and manage regional initiatives) participated in the working session.

### 3. Why Regionalism in the West?

One of the discussions at the working session explored the forces and trends driving the emergence and proliferation of regional initiatives. Participants cited four primary forces converging on the American West at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that are consistent with the literature on regionalism.<sup>[14]</sup>

First, informed by complexity theory, we can see that regionalism is an organic, inner-directed response to human needs and interests.<sup>[15]</sup> The comparative advantage of regionalism as a framework for policy and management is its insistence on addressing human needs and interests according to the “natural geography” of the problem or opportunity. This approach has emerged in part from attempts to protect endangered species and their habitat, an improved understanding of ecosystems (or “natural regions”), and an increased ability and willingness to take integrative approaches to solving problems. Regionalism recognizes the value of integrating social, economic, and environmental concerns; multiple interests and viewpoints; and different ways of learning.

Second, advances in information, communication, and transportation technologies allow people to work together at global (Earth being the largest example of a “natural,” organic region), continental, and subcontinental scales.<sup>[16]</sup> Globalization has led to the integration of the world’s economies, which forces

people to think and act regionally to remain competitive, both to sustain the local economy and to interact with markets around the globe.

Third, regionalism is a response to the failure of existing institutions to effectively solve problems that transcend political and jurisdictional boundaries.<sup>[17]</sup> People are looking for better ways to resolve trans-boundary issues such as transportation planning in urban centers, wildlife management in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, air quality on the Colorado Plateau, or land use and recreation in the Columbia River Gorge. Some regional efforts are attempts to pre-empt heavy handed or misguided regulatory enforcement. In other cases, people recognize a “common fate”—that “our” future is linked to “their” future and cooperation is the best path to a sustainable solution.

Fourth, the re-emergence of federalism and emphasis on decentralized government compels states and communities to think and act regionally to pool resources and resolve common problems. In short, regionalism is proving to be an effective way to sustain communities and landscapes. The larger the playing field, the more resources can be applied to the problem, and the easier it is to make tradeoffs among competing interests. In addition, Congress and other leaders have promoted regional approaches from the top down through policies and executive orders<sup>[18]</sup>. Some public interest laws (and subsequent litigation) have compelled agencies to engage in regional approaches<sup>[19]</sup>.

#### **4. Types of Regional Initiatives**

Based on our preliminary inventory, regional initiatives in the West can be characterized by who initiates them, at what geographic scale, and for what purpose.

##### **A. Initiation**

Regional initiatives in the West are initiated by a number of different actors. Citizens, perhaps frustrated by the inability of existing jurisdictions and institutions to solve particular problems, have catalyzed and convened a number of regional initiatives. The Malpai Borderlands Group, Grand Canyon Trust, Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Coalition, and the Lead Partnership Group are just a few of the many regional initiatives in the West that have been initiated and convened by citizens. Some of these initiatives are more organized than others, some are more advocacy-oriented, and others are more inclusive forums for education and problem solving.

Other regional initiatives have been catalyzed and coordinated by one or more levels of government. Some initiatives, such as the Missouri River Basin Association, the Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee, and the Southwest Strategy, represent partnerships among multiple levels of government, including local, state, federal, and in some cases tribal jurisdictions. Other initiatives, such as the Sierra Nevada Framework for Conservation and Collaboration, reflect the commitment of particular government agencies to think and act regionally within the confines of their own jurisdiction. The Sierra Nevada Framework is one of the most ambitious efforts undertaken by the U.S. Forest Service to employ the

philosophy and strategy of ecosystem management to the stewardship of national forests.

Still other regional initiatives are initiated and managed by public-private partnerships. The Pacific Northwest Economic Region is designed to promote economic development and free trade among several states and provinces in the Pacific Northwest. It was statutorily endorsed by the multiple states and provinces, and is governed and funded by representatives from the public and private sectors. Likewise, the Outside Las Vegas Foundation is a trans-boundary partnership among local, state, and federal governments and the private sector designed to manage growth and preserve the environmental quality surrounding Las Vegas.

The fact that regional initiatives are initiated by a diversity of actors suggests that there is widespread recognition of the need for and value of trans-boundary approaches to land use, natural resources, and other environmental issues. The variety of ways in which regional initiatives emerge also reflects a natural laboratory in which multiple experiments flourish and provide different lessons on what works.

## **B. Geographic Scale**

Regional initiatives in the West are organized at different geographic scales, from small watersheds to multi-national ecosystems. At one end of the spectrum are numerous intra-state watershed councils.<sup>[20]</sup> As used here, “watershed council” is an umbrella term for regionally based initiatives defined by a focus on one or more aspects of a watershed. While there are literally hundreds of watershed councils throughout the West, all of which might be defined as experiments in regionalism, the inventory of regional initiatives is limited to watershed councils that encompass more than one established jurisdiction, such as a county or national forest boundary, but fall within a particular state. For example, the Big Hole Watershed Committee cuts across two counties, two national forests, federal land managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, state land managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources, and private land.

The second type of regional initiative, defined by geographic scale, is intra-state place-based partnerships. These partnerships are delineated by geographical and social characteristics that define a region within a particular state. In some cases, the region may be a watershed, but the initiative’s focus reaches beyond water management issues. For example, the Applegate Partnership defines itself in part by the boundaries of the Applegate River watershed in southwestern Oregon, but the partnership’s objectives include promoting economic diversity and community values. Likewise, the Great Valley Center focuses its efforts on supporting the economic, social, and environmental well being of California’s Great Central Valley, which spans several watersheds between the Sierras and the coast ranges from Redding in the north to Fresno in the south. Other placed-based partnerships focus on a swath of forest, range of mountains, or region of economies.

From intrastate regional initiatives, we move to inter-state initiatives. These initiatives encompass more than one state and may be defined by watersheds, such as the Missouri River Basin Association, or other regional characteristics, such as the Grand Canyon Trust.

The fourth type of regional initiative in terms of geographic scale, is multi-national initiatives. Some of these initiatives are defined by partnerships among national governments, such as the Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park and Biosphere Reserve, which is focused on the preservation of unique wildland resources in the northern Rocky Mountains region in the United States and Canada. Others include working arrangements among multiple states and provinces, such as the Pacific Northwest Economic Region. Other multi-national initiatives are defined by watersheds that cut across international boundaries, such as the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Coalition along the U.S.-Mexico border, and the Yellowstone to the Yukon initiative, which reaches from the headwaters of the Yellowstone River in the U.S. to the Yukon River in Canada.

The fifth and sixth types of regional initiatives focus on issues bounded by metropolitan areas, such as transportation, wastewater, and related urban challenges. Urban planning initiatives include efforts by neighboring cities and counties to work together to solve common problems or to gain efficiency and economies of scale by sharing infrastructure and services. For example, Envision Utah brings together state and local governments, private industry, and non-profit organizations to develop growth management strategies focused on preserving Utah's quality of life. Regional councils of government are more formalized partnerships among local governments. The Sante Fe Regional Planning Authority, for example, is designed to promote effective land use planning and growth management in the city and county of Sante Fe. The Western Colorado Council of Government, by contrast, encompasses multiple counties west of the continental divide, to not only coordinate the delivery of services, but also to foster a regional political coalition in affairs with the more populous eastern slope of the Rockies, including the greater Denver metropolitan area.

This typology of regional initiatives based on geographic scale suggests that regionalism is at once a unifying theme and an adaptive concept. The idea of people and organizations, both public and private, working across political and jurisdictional boundaries seems to be a desirable way to approach land use, natural resource, and other public problems at nearly all geographic scales.

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### C. Purpose

There seem to be at least six objectives for creating regional, trans-boundary initiatives. These different objectives reinforce one another, and suggest a natural progression from knowledge- and community-building to advocacy and governance.

**Knowledge Building:** The first objective is to conduct research and education. Several initiatives, such as the Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project, the Blue Mountain Natural Resources Institute, and several

regional think tanks, are designed to promote a deeper sense of the social, economic, and ecological characteristics of a particular region. Some initiatives are also designed to develop the capacity of citizens and officials within a region to work together on issues of common concern. Knowledge building seems to be the foundation for most regional initiatives, suggesting that it is a necessary condition before moving on to other objectives.

**Community Building:** In addition to fostering awareness and understanding of a particular region, some initiatives are expressly designed to stimulate conversation, mutual understanding, and a common sense of place within a particular region. Many watershed councils and other place-based partnerships, for example, often start as forums to exchange ideas and better understand their region. In many cases, these regional forums take on other objectives, such as solving particular problems. The Western Charter Project, for example, is designed to foster a conversation about the region—its past, present, and future. Since 1997, the Great Valley Center has raised awareness and understanding of the Great Central Valley as a distinct region in California and now works to improve planning and decision-making processes in the region.

**Share Resources:** Another objective or function of regional initiatives is to share resources, particularly information. The Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee, the Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park and Biosphere Reserve, and several other initiatives are designed to improve coordination of programs and services among agencies and organizations within a region.

**Advisory:** The fourth objective of regional initiatives is to provide input and advice in the spirit of solving particular problems. Not surprisingly, this is a relatively common objective. A variety of urban planning initiatives, such as efforts in Washoe County, Nevada, the Santa Fe Regional Planning Authority, and Envision Utah, are designed to solve trans-boundary issues related to growth and land use. The Missouri River Basin Association is an interstate forum to address problems related to the use and management of the Missouri River, which flows through at least ten different states.

**Advocacy:** Another objective or function of some regional initiatives is to promote a distinctive agenda within a particular region. The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Project, the Grand Canyon Trust, and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, for example, are designed to pursue environmental objectives in their respective regions. The Pacific Northwest Economic Region is designed to promote economic opportunities within that region, and the CANAMEX project fosters interstate transportation planning. While the specific objectives of these regional initiatives varies, they are all designed to advocate a particular outcome or policy.

**Govern:** The sixth and final objective or function of regional initiatives is to govern—that is, to make, administer, and enforce policy within a designated region. This type of regional initiative appears to be relatively rare in the West. The only two examples that we have identified to date are the Columbia River Gorge Commission and the Lake Tahoe Regional Planning Authority.

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## 5. Types of Institutional Frameworks

Given the source and diversity of objectives of regional initiatives, it is not surprising that there appear to be at least nine different institutional models for creating and structuring regional institutions.

**A. Ad Hoc Partnerships.** These types of arrangements are most often characterized as citizen-driven initiatives. That is, they emerge from the efforts of citizens with a common interest in a particular region, and often do not have any official government sanction or authority. Some ad hoc partnerships may include governmental representatives, but many do not.

**B. Non-Government Organizations.** More often than not, regional initiatives that are designed to promote environmental objectives are formed and governed as not-for-profit organizations. Examples include the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Alliance For The Wild Rockies, and the Flathead Lakers. Other regional initiatives, such as the Missouri River Basin Association, also operate as not-for-profit corporations.

**C. Research Organizations.** Initiatives whose primary goal is to accumulate and disseminate information are typically affiliated with a university. Examples include the Utton Transboundary Resource Center and the Center of the American West. The West is also home to a number of centers for research, study, and theory development on regional issues. These think tanks, such as the Center for the Rocky Mountain West; the Stegner Center for Land, Resources, and the Environment; and others, tend to emphasize multi-disciplinary approaches to exploring the natural, cultural, political, and economic aspects of decision- and policy-making in the West.

**D. Government Sponsored Initiatives.** These initiatives are catalyzed and/or supported by one or more levels of government. This category is composed of several subcategories:

- (a) **Statutory** - recognized by state or federal legislature. Examples include the Flathead Basin Commission (created by the Montana legislature), the Pacific Northwest Economic Region (created by several state and provincial legislatures), and the Henry's Fork Watershed Council (created by the Idaho legislature).
- (b) **Executive Order** - mandated through executive action by the President or a Governor. Examples include the Southwest Basin Native Fish Watershed Advisory Group (created by the Governor in Idaho).
- (c) **Interstate/International Compacts** – between state/federal or state/state agencies. Examples include the Colorado River Water Compact, Northwest Power Planning Council, and the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and Biosphere Reserve.
- (d) **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** – an understanding that the various groups will attempt to coordinate or mutually delegate some level of planning or authority. Examples include the Southwest Strategy and the Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee.
- (e) **Agency-driven.** This category is often found when a state or federal agency (or both) realizes that there is a problem or issue that is generally in the public interest. In response, one or more agencies

take the initiative to create an otherwise ad hoc partnership, such as the San Carlos/Safford/Duncan Watershed and the Little Colorado River Multiple Objective Management Group.

- E. Hybrid Initiatives.** This category includes groups that originated under one institutional framework and were later transformed into another type of institution or organization. For example, the Rio Puerco Watershed Management Committee was originally formed in an ad hoc manner and was later recognized by Congress under Public Law 104-333.

## 6. Accomplishments of Regional Initiatives

Given that the intent of this article is to provide an overview of the status and trends of regionalism in the West, we have not developed case studies or examined in detail the performance of any regional initiatives. However, regional practitioners were asked in the survey to characterize the nature of their accomplishments. The survey did not impose a definition of success for regional initiatives, but rather provided a list of different indicators of accomplishments, and asked respondents to check the ones that characterized their performance.

Forty-two out of 46 organizations responding to the survey report that they have improved communication and collaboration; 38 out of 46 have increased understanding of the social, economic, and environmental characteristics of the region; 34 out of 46 have increased public awareness of the region; 33 out of 46 have fostered policy outcomes; and 29 out of 46 have implemented on-the-ground projects.

These results indicate that, at least for the regional initiatives that responded to the survey, much of their self-defined success revolves around procedural indicators—improving communication and collaboration, increasing understanding, and raising public awareness. These accomplishments do not, in and of themselves, immediately result in on-the-ground accomplishments. However, they establish the necessary relationships and foster a common understanding that provides the foundation for future success. The fact that the most frequently cited indicators of success are procedural also suggests that it takes time to develop and implement policy and management plans. From this perspective, it appears that small steps to improve the process of regionalism may provide the motivation for more substantial accomplishments down the road.

At the same time, the accomplishments in terms of process are important in themselves. Many respondents seemed to be quite enthusiastic and satisfied by successfully creating trans-boundary partnerships, conducting research, and raising awareness and understanding of their particular region. Given that regional thinking and action runs perpendicular to our established system of arbitrarily defined jurisdictions and institutions, regional initiatives should be viewed as long-term experiments. The results of our survey, albeit somewhat limited, suggest that important process changes are under way.<sup>[21]</sup>

## 7. Key Ingredients to Success

Although the regional initiatives surveyed vary in many respects, they seem to share a number of common ingredients in terms of their success. The most frequently cited reason for success was the dedication of the participants. Forty out of 46 respondents noted the critical importance of having motivated, committed people to help create a regional vision and then develop the means to make the vision a reality. Whether public or private, professional or volunteer, talented leaders often create and sustain regional initiatives despite a lack of resources and political or public support.

Another commonly cited ingredient to effective regional initiatives, one that no doubt reflects the ability of strong, thoughtful leaders, is collaboration among individuals and groups with diverse viewpoints. Thirty-six survey respondents identified the critical need to build partnerships with people and organizations across jurisdictions, to foster broad-based political coalitions, and to promote processes that provide an opportunity for all interests to be meaningfully involved. Participants at the Salt Lake City workshop echoed this conclusion, and emphasized the need to establish ground rules for inclusive participation early on as a way to build trust and understanding, which lays the foundation for building agreements and a sense of community within a region.

Thirty-one respondents said that agency support was critical to their success. Local, state, and federal officials can provide legitimacy and credibility, as well as authority, to regional initiatives. They also provide funding and technical assistance. The workshop participants agreed that, if the intent of a regional initiative is to influence public decision-making, one of the most valuable contributions of agencies is to link the efforts and outcomes of ad hoc forums to formal decision-making structures and existing political jurisdictions. In addition to agency support, public support was cited by 19 respondents as critical to implementing effective regional initiatives.

Another important ingredient to success is the availability of resources, including people, funding, information, equipment (particularly geographic information systems) and time. Twenty-five respondents said that the availability of adequate resources at the appropriate time is critical to moving regional initiatives forward.

Finally, 21 respondents said that it is important to define “meaningful, realistic boundaries.” Building

on this observation, participants at the workshop agreed that effective regional initiatives focus on a core area that has integrity and definition, and are more comfortable with the boundaries of a region being fuzzy.

## 8. Obstacles and Challenges

When asked to identify obstacles and challenges to sustaining the effectiveness of a regional initiative, 31 out of 46 survey respondents said “limited resources,” making this the most common response. Resources found lacking include knowledge, time, funding, and information. Workshop participants echoed this theme. One said that “Regional practitioners learn on the job. We need training, mentoring, and opportunities to share experience and ideas with other practitioners.” Another agreed, saying that practitioners need training in collaborative problem solving in particular. “We struggle with time issues,” said another participant, “deadlines, time as money, conflicting expectations of how fast or slow to move, and the public’s short attention span.” The lack of resources can lead to turnover, burnout, and generational change (within regional organizations and among constituents), which makes it difficult to build on progress and reconcile old and new values.

The next three most commonly cited challenges focus on agency-related problems, inadequate participation, and opposition from the general public, political officials, and/or private interests.

Several survey respondents said that many agencies are reluctant to engage in multi-jurisdictional processes because they have different missions and mandates and limited resources. Some agencies claim that existing laws and regulations, particularly the Federal Advisory Committee Act, create a significant barrier to working with citizens, interest groups, and other agencies. Several respondents and workshop participants also perceived that many agencies are reluctant to engage in regional, trans-boundary initiatives because of historical animosity, the need to maintain control over the agenda and outcomes, and little to no experience in sharing responsibility for common problems.

Practitioners also said that hierarchical decision making—common in bureaucracies—doesn’t work on regional issues. “No *one* person makes the sorts of decisions we deal with,” they said. Sometimes decision makers are uncooperative, uninterested, or overwhelmed. “Government agencies tend to do their work ‘by the book,’” said one practitioner, “with no room for flexibility or creativity. Some resist sharing power or decision making authority.”

Fragmented jurisdictions owned by multiple public and private parties make it difficult to work effectively at the regional level. Distrust among stakeholders is often a problem. People also need to be convinced that they are likely to achieve more of their interests by working together at a regional level than through any alternative approach—in short, that regional, trans-boundary approaches add value. One practitioner said that “People focus on immediate, personal concerns and personal agendas. They lose sight of larger-scale opportunities and long-range potential.”

Practitioners often face opposition to the idea of regional approaches in general, and sometimes to a particular initiative. The public is often wary of government-initiated regional initiatives. Workshop participants said that negative public reactions most likely stem from misinformation and misperceptions, and skepticism about a new way of doing business. Some people extrapolate from unfavorable experiences with government planning and regulation. One workshop participant noted that political will is not always built on local public opinion. “Political support often comes from outside the region,” he said, “particularly on environmental issues. Urban centers provide political and financial support, but we struggle to build similar constituencies within the region itself. When people’s sense of self-identity doesn’t jibe with the region’s identity (as defined by a given issue), it is hard to promote a cohesive sense of place. We also face a constant tension among local, state, and national interests.”

A final concern shared by most regional practitioners is the question of authority. As one practitioner put it, “When we make decisions that carry clout, we run into questions of governance—how is governance shared among the region’s constituencies? Who has the power to enforce these decisions? Who provides incentives for compliance? Who pays the bills?”

## **9. Strategies to Support and Promote Regionalism**

Based on the proposition that regionalism is an effective approach to land use, natural resources, and environmental protection in the West, we asked people in the survey and during the practitioners’ workshop what resources or services would most help them. Taken as a whole, people responding to the survey and participants at the workshop seem to suggest that it would be helpful to (1) build the capacity of existing regional practitioners and initiatives to be as effective as possible; and (2) build a constituency for regionalism. Four related strategies to accomplish these objectives emerge from the survey and Salt Lake City workshop.

The first strategy is to sustain and expand the network of practitioners that convened in Salt Lake City. The participants agreed that the audience should in large part be limited to practitioners—people who have similar jobs leading and managing regional initiatives. They suggested that it might be valuable to invite other regional practitioners, particularly people working on regional initiatives within federal, state, and local government. The participants also concluded that it is important to hear from scholars and other regional

thinkers, and that it is valuable to meet on at least an annual basis to exchange ideas and identify best practices.

To further build the capacity of existing regional practitioners, participants suggested the potential value of creating a listserv and a website. They also suggested that it would be helpful to document successful models of regionalism, and to develop training seminars on designing regional initiatives, managing regional organizations, and strategies for collaborative problem solving.

The second strategy is research and communication. Twenty-two respondents to the survey agreed that it would be valuable to gather, analyze, and redistribute information. The participants at the workshop were even more emphatic about the need for additional research, case studies, and communication materials.

Two of the most practical research questions identified by the participants at the workshop are (1) How do regional initiatives survive and thrive in the current system of local, state, and federal government systems? and (2) How can and/or should the efforts of non-governmental regional initiatives be effectively connected to the existing system of public decision making? This second question raises the related question of what the most appropriate roles are for the public and private sectors. Participants also suggested that it would be valuable to identify and examine different models of regionalism, to identify when regional approaches are most appropriate, and to identify the key ingredients to convening and coordinating effective regional initiatives. [\[22\]](#)

Several people also expressed an interest in learning more about regional models of governance, understanding how they emerge, how they are structured, and how effective they are. While this would help existing practitioners, additional evidence on the comparative advantages of regionalism in terms of environmental quality, economic development, and social equity, and the conditions under which regionalism works, would be helpful in promoting regionalism within existing institutions.

This research and communication program should also examine legal opportunities and barriers to regional governance, [\[23\]](#) as well as review and develop policy initiatives and incentives to think and act regionally. [\[24\]](#) It should produce peer-reviewed case studies—both successes and failures, and prepare training manuals on the use of collaborative problem solving, computer modeling [\[25\]](#), implementation strategies, and other techniques to improve the effectiveness of regional initiatives.

At a very practical level, participants suggested that it is important to clarify our vocabulary as a means to improve our ability to communicate with each other and to build a constituency to support regionalism. Along these lines, participants agreed that we need a more rigorous framework for thinking about the place of regionalism among other approaches to natural resource policy and management. Finally, participants agreed that we should develop and incorporate effective feedback loops into both the theory and practice of regionalism. On the one hand, practitioners should build in opportunities for reflective learning, which might then suggest ways to adapt their practice to be more effective. Likewise, practitioners and scholars should

evaluate what works, explain why, and integrate such lessons into education and training programs.

The third strategy is to provide education and training. Twenty-seven survey respondents suggested that it would be valuable to convene seminars, workshops, and other educational programs. Based on the very successful model of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy,<sup>[26]</sup> this strategy might begin with a senior executive institute for existing practitioners.<sup>[27]</sup> The institute could provide opportunities for peer consultation and advice (suggested by 25 out of 46 survey respondents); advice on fund-raising (suggested by 27 out of 46 respondents); strategies for public participation and collaborative problem solving, particularly among stakeholders who are difficult to bring to the table; and technical assistance and referrals to appropriate experts on other topics. Participants at the workshop also suggested that it might be valuable to establish a fellowship and/or mentoring program that would allow practitioners, and perhaps members of their boards of directors, to spend time working with other regional practitioners.

To complement the senior executive institute, the education and training strategy should also include one or more skill-building courses to build the capacity of practitioners and the constituency for regional initiatives. As one member of the national advisory board for the Harvard Environmental Regionalism Project said, we need to “. . . train people who can facilitate thinking across boundaries, to work together to recognize and save natural character, natural resources and the environment. One attribute of these leaders might be that they are respectful of both people and places.”<sup>[28]</sup>

The fourth and final strategy is to build a constituency for regional thinking and action by working with policy makers and other officials within existing institutional arrangements. If regionalism is more than a supplement to existing institutions and systems for public decision-making—if it offers an alternative form of governance—then it is critical to raise awareness, understanding, and interest among existing decision makers and other people who may be affected by regional approaches to policy and management.

The participants identified two specific needs along these lines. First, local, state and federal governments should be encouraged to re-organize, or at least to allow re-organization, to fit regional needs and interests. This is fundamentally a challenge of fostering the political and public will to change our systems of problem solving and governance. Second, as mentioned above, new models for regional governance (the authority to make and enforce policy) need to be identified, examined, and developed to facilitate a change in political and public will.

To begin to accomplish these objectives, the participants agreed that the Bush administration, particularly the Council on Environmental Quality, should develop an executive order and/or policy guidance on the need for and value of regional initiatives. Recently, there has been a strong push to seek Congressional authorization for a series of “pilot projects” or experimental approaches to federal lands management.<sup>[29]</sup> The National Forest Foundation and the Bush Administration have also expressed interest in pilot projects, which might include one or more regional, trans-boundary approaches to natural resource policy and

management.<sup>[30]</sup> Members of Congress should build on this interest and explore the possibility of creating a Congressional Caucus on Regionalism. To promote regionalism at the local and state level, and to establish more efficient and effective mechanisms to coordinate activities with relevant agencies and public officials, the Kennedy School of Government, in consultation with regional practitioners, should develop model executive orders, statutes, and other policy instruments.

In addition to the four strategies outlined above, the participants in the workshop also considered the value of creating a “center of excellence.” The idea of a center of excellence, whose mission would be to support and promote regionalism in North America, emerged from the Harvard Environmental Regionalism Project and is based on the premise that there is currently no such center to meet the needs and interests of existing and emerging regional practitioners.<sup>[31]</sup>

Participants agreed that it would be helpful to have some sort of framework to promote and support regional initiatives, but rather than a “center of excellence,” they preferred to talk in terms of a “network of practitioners.” Several people expressed concern about creating any formal organization or arrangement to “institutionalize” regionalism, suggesting that regionalism is more likely to thrive if it is free to be organic, flexible, and integrative. Most of the participants agreed that a network of practitioners would best serve the needs and interests of practitioners, and could most likely be supported by existing intellectual and facilitative resources. That said, it is important to acknowledge that sustaining a network of practitioners would in itself require some type of organizational home and resources. So, whether it is characterized as a “center of excellence” or simply a network of practitioners, participants seem to agree that there is value in creating and sustaining a place to serve the needs and interests of regional practitioners.

Based on responses to the survey, and the input and advice of participants at the workshop, a “center of excellence” could provide one or more of the services outlined above, and might also establish a clearinghouse of ideas, information, models, and success stories; maintain a roster of who knows what and who can provide which resources and services; generate and distribute funding; and encourage entrepreneurship and experimentation with different models.

## 10. Conclusions

This article is a first step. It documents the status and trends of regionalism in the West, analyzes the promise and pitfalls of regional initiatives, and offers several prescriptions for practice, policy, research, and education. The image that emerges from this inventory and assessment is that regionalism is an important means to sustain communities and landscapes. What is most promising is that regionalism is not confined to the federal government or any other sector. Many different groups are playing important roles at many different levels. While many of the initiatives are relatively young, compared to other approaches to management and policy, they provide an emerging set of experiments for learning about the theory and practice of regionalism.

Regionalism is challenging because it runs counter to established policies and institutions, and requires the type of “collaborative leadership” that is often hard to find. However, considering the feedback from the survey and the enthusiasm of participants at the workshop, it is exciting to consider the possibilities. People are excited about a renewed vision for land use, natural resource, and environmental management, and while success is at times slow and incremental, there is a shared sense that “we are really on to something,” as the workshop participants concluded.

The challenge now is to create a portfolio of strategies that support existing regional initiatives and foster regional thinking and action within existing institutional arrangements.

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[1] Matthew McKinney is the Executive Director of the Western Consensus Council. Craig Fitch is a Research Associate with the Council, and Will Harmon is the Director of Research and Communication for the Western Consensus Council.

[2] John Wesley Powell, “Institutions for the Arid Lands,” *The Century Magazine* (May-June., 1890): 111-116.

[3] The standard biography of Powell and his ideas is Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* (University of Nebraska Press, 1953).

[4] *Webster’s Unabridged Third New International Dictionary* (1993).

[5] For an excellent summary of the history of regionalism in the United States, see Kathryn A. Foster, *Regionalism on Purpose* (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2001). See also Martha Derthick, *Between Nation and State: Regional Organizations of the United States* (The Brookings Institution, 1974); and Ethan Seltzer, “Regional Planning in America: Updating Earlier Visions,” *Land Lines* (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, November 2000): 4-6.

[6] Dewitt John, *Civic Environmentalism: Alternatives to Regulation in States and Communities* (Congressional Quarterly, 1994).

[7] Philip Brick, Donald Snow, and Sarah Van De Wetering, eds., *Across the Great Divide: Explorations in Collaborative Conservation and the American West* (Island Press, 2001).

[8] John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

[9] Lawrence Susskind, et al., eds., *The Consensus Building Handbook* (Sage Publications, 2000).

[10] See the attached inventory of regional initiatives in the West for specific examples.

[11] Dr. Foster is a Research Professor at the Kennedy School of Government, and has been actively involved in regional policy, planning, and management for over 50 years. Charles H.W. Foster and William B. Meyer, *The Harvard Environmental Regionalism Project* (Environment and Natural Resources Program, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, December 2000); Charles H. W. Foster, *Managing Resources as Whole Systems: A Primer for Managers* (Environment and Natural Resources Program, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, December 1997).

[12] The complete inventory is presented as an appendix to this article, and is also available on-line at [www.headwatersnews.org](http://www.headwatersnews.org).

[13] See [www.narc.org](http://www.narc.org).

[14] See footnote 5.

- [15] Daniel Kemmis, *This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West* (Island Press, 2001).
- [16] See footnote 15.
- [17] Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton, *The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl* (Island Press, 2001).
- [18] See footnote 11.
- [19] See Robert B. Keiter, Ted Boling, and Louise Milkman, "Legal Perspectives on Ecosystem Management: Legitimizing a New Federal Land Management Policy," in N.C. Johnson et. al., eds, *Ecological Stewardship: A Common Reference for Ecosystem Management* (Elsevier Science, 1999): volume 3, 9-41. See also Robert B. Keiter, "Taking Account of the Ecosystem on the Public Domain: Law and Ecology in the Greater Yellowstone Region," *University of Colorado Law Review* 60(4)(1989): 923-1007.
- [20] Perhaps the best summary and evaluation of watershed councils in the West is Doug Kenney, et al., *The New Watershed Sourcebook* (Natural Resources Law Center, University of Colorado School of Law, 1999).
- [21] For more on the success of regional initiatives, see Doug Kenney, et al., *The New Watershed Sourcebook* (Natural Resources Law Center, University of Colorado School of Law, 1999); The Keystone Center, *The Keystone National Policy Dialogue on Ecosystem Management: Final Report* (The Keystone Center, October 1996); and Stephen L. Yaffee, et al., *Ecosystem Management in the United States: An Assessment of Current Experience* (Island Press, 1996). John E. Thorson, *River of Promise, River of Peril: The Politics of Managing the Missouri River* (University Press of Kansas, 1994), provides a superb study of efforts to manage the Missouri River Basin, one of the largest eco-regions in the United States. Robert B. Keiter, "Taking Account of the Ecosystem on the Public Domain: Law and Ecology in the Greater Yellowstone Region," *University of Colorado Law Review* 60(4)(1989): 923-1007, provides an insightful examination of regional approaches to land and resource management in and around America's first national park.
- [22] Several people have suggested that it might be valuable to convene the community of scholars that specialize in regional, trans-boundary approaches to policy and management to identify the "best practices" in terms of the scientific and technical "field tools" required for regionalism. Such a meeting or ongoing conversations among "experts" would complement an annual gathering of practitioners. It might also be valuable to create local partnerships among practitioners and universities with expertise in regional science and policy. In other words, encourage university faculty and programs to support regional initiatives that are close in proximity.
- [23] See Robert B. Keiter, Ted Boling, and Louise Milkman, "Legal Perspectives on Ecosystem Management: Legitimizing a New Federal Land Management Policy," in N.C. Johnson et. al., eds, *Ecological Stewardship: A Common Reference for Ecosystem Management* (Elsevier Science, 1999): volume 3, 9-41.
- [24] See, for example, the ENLIBRA Principles adopted by the Western Governor's Association. [www.westgov.org](http://www.westgov.org).
- [25] For example, several people suggested that it would be very helpful to encourage public and private organizations to use a common format for geographic information systems, census data, and other relevant information.
- [26] See [www.lincolnst.org](http://www.lincolnst.org)
- [27] The "network of practitioners" might be reframed as a senior executive institute.
- [28] Letter from Robert L. Bendick, Florida Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, to Dr. Charles H.W.

Foster, dated February 8, 2002.

[29] See Daniel Kemmis, *This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West* (Island Press 2001); and [www.crmw.org](http://www.crmw.org).

[30] One of the primary challenges facing proposals for “pilot projects” is how to provide people a sufficient amount of autonomy to create innovative and effective strategies, while at the time requiring an appropriate degree of accountability. On strategies to foster “accountable autonomy,” see Archon Fung, “Accountable Autonomy: Toward Empowered Deliberation in Chicago Schools and Policing,” *Politics and Society* 29(1)(2001):73-103; and Edward P. Weber, “The Question of Accountability in Historical Perspective: From Jackson to Contemporary Grassroots Ecosystem Management,” *Administration and Society* 31(4)(1999): 451-494.

[31] Charles H.W. Foster, *Fostering Conservation and Environmental Regionalism: The Center of Excellence Approach* (Harvard Environmental Regionalism Project, Draft of January 15, 2002).