THE ETOWAH HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN OUTREACH PROGRAM: A SOCIAL NETWORKS BASED APPROACH TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract. This paper and presentation describe the unique outreach and public participation program supplementing the development of the Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)—a planning effort involving the local governments drained by the Etowah river and several regional, state and national ecological research and resource management agencies including the University of Georgia, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia Conservancy and Upper Etowah River Alliance. The HCP outreach program uses a social networks based approach towards gathering input and community involvement by focusing on the structural and interactional criteria of community social networks (Stokowski, 1994). That is, by focusing on network linkages among community members, and the roles that community members play in social networks, the HCP outreach program and planning process become local movements created, driven and supported by community members, rather than simply programs created by outsiders, in which local residents participate in but do not create or design. This talk and paper address the theoretical basis for using a networks based approach towards outreach, as well as the components and objectives of outreach program itself and the HCP advisory committee's developing plans to document and evaluate the success of the outreach program.

INTRODUCTION

Public participation. Outreach. Local involvement. Community action. Gathering stakeholder input. These concepts are becoming increasingly common themes in the grant proposals, mission statements, work plans and project initiatives of ecological research and natural resource management agencies across Georgia, the southern states and nation. Yet, each concept has several meanings, and in practice can be completed in an enormous variety of ways, making action towards goals involving these ideas difficult and frustrating. Questions like *what is community? Who are the stakeholders? What is enough participation? How does one reach and involve stakeholders?* plague many outreach coordinators and project managers, and indeed, these questions won't be definitively answered by this presentation. This presentation will, however, shed light on these questions by exploring the successes and failures of one outreach program—the social networks based approach implemented through the planning process of Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan.

This presentation examines the theoretical foundations of a social networks based approach towards gathering stakeholder and community input for natural resource management decisions and planning processes; outlines the Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan's outreach program, one example of the social networks approach in action; and explores one frequently missing piece of outreach programs—an evaluation of success.

This paper is relevant for several reasons. First, individuals and communities across Georgia are historically fiercely independent, staunch opposers of top-down government decision making, and rightfully insist in being a part of planning processes regarding the management of local natural resources. Therefore, understanding methods for reaching, educating and involving local communities is imperative for management agencies in the state. The social networks approach sheds light on the structures that form and define community, allowing outreach and community participation programs to tap into those structures. Second, environmental and watershed groups are becoming more common across the state. Local groups are often started by a small number of dedicated individuals linked by social networks and trying hard to develop linkages to the broader community. Over time, competition for resources among organizations, diverging interests, and the common distractions of life make building and maintaining network linkages difficult for local groups, and staying power begins to run low. Understanding the ways that local groups and individuals fit into larger social structures, how social networks grow and change over time, and how communities develop longevity, can help local groups become fixtures in the community, even as individuals

come and go. Third, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division is exploring the possibility of using a watershed approach towards managing the state's water needs. This approach requires that statewide management agencies understand local communities, and develop relationships with community members and organizations, in ways that are uncommon for large government agencies. The social networks based approach may facilitate the development of an effective and lasting model for watershed planning in the state of Georgia.

This presentation is for resource managers struggling with outreach programs, wondering *how to start an public involvement program? When to be finished?* and *why community members don't come to meetings?* as well as other vexing and related questions. It is also for marketing and public relations personnel wondering how to define and reach their audience in a way that appreciates, and is specific to, the local community. Lastly, this presentation is for anyone who has written the words *public participation, outreach, local involvement,* or *stakeholder* into a grant proposal, project plan or mission statement.

This presentation does not pretend to have answers, or provide relief, to questions and frustrations related to public participation. However, by critically examining the outreach efforts of Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan this paper and presentation will improve our understanding of outreach in the context of community and social networks, as well as identify methods for analyzing and evaluating outreach methods to make them more efficient, effective and successful.

BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan

The Etowah River flows along the northern fringe of the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan region. The Etowah Basin drains parts of 11 counties, among them some of the fastest growing in the United States. Three fish species and several freshwater mussels of the Etowah system are currently listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act and others are listed under Georgia state law.

To prevent the extirpation of these species, the University of Georgia, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Nature Conservancy, the Georgia Conservancy and diverse stakeholders are working together, with local governments, to create a regional habitat conservation plan. The Etowah HCP will provide protection for imperiled species through stormwater controls, a water supply planning framework and permanent protection of high priority watersheds.

Community and Social Networks

Defining community is a difficult task. For example, communities can be geographic in nature, such as those based on government boundaries, or based on spiritual ties that extend across geographic boundaries, such as the Catholic, Jewish, or Buddhist communities of the United States. And, communities can exist within and across other communities, and individuals can be members of many different communities simultaneously. One type of community especially relevant to natural resource managers is the *community of attachment* (Wilmott, 1986). Communities of attachment form among individuals that share common feelings for particular places and interests. Natural resource dependent communities, such as timber towns, are good examples of attachment communities because members often have strong feelings for locations within the community, such as local forests or sawmills, and common interests in the health of local natural resources. A second type of community especially relevant to resource managers is the *community of interest* (Wilmott, 1986). Members of these communities share common interests in an activity such as kayaking or homebuilding.

Understanding the type of community an outreach program must reach can facilitate the development and success of the program. Understanding community can help resource managers understand the concerns and needs of community members, and subsequently shape the message put forth by the outreach program and, ideally, the way that message is presented to the community. Often, when natural resources managers discuss *involving stakeholders or community members* in planning processes, it is the interest communities likely to feel the effects of management decisions that are targeted for involvement. When managers discuss *building community* it is the community of attachment that is regarded as the ideal. That is, communities of attachment, with members' shared attachments to activities and the places those activities are tied to, can promote sustainable management of the locations held dear to the community.

Social networks are the relationships that connect community members to one another. Network linkages may be based on family relationships, friendship ties or professional acquaintanceships, for example. Using a social networks approach for outreach utilizes the strength and capacity of linkages among community members to spread information and gather input throughout the community and to bring additional community members into the planning process. In order to successfully use a networks approach one must understand the types of networks important in a community as well as the network roles played by specific members. For example, network stars—well connected individuals (Stokowski, 1994)—may play important roles in spreading information to a large group at once, or in arranging introductions with key members of the community.

Network isolates (Stokowski, 1994)—individuals with few linkages—may represent disenfranchised members and perspectives of the community and individuals with whom linkages should be fostered. A networks approach may also identify key individuals who can serve as entry points into community groups.

Etowah HCP Outreach

Generally, the HCP outreach and participation program has put in place a two-pronged approach toward gathering input and gaining support. Simultaneously the outreach program has worked to raise awareness about endangered species in the Etowah through a broad educational campaign, while working with specific target groups to develop a process for gathering detailed, technical feedback regarding specific policies and programs within the HCP. The two-pronged approach has been guided by concepts of social networks. For example, target groups have been identified by understanding the communities likely to be concerned with the HCP for any number of reasons (the HCP may impact them professionally, such as developers, or personally, they have personal concerns for the ecological health of the region, for example), and entry into these interest communities has been facilitated by identifying network stars within these communities and accessing their linkages.

Using networks in this manner may seem obvious, however, further examples and analysis reveals complexity and nuances in the approach. This presentation will cover the use of the networks approach in the following steps and programs of the HCP:
● *Development of HCP steering and technical committees*
● *Organizing local Development Industry Task Forces to review HCP policies and bring colleagues into the process*
● *Bringing together leadership from various diverse community groups for involvement in the planning process*
● *Reaching community groups for general presentations*
● *Identifying outlets for broad education materials*

HCP Outreach Objectives

Several objectives guide the HCP outreach effort. These objectives focus on both portions of the two-prong approach, and address using local media and broad education outlets successfully; educating local elected officials and staff; working with local professional and community groups; coordinating HCP task forces for reviewing policy; and partnering with other environmental and community groups. Concentrating on network linkages among and between members of diverse industry and community groups while working at accomplishing these goals is designed to allow network linkages—based on shared interests in the health of the region, local communities, local industries, economy and success of the plan—to form among the participants in the planning process and among members of their networks and to develop an active support base for local elected officials voting to adopt the HCP.

Evaluating the Outreach Program

The final portion of this presentation addresses the HCP advisory committee's plans to evaluate the success of the networks based approach towards outreach and to shape future efforts based on successes and failures of the past. The first portion of this evaluation will involve documenting, through interviews and short surveys, how the HCP planning process, and steering and advisory committees, were initiated and shaped, and the roles that social networks played in this process. Additionally, this portion of the evaluation will involve developing social network maps of the key communities and individuals involved in the process. The second step of the evaluation will document how social networks have grown the HCP outreach effort to form new committees and task forces, and build support for plan. The third step will examine the success of the outreach program within the context of the goals set out at the start of the effort. Finally, the results of the evaluation will be used to modify future actions of the HCP outreach effort.

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