

TO HARNESS THE ENERGY OR TO HOBBLE THE ENEMY:
WHICH WAY FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION?

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INTRODUCTION

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service (ACTPCS) has the widest range of responsibilities of any such agency in Australia, albeit over a narrow geographic base. The ACTPCS combines the roles of agencies responsible for national parks and wildlife, fisheries, forestry, agriculture, horticulture, municipal parks and gardens, sport and recreation, heritage and museums.

This paper notes the approaches used in the past by the ACTPCS and its predecessors for obtaining community input, and outlines an innovative participation program to be trialled in development of a management plan for the Canberra Nature Park. The paper discusses the proposed design of this program which aims to provide meaningful insights into community expectations and changing client needs for access to areas, programs and information. At the same time the ACTPCS aims to develop co-operative working relationships and continued community involvement in neighbourhood open space management.

The result of the processes outlined below should be a more comprehensive and secure system of parks and reserves that is managed for and with the community to provide the widest appropriate range of opportunities and resources for outdoor recreation and education within the metropolitan area.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION - WHICH WAY?

Sandercock (1) identifies five basic models of participation:

- . **market research** in which the participant is seen as a consumer, the process one of seeking feedback from clients, and the emphasis placed on leaflets, public meetings, surveys and polls
- . **decision-making** in which the participant is seen as a policy making partner, the process one of harnessing talent and energy, and the assumption made that people are reasonable and can have harmony of interest
- . **social therapy** in which the participant is seen as co-operative and helpful, the process one of adapting people to change and the emphasis placed on involving people in provision of services rather than in decisions on what is to be provided
- . **dissolution of organised opposition** in which the participant is seen as either apathetic or dissatisfied, the process one of dividing and conquering opponents by co-opting radical

leaders into structures that divorce them from their supporters

- . **grass roots radicalism** in which the participant is seen as a militant activist waiting to be released from inactivity and harnessed to a cause, the process one of organising victims for challenge and conflict based on the assumption that there is a reservoir of untapped enthusiasm.

Of these the ACTPCS has developed experience primarily with the market research model which is based on a rationale of organisational expertise and efficiency. This has been through publication of draft management plans accompanied by a call for submissions. This has at times been preceded by selective on-site or committee meetings with interest groups. The agency has also made some use of the decision-making model through a consultative committee and an advisory group that have been at least partially community-based and has touched on the social therapy model in the form of volunteer involvement in tree-planting and similar projects.

In short the ACTPCS (in common with most land management agencies) has embraced with enthusiasm only the consultation elements of community participation, concentrating mainly on detail rather than on broader policy decisions. The rationale for this would seem to be based on the availability of expertise and experience within the organisation, as well as on the costs in time and resources implied by any move to cast the net wider. Notwithstanding this some would assert that the 'traditional' processes pay lip service to participation while actually inhibiting it. They may also foster notions that a lack of community response equates with a lack of interest or concern and suggests that the agency must be 'doing everything right'.

The impetus to deviate from the past pattern has arisen from a number of concurrent processes within the ACTPCS and the wider ACT Administration, including reviews of roles and responsibilities, planning and budgeting strategies, management information systems and community relations in the approach to self-government. The relevance of this context can be seen in the assertion by Sinclair (2) that the main point of public participation is to establish and keep open communication links between three decision-making partners - the community, institutions and politicians.

WHY BOTHER?

The ACTPCS is well aware of the limitations inherent in participation program and does not intend to fall into the trap of embracing participation merely because it is seen as 'a good thing' or as a defensible means to divert attention from a lack of responsible decision-making. Among the limitations documented (eg Clark [3]; Sandercock [1]; Sewell [4]; Sinclair [2]) are the following:

- . cost burden of starting and continuing a higher level of community interaction
- . difficulties in defining who 'the community' is

- . problems in reconciling differences between technical expertise and community knowledge
- . unwillingness of those with power to share it
- . the tendency for programs to lose their sense of purpose
- . the tendency to overestimate potential community response to opportunities to participate
- . difficulties of assimilating information quickly, processing this into a meaningful form and feeding it back
- . difficulties of sustaining community interest beyond short term and local issues
- . lack of community interest in and understanding of abstract concepts
- . difficulties of establishing incentives for a large proportion of the community to be involved
- . disincentives confronting the traditionally disenfranchised in the community, including those less articulate
- . difficulty in establishing mechanisms that adequately represent all sectors of the community
- . lack of community organisation and structures to aid constructive participation
- . the tendency for organisations to control information flow, meetings, agendas, questionnaire design, and so on to the detriment of community input.

Given these limitations it is hardly surprising that agencies are reticent about embarking on participation programs. Nonetheless the advantages or benefits of such programs are sufficient to justify them. Among these benefits are:

- . the input of local information that educates both the community and the agency
- . spread of power through levels of government and the community
- . increased community self-respect
- . plans that better reflect community aspirations and offer some measure of accountability
- . development of links to community groups for on-going involvement and assistance
- . increased community support for agency goals, policies, and programs and an enhanced corporate image
- . increased trust, confidence and communication between the community and the agency.

In regard to the limitations and benefits, Sandercock (1) points out that the process may be more important than the product and goes on to sum up the benefits:

An open planning process, providing easy access to both information and to the planners, can reassure people that they're being thought of. Participatory mechanisms, even those involving no devolution of power, may make public authorities more honest and humane and considerate of the people they are serving than they would otherwise be: more thoughtful of broader issues than their single purpose functions, more sensitive in performing their duties. And participation at local level may elicit informed and useful responses on questions of local detail, on things that may not seem important to planners (who are therefore unlikely to think of them) but are usually very important in the lives of those suggesting them. So at this level participation may produce a better result for residents, without threatening what planners regard as their expertise, and without bogging down the planning process irretrievably.

In aspiring to such a relationship with the community the challenge for ACTPCS will be to design a participation process that at least addresses the limitations and maximises the benefits. The following can be considered as prerequisites for the agency's success (after Perlmut [5]):

- . clear objectives, direction and plan for process
- . adequate resources to devote to the process
- . timing of participation sufficiently early to build trust.

For the community's success the following are required (citing Sewell [4]):

- . focus on a few key issues
- . access to technical expertise
- . knowledge of the bureaucracy and power
- . financial resources
- . effective leadership
- . organisational skill
- . good media relations.

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

Clearly, the needs of both the community and the agency need to be addressed in design of the process if it is to be mutually beneficial. The ACTPCS, in embarking on a community participation program for preparation of a management plan for Canberra Nature Park, hopes that this might be achieved in the following ways:

Objectives, direction and focus

The objectives of the participation program will be explicit and include the following:

- . to raise awareness in the community of Canberra Nature Park (CNP), its conservation, recreation and education resources, and the planning and management processes
- . to establish communication with a wide range of people in the community who have an interest or stake in the resources and management of CNP
- . to encourage active participation in the planning and management programs
- . to maintain mechanisms for community involvement beyond the initial plan preparation and production
- . to foster a sense of community pride in, support for, and 'ownership' of, CNP
- . to build trust and confidence into relations between ACTPCS and the community.

The focus of the program will be 'Problems, possibilities and preferences' with respect to standards of maintenance and provision of and access to facilities, information and programs.

Timing

When participation is left too late in the process, after directions are set and fine detail is all that remains to be resolved, confidence and trust are difficult to achieve as the take of planners and managers in the process is by then too high to readily accept changes. It is proposed to include forms of participation in all phases of the planning - from identification and definition of issues through decision-making to the implementation and monitoring phases. Community involvement in the latter is useful for increasing awareness of services and for providing a focus for continued input.

Resources

To reach a wide range of people a wide range of media will be required, including mass publicity, displays, discussion groups and 'street meetings', surveys and invitations for submissions.

An early opportunity to raise awareness of CNP in the community was offered by the 1988 Canberra Festival at which ACTPCS mounted displays and launched a set of individual area leaflets for CNP components. Further mass publicity will include a leaflet drop and mailing campaign coupled with media releases and advertising. While expensive, these serve to disarm claims that people have not been involved or informed. They do not necessarily lead to an improved process or product and they are not a substitute for constructive personal interaction with the community.

1 displays used in the program will:

be of a range of durations and in a variety of locations concentrating on accessible and approachable community locations rather than in offices. A mobile 'site office' may be used to take displays into neighbourhoods.

- . be simple and concise, with no effort to educate or lecture the participant
- . concentrate on the key issues rather than on abstract notions and generalities
- . provide opportunities for people to register their attendance and comments without the need for additional formal submissions or attendance and expression at meetings
- . be operated by trained staff who can provide guidance, information and discussion for those unable or unwilling to commit their input to writing.

Discussion groups used in the program will:

- . be organised so as to break down any mystique and aloofness of planners and to provide participants with ready access to expertise
- . be commenced with snowball sampling which identifies people already active in the community and then gains wider involvement by their efforts and contacts
- . be small and informal and will be held in relaxing and accessible locations within the neighbourhood
- . be followed by 'street meetings' or 'park meetings' arranged by the community (thus emphasising existing or new community structures).

Surveys and questionnaires are limited in their application but can reach people who would not attend or contribute to a meeting and/or would not make a formal submission. As most decision-making is value based so such surveys need to provide opportunities for the community and the agency to share values as well as factual data.

Submissions can help to focus the community into loose groups, to broaden involvement and to develop a stronger bargaining position for their interests. It is recognised however that groups and individuals who are willing and able to make formal submissions are limited. Without the benefit of access to planners and expertise the submissions received are often simplistic and/or irrelevant and easily dismissed. It is proposed that timing of the process be such that those who make submissions can be provided with opportunities to review and refine their initial input after discussion with the agency and with the benefit of any necessary further information.

Leadership, organisational and media skills

ACTPCS staff adequately trained in skills of meeting management, group facilitation, conflict resolution and media liaison will function as resources to community groups in their deliberations while also building trust and confidence between the community and the agency.

CONCLUSION

The ACTPCS is confident that pursuit of the participation program described above offers opportunities to further develop, expand, and provide security for, the Canberra Nature Park with a continuing and increasing community involvement.

REFERENCES

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- (4) SEWELL, W R D 1985 Public participation in environmental decision-making Seminar at Dept. of Geography, Univ. of New England, Armidale, 16 April 1985
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