Socially Acceptable Natural Resource Management
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Natural resource managers are increasingly finding themselves dealing with the judgments that citizens make about the desirability of land management practices. Public interest in decision making, once focused upon public lands, has now spread to private lands as well. To some extent, the tendency of citizens to view all lands, both public and private, as part of their environmental heritage is an understandable extension of their current scale of view about natural resource management in which watersheds, landscapes, or even "planet earth" is the appropriate unit for planning. Since these units in western states often include a mixture of public and private lands, it seems illogical to them to apply one standard to public lands and a different standard to private lands. Range lands and forest lands are particularly vulnerable to these points-of-view, because they often contain native vegetation. Most societies recognize things which have owners and those that don't have specific owners. Things that belong to everyone are often called "common goods". In general, commercial things such as orchards and planted pastures have owners. Wild things such as weeds or stands of native vegetation are often common goods. An easy way to understand this issue is to consider the dandelion. Someone taking a dandelion from your lawn is guilty of trespass, but not theft. However, someone taking a dandelion from a row of organically grown greens in a farmer's field is clearly stealing. So, when visitors see an apple orchard or an alfalfa field, they recognize that it has an owner whose land use rights probably exceed their own. However, when visitors see what appears to be a native forest or a rangeland, they tend to perceive it as part of their natural heritage and are much more likely to demand a voice in its use.

In agroforestry, we talk about 4 properties that a land use system must have in order to successful. It must be: (1) Biologically Possible, (2) Economically Feasible, (3) Socially Acceptable, and (4) Environmentally Sustainable. This simple list is misleading because it suggests that the four properties are somehow separate or equal, when they are actually all dimensions of a single complex. For example, many un-natural options become biologically possible if one is willing to spend enough. The natural "fact" that Douglas-fir won't grow in a 6 inch rainfall zone is easily overcome by application of irrigation water, and the low economic feasibility of reverting cropland to native rangeland is equally easily overcome by high social acceptability that provides government payments to encourage the conversion. Therefore, social acceptability varies within the context of what is biologically possible, economically feasible, and environmentally sustainable, and to a large extent, each of these factors reflect value judgments and accompanying assumptions rather than facts. When I see a cottonwood tree that has been felled into the creek, the fact that it is now in the creek is indisputable. However, my view of the appropriateness of it being there may vary substantially if I assume that a vandal has chopped it down as opposed to a beaver gnawing through it for later use as food. Radically varying but often unstated assumptions about causes or processes may contribute substantially to

conflict about what the desirability of the current resource status is and what, if anything, needs to be done.

The term "Social Acceptability" is widely used but seldom defined by those using it. In its crudest form, it refers to the desirability of choices/actions based upon local community practices and standards. Interestingly enough, the legal term "malpractice" has a similar basis, referring to providing services that are below the standards and practices present in the local community. Although social acceptability is complex and hard to predict, its lack is readily evident by public opposition. Since community standards and practices change with experience and circumstances, so does social acceptability. Circumstances will often change acceptability. For example, areas which are economically dependent on natural resource use are often more tolerant of environmental costs that may accompany that use. It is tempting to think that education will change acceptability. However education has often proven to be a blunt tool for this purpose for several reasons. First, even if people can agree upon the "facts", their interpretation may vary substantially. I am reminded of the appearance of a spotted owl that was seen roosting on a lamp post in Everett ,Washington. One group, that was maintaining that the owl was resilient in its habitat use, was quick to point to the owl and say "See, it doesn't have to have old growth forest…. Here it is roosting on a lamp post"…. While the folks arguing for the need for old growth habitat said …"It just goes to show you how little habitat is left when owls are reduced to roosting on lamp posts"… Second, the specific topic being considered is often a surrogate for a larger set of values. For instance, I was personally involved in the forest herbicide controversy in the 1980's, and recall a lot of effort being spent trying to educate people about the "safety" of specific herbicides when the real issue was about forest management in a more general sense and a growing philosophical linkage between "natural processes", healthy ecosystems, and healthy humans. Giving concerned people a biochemistry lesson or even drinking herbicide to demonstrate its safety did little to stem opposition. It was a social issue, not a scientific issue. Likewise, conflict over saving rare or endangered species is often more about preserving or restoring habitat types for their use than it is about the individual plants or animals themselves. Pointing out that your position is based upon knowledge (Science) while the opposition's is based upon emotion has generally not proven effective in resolving conflicts about natural resource use. This is because social acceptability has factual, moral, and philosophical underpinnings. It is based upon not just what is, but what should be.

Malpractice is evident in the eye-of-the-beholder, and people are quick to point out the failures and ascribe causes/responsibility for them. If you want to know what went wrong, someone is generally more than willing to tell you. However, acceptance is usually defined by its lack of opposition, and therefore more difficult to identify and analyze. There are very few sets of specific guidelines that one can follow to increase social acceptability. The best set that I have seen was published by Mark Brunson, a Professor at Utah State University in his 1993 Western Journal of Applied Forestry article *"Socially Acceptable Forestry: What Does it Imply for Ecosystem Management"*. He presented a set of seven propositions that I have found pretty well conform to my experiences in watching natural resource issues over the past 35 years. The following propositions are Brunson's, the explanations are mine.

1] *Acceptability may apply to conditions, but is a function of causes* - People judge the appropriateness of things or events by both what they are, and why they happened. **Process is as important as product**. Acceptable procedures are likely to produce acceptable situations. Unacceptable processes always produce unacceptable outcomes. For instance, decisions made in

Washington D.C. generally have poor acceptance because people resent a process in which outsiders tell them what to do. I recall being out with a backpack sprayer one afternoon spraying herbicide on brush in a pasture next to a subdivision. Unfortunately, the home owner saw me and rushed out to confront me. He asked "What are you spraying?" While I assumed that he was asking what chemical was I using, I adopted the old politicians ruse of answering the question that I wanted to answer, not necessarily the one that was asked. So I said "I am spraying poison oak so that it won't creep under the fence into your yard". He was quite pleased and thanked me. This proposition has a simple practical implication: processes that respect and involve local people and that advance their needs or values generally produce outcomes that more implementable. In the case of livestock grazing on public lands, arguing that one is preserving a way of life is much less likely to capture public acceptance than grazing used to advance socially acceptable goals such as improved wildlife habitat, control of non-native weeds, preservation of biodiversity, preservation of rural view sheds, etc.

2] *Conditions which arise as a result of "natural" causes are virtually always acceptable -* **natural is good, un-natural may be bad**. Grazing is preferable to herbicidal weed control because it is perceived as being more natural. Hikers interviewed in National Forests often see meadows as pretty if they believe they are natural openings, but consider the same meadow as less attractive if they believe it is the result of logging or grazing. When an elk poops in the creek, that's nature. When a cow poops in the creek, that's pollution. Implications: Use as many natural processes as possible and select processes that look natural. Processes that mimic natural processes, such as nitrogen-fixing plants and grazing are more often acceptable than un-natural equivalents such as fertilizer application or spraying herbicides. This opens up a wide range of opportunities for prescription grazing, use of nitrogen-fixing plants, and other "service functions" of ecosystem components.

3] *Acceptability of a condition can only be questioned if there are feasible alternatives to that condition -* **things are judged relative to alternatives.** To some extent, natural events such as wildfires, floods, volcanic eruptions etc. have high acceptability because people think that they are beyond human control. That is, there are no alternatives. Attempts to exploit this point have generally failed because people have been able to perceive alternatives. It is no use arguing, for example, that we must cut old growth forests to obtain wood products when we are already importing wood from many sources. Likewise, the argument that we can't do something because it is too costly or impractical usually gets little sympathy. People are generally quick to point out alternatives that they see as being feasible, even if you don't. Implications: The best course is to champion your alternative while not trying to deny alternatives. It is often best to present alternatives and to discuss their strengths and their inadequacies in light of other acceptability issues with potential participants. It is always better to promote your alternative than to oppose someone else's alternative.

4] *In the presence of feasible alternatives, acceptability is a function of the perceived desirability, equitability, and feasibility of those alternatives -* **People judge alternatives relative to whether they can and should occur** based upon a person's experience and values. Concern for rare and endangered species, for example, is often related to peoples' values about the fairness or desirability of species disappearing. Much of the controversy over grazing fees on public lands seems to revolve around a perception that the fee is unfairly low compared to charges for grazing private lands. Implications: Practices that conform to local myth and value systems are most likely to be supported. Because perception is reality in forming people's

opinions, clearly presenting practices in light of what is generally seen to be fair, desirable, and do-able should increase acceptability. For instance, constructing livestock water developments so that quail, deer, snakes, and other wild animals can use them should increase acceptability by more fairly sharing their benefits.

5] *Acceptability is a function of the perceived risk associated with a condition or practice* - **the greater the risk and uncertainty, the lower the acceptability** of a practice. Risk is judged relative to the probability of bad things happening, how bad potential outcomes are, and how long negative effects last. For example, tolerance for things that potentially harm human health is low because harm is often viewed as severe and/or permanent. There is a scale factor at work here also. Small scale applications are often acceptable because if they don't work out, the localized problems produced can be easily fixed in the future. Failure of landscape scale projects may have more severe or longer lasting consequences such as land slides, erosion of stream channels, loss of local ecotypes of native plants or animals, loss of employment for people, etc. When we were starting to graze sheep in the coastal forest for brush control, I was clearly told by some fisheries and wildlife folks that they were not opposing the grazing because of its relatively small scale (1500 acres), but if it became more widespread, that would be a matter of more concern. Implications: Re-assure concerned people by emphasizing known, proven practices which are easily correctable if they fail. Start out at a small scale until new practices are accepted.

6] *Acceptability is judged within a geographic context* - the **Not In My Back Yard phenomenon**. What is philosophically acceptable for others may not be personally acceptable. A good example is the attitude of city people to the loss of rural forestry and agricultural jobs. People who do not oppose logging in general, often complain loudly when forests near their homes are logged. Implications: Land management systems are culturally as well as biologically site specific. Natural resource management projects have to be especially sensitive to the concerns of neighbors and other people who will bear the direct impacts of the project.

7] *Acceptability is judged within a social context* - **Peer group pressures and opinions are important determinants of acceptability**. For example, environmentalists may oppose an otherwise acceptable alternative such as timber salvage because they do not trust the Forest Service or because it makes them appear to be in league with the timber industry. There was an Ace Reid cartoon of two scruffy looking drovers in a beat-up pickup truck stopped at the mailbox. One is saying to the other "Hot darn, Here's the wool incentive payment…. Now we can go to the cattleman's meeting". Clearly, being associated with the right group was important. Implications: Understand how proposed management practices will interact with group identities and align practices with the status and value systems of target participants. It never hurts to have someone from the target group speak up for your proposal.

It is always useful to keep in mind that social acceptability is a concept applied to groups not to individual people. You are never going to please everyone. But hopefully, creative application of Brunson's 7 propositions will help us to please enough people that our management actions are not vigorously or widely opposed, which is, after all, a functional form of acceptability.