

CONSERVATION COMPASS

A New Beginning in Public Land Management?



Jack Ward Thomas

B&C Professor of
Wildlife Conservation
The University of Montana

IN EARLY OCTOBER, I HAD the opportunity to address a meeting of about 200 folks in Montrose, Colorado. The invitation came from Bob Storch, the Supervisor of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests, and with whom I had worked some 20 years ago on a project in eastern Oregon.

Bob Storch is a believer in what is called “collaboration” between federal management agencies and the people who live in and around the public lands. He knows, in his gut, that if the experiment of public lands is to be maintained it will have to be acceptable to the community that includes those lands. He knows that there is wisdom in the admonition given to Forest Service employees in *The Use Book – Regulations and Instructions for Use of the National Forest Reserves* (1906) – “In the management of each reserve, local questions will be decided upon local grounds . . .”

He has been around long enough to see that philosophy altered by a plethora of laws that have incrementally and inexorably eroded the flexibility of managers to consider the needs and desires of the local communities. And, now, a new round of forest planning is being instituted. Why would any intelligent observer expect a different result from a collapsed process? To do the same thing over and over and expect a different result is one definition of insanity.

Bob Storch and associates want to avoid that insanity. The one possible way to get a different result – barring unlikely changes in law – is to focus on “community(s) of interest,” which involve the national forests in question. The meeting I addressed was composed of federal and state employees and County Commissioners from involved counties who came together to see if and how they might exercise some control over their own destiny. I was

pleased to lend a helping hand. Some of what I had to say follows.

COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST—A PLACE TO START

To a limited degree, people who live in communities involving national forests can attempt to exert some level of control over their destinies. Their war cry could be taken from the old movie *Network*, in which the central character became fed up with the *status quo* and began to scream, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

Being angry and feeling powerless is hard on both digestive tracts and the human spirit. It is a mood that no vibrant community can long endure without deterioration. But, such can – if appropriately channeled – provide stimulus to reach out to others to produce something better.

As a child, when I became frustrated or exasperated, my grandfather would observe, “You need a helping hand.” Then, he would hold my hands in front of my face and tell me to look there for the help I needed. And, then, he would say, “If that is not enough, then take my hand. Two hands are better than one and many hands are even better.” That was good wisdom. Even a child could understand.

This approach involves relaxing fists into open hands and extending those hands to join with another and another and, then, yet another. That reaching out takes place within a “community of place” which involves a defined landscape and the people therein. The place is made up of many land classifications and ownerships (in this discussion, the National Forests are of primary significance). The people share several things in common. First, they live there. Second, the place is, at least emotionally and spiritually, more theirs than those who live far away.

THE FOREST SERVICE AS FACILITATOR

I hope, and think, that in this round of planning Forest Service professionals will serve more as facilitators of the process than as purveyors of predetermined courses of action. Such will be a new approach and, quite likely, a bit “messier” than that which has gone before – but, perhaps, with more acceptable results.

I hope the process will be much less drawn out than last time around. If the process draws out too long, most of the initial participants will drop out and leave the playing field to a few dedicated individuals. Most of those present at the end of the struggle are either truly committed with time and patience aplenty, or zealots, or “hired guns” from the ranks of the conflict industry. And these warriors from the conflict industry will be there – either during the process or in the appeals, legal processes, and cries for delay that will follow. They will be there. Do not let their presence, whether early or late in the process, unduly distract you from your objective – the best community solution possible. For, most certainly, the community will live with the result after the warriors have moved on to other battles in other environs.

UNSPOKEN RULES OF THE FOREST PLANNING GAME

Two facts essential to our participation in planning are: “Decisions are made by those who show up” and “In a democracy, outcomes are determined by the majority of the minority who cares deeply about the issue in question.” Again, we see sound wisdom.

Knowing this, old hands in the game, particularly those rooted in the conflict industry, come to the game both experienced and prepared. They know that the longer the process drags out, the more voluminous and less intelligible the written assessments become, the more revisions made, the more complex the process, the more likely that the playing field will be

left to the zealots and hired guns.

The lesson to be learned is this: set reasonable, but firm, deadlines. Do thorough work based on experience from the last go-around in planning. Meet the deadlines. Do not grant extensions except for the most valid of reasons. Routine granting of extensions and requests for more assessment and more review and extended opportunities for public comment may seem a means of political mollification. Such is not the case. Extensions are expensive in time and money and in the public's confidence. And, delay rarely makes much difference in either knowledge gained or the conclusions reached. If the desire is to turn the process – and ultimately the end result – over to the folks from the conflict industry, allow the process to drag out.

Make certain that your Federal Congressional representatives, Governors and State Legislators know about your collaborative efforts. Make certain they understand that you expect their support both in terms of process and achievement of the outcome. In the end, you may deem it desirable to have the outcome of your collaborative efforts blessed in law. There are precedents for such actions – even involving budgets. At the very least, the blessings of political leaders are helpful, for, as Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neil observed, "all things are political and all politics are local." That too is sound wisdom.

AND, WHY SHOULD THINGS BE DIFFERENT THIS TIME?

Why might this go-around with planning be different? Because things have changed and, I believe, there is no going back. Twenty years ago, there was a pitched battle going on between warriors of the environmental persuasion and the old-line extractors of natural resources over the future of public lands in the West. The environmental warriors won, capi-

talizing on the environmental laws passed in the 1970s, the collapse of timber extraction during the Reagan/Bush administrations, and the eight years of a Clinton/Gore Administration *muy sympatico* to environmental constituencies.

Fierce in battle, many of the eco-warriors are unable to come to grips with the consequences of victory and are now reduced to wandering about the old battlefields bayoneting the wounded. Their counterparts from the resource extraction community, likewise, cannot come to terms with defeat and hold "ghost dances" to bring back the good old days when they were undisputed Kings of the West.

In the meantime, other things changed. The population in counties near the national forests of the West has grown at twice the national rate and has not become philosophically synchronized with the old days and old ways. The economic opportunities so dramatically exploited by the newcomers were not based on resource extraction and secondary manufacture but on other sources of jobs and economic opportunities. In addition, many of these newcomers were attracted by the aesthetics of the West, its quality of life, and its inherent life style.

The "old west," and its component land management and regulatory agencies reluctantly moved into the new age nudged by one court loss after another for noncompliance with the environmental laws of the 60s and 70s. The people whose lives were changing, and not by their choice, were moved to resistance – sometimes dramatically expressed. These acts of resistance made news – for a few days – but changed nothing. They demonstrated, blustered and threatened, but frightened few and not for long.

In the aftermath of victory by "the greens" and the national public acceptance of change that was wrought, it is past time for a "Marshall Plan," wherein the vic-

tors realize that the best chance of maintaining their gains is by fostering a new spirit of cooperation, an appreciation of the desirable aspects of western culture, and the development of an institution of a "just peace." Some scholars believe that this can only be achieved by stepping back from the "one size fits all" approach. Over the long haul, fostering local or regional solutions to suit local or regional conditions – economic, social, and ecological – is likely best. Many politicians, perhaps in desperation, agree that this is an acceptable and needed change.

And, with the disaster of September 11th, a new national mood is apt to persist for some time into the future. That mood is one of national unity with a focus on the general welfare and a renewed trust of government and its institutions. For example, within ten days of that event, the President of the Sierra Club announced a change in strategy away from personal attacks and inflammatory rhetoric. Part of that statement was "Now is the time for rallying together as a nation; the public will judge very harshly any groups whom they view as violating the need for unity."

Just maybe, there has been a change in attitude that requires more gentility, courtesy, and respect in the process of making decisions in land-use planning and management. This round of forest planning is the best extant chance to take a step – even a baby step – in that direction. I say, seize the opportunity. ▲▲▲

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