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RESOURCE ISSUES AND OPTIONS—RIO: A COORDINATED APPROACH TO EDUCATION ON NATURAL RESOURCE ISSUES

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Nowhere has the endangered species issue been more contentious and vivid than in the state of Oregon. The listing of the northern spotted owl as a threatened species has resulted in reductions in timber harvests from public lands; job losses; promulgation of forest practices restrictions on private lands; and lingering uncertainty about the investment potential of Oregon's public and private timber growing lands. These consequences have spun out of a cyclone of interest group activity in the media, the state legislature and in Congress, with much left to be resolved.

The impression left with the general public is that the "facts" brandished by various interest groups are hopelessly conflicting and that there is simply no common or middle ground on this issue. It adds to the notion that our institutions have failed us again. Since endangered species is not a life-and-death issue for most people, in the midst of such confusion they simply turn it off and relegate it to "spectator sport" status without ever digging further to establish better-informed judgment.

Future acts of the endangered species drama could be played out with the marbled murrelet, a shore bird that nests in old growth forests along the coast, and the many stocks of salmon in coastal streams, the Columbia River and its tributaries. Listing of these anadromous fish would have great impacts on agriculture, forestry, domestic water uses, water-borne trade and electrical power. These consequences would reach far beyond the rural communities associated with the spotted owl. How will the publics affected by the options for dealing with salmon protection and recovery learn about those options and understand the consequences? Hopefully, the university can do better than we have in the past.

Approach

The Forestry Extension Program at Oregon State University's College of Forestry launched a prototype educational effort to help people work through resource issues. Oregon State University has one of the strongest technical forestry extension programs in the country, with twelve full-time forestry field agents and eight extension specialists in such areas as silviculture, wood processing, business management, marketing, harvesting, watershed management and wildlife. This group has a record of organizing to successfully attack a central challenge usually involving forest landowner education (Adams and Garland). The challenge here was to marshal these abilities toward public issues education.

Involvement of the College of Forestry in issues was traditionally piecemeal and reactive. Sporadic requests from political decision-makers and interest groups to the dean's office or to individual faculty members often led to supplying technical information or assigning faculty members to conduct policy analysis for executive and legislative units. There was no concerted outreach effort to educate the public on issues that generate policy options although it was clearly within the mission of the land grant university. Our dean recognized the opportunity to develop such a program when he began his administration in 1989, wanting to make the College of Forestry a center for intellectual debate and learning about the forestry issues.

It is important to recognize that the endangered species issue, as big as it seems, is actually part of the larger complex of issues concerning the uses and protection of forest ecosystems. Profound changes are occurring in the way an increasingly urban/suburban public views the forest. Aesthetic qualities and nontimber resources have become highly demanded outputs of the forest. Our traditional forestry practices seem to increasingly clash with these amenity values of the forest.

Addressing the endangered species issue directly would have concentrated on only a symptom of the root issues. Most of the issues that are determining the future of forestry are really variations of the forest ecosystem protection theme: endangered species, riparian area management, wetlands protection, and forest harvesting and management practices. There had already been so much attention to the spotted owl controversy that an outreach effort, even from the university, probably would have been mistaken by many as another interest group hype. The College of Forestry was already viewed by many as pro-logging, an unfortunate preconception that stems from decades of research and technology transfer in the intensification of forest production. We had lots of work to do in building a new image from which to do issue education.

We wanted to build a program that would fulfill four purposes:

1. Encourage more citizens to get involved in forestry issues.

2. Develop more effective methods for helping people understand the issues and options.
3. Provide more access to relevant research-based information in ongoing debates.
4. Change the role of the forestry extension program with the citizenry and the College of Forestry and broaden its base of support for this new role.

The RIO Program

We named the new program Resource Issues and Options (RIO). We did not use the word “policy” in the title. Importantly, we did not want to infer that public policy is the only avenue for solving problems. We wanted participants to also explore dispute-resolution and citizen action alternatives. Second, the term “policy” has been a “turn off” for many potential participants and extension faculty. Too much of the public feel that policy is made only by politicians and behind-the-scenes experts. They do not feel they have access to the political process and strongly distrust those who do. We wanted to encourage people to get involved in the early stages of issues so they could help define the problems to be solved and understand the issues’ various implications before information became polarized and focused on the merits and demerits of policy proposals.

Issue Team Approach

We organized RIO into three teams, each addressing a different root issue: forest health, forest practices, and community futures. Each team consists of six to twelve forestry extension agents, specialists and research/teaching faculty from disciplines applicable to the general problem area. These educators design programs to interpret these issues to various audiences. Each core team calls on an advisory group of scientists, resource managers, decision makers and interest group representatives for review of program goals and educational materials.

The *Forest Health* team is developing a brochure, video and series of discussion and debate sessions to address public issues about the current insect and disease epidemic in the forests of eastern Oregon. Many strategies for dealing with this problem involve manipulation of the forest in some way: cutting, burning and spraying, all of which are opposed by some interest groups.

The *Forest Practices* team has developed a public symposia series about the scientific and social basis for issues in regulation of forest practices on private land in Oregon. They have focused initially on proposed guidelines for stream protection, using symposia to get landowners, regulatory agency representatives, and faculty members together to identify tradeoffs between protection standards and

their implications for forestry operations and investment values. This team has also developed a faculty seminar program to explore issues concerning the involvement of science and scientists in the policy formation process using stream protection as a carrier issue.

The *Community Futures* team is developing a pilot project for community leaders in two counties that are struggling through economic and social transitions brought on by harvest reductions on public forest land; intensified cutting of intermixed private lands; and structural changes in the forest industry. Their theme is longer-term redevelopment goals tied to the options for forest resource management and utilization. The team brings technical and policy specialists from the university and agencies to work with business and community leaders to identify policies that capitalize on opportunities for environmentally sound economic development.

Steering Committee Functions

Supporting the RIO issue teams is a small steering committee formed to handle strategic planning, evaluation and coordination as well as special issue education projects. This group consists of one member from each of the issue education teams plus the forestry extension program leader and a designated leader of the RIO project. This latter individual serves as an administrator for the RIO effort and as a consultant in training issue teams in policy education techniques and helping teams design projects and document and evaluate their programs. Although this could be a full-time job, we settle for .25 full time equivalent (FTE) from the forestry programs marketing specialist who has taken a special interest in policy education.

The RIO steering committee has several responsibilities:

1. Work with the dean and the College of Forestry administrative team to explain evolving program structure, monitor hot topics and encourage support and recognition of faculty involvement by academic department heads.
2. Review and approve RIO issue papers and educational materials.
3. Liaison with the Agricultural Communications Department to assure timely delivery of materials.
4. Search for sources of outside funding for RIO efforts and help issue teams apply for these funds.
5. Produce special publications that support the general issue education efforts. Recent examples include a directory of environmental, industry and other interest groups for general circulation to citizens seeking more information and involvement; and a brochure designed to assist new participants in public policy education to frame appropriate questions.

6. Organize training and professional development opportunities for extension and academic faculty in issue education concepts and methods.

Each of the RIO teams operates independently, reporting its progress twice annually to the rest of the forestry extension group. Each team has embarked on a different approach to issue education, governed by the personality and talent mix of the team members and the nature of the issue. Members have worked together before and draw on successful experiences in group projects for forest landowner education. Each team develops four-year plans of work around their issue and members integrate their part into specific FTE commitments and annual plans of work that are part of the performance evaluation process. Because agents and specialists are housed in disparate counties and academic departments it is important that the purposes and objectives of the RIO project be communicated to their chair agents and department heads.

Keys to Success in Resource Policy Education

Process Skills

All the forestry extension people have been trained in meetings management and facilitation skills. They have refined those skills in various group projects and special sessions before the RIO project was developed. Several individuals had been involved in what we now call issue education and had been instrumental in forming local chapters of the Oregon Small Woodland Owners Association, a politically active group supporting the interests for forest landowners. So our extension people were not ignorant of politics and the political process, but, up until the RIO project, they did not see issues and the political side of forestry as a subject for viable educational effort or worthy of significant commitments of time. It was a new endeavor with new audiences. Issue education at first did not seem to have a concrete body of concepts or techniques to serve as guideposts in designing programs.

Breaking the inertia was aided by the policy education material in the *Working with Our Publics* training package. The material was adapted to forestry examples and issues and delivered to the RIO teams in initial training. This was supplemented with an audiotape and an example issue paper and educational session on the log export issue to demonstrate some of the policy education techniques.

Team members developed the “facts, myths, values” and the “alternatives/consequences” models into exercises specific to their own issues. The “Kings and Kingmakers” and “Power Cluster” models were most useful in helping foresters articulate what they had been witnessing in the political environment and making it less frightening and more tractable. RIO teams have developed their own list of criteria for selecting issues and a complete set of planning

worksheets for analyzing the issue and designing an educational intervention.

Systemic Ownership

The RIO project is now one and one-half years old. It has enjoyed some successes and is slowly gaining the credibility it needs to propel larger-scale and more effective efforts. We are still borrowing time and talent from ongoing technology transfer programs that have established clientele. We do not have a policy education specialist; a full-time person could increase our activity level but might be tempted to assume too much of the work load at this early stage of the program. Our purpose was to help make public issues education and the requisite skills a part of each extension foresters professional repertoire regardless of his/her specialty or geographic area. We hoped the enthusiasm and experience gained would help to integrate a public issues component into individual educational tasks.

Administrative Support

Administrative support through dedicating resources to start-up costs is helpful. Initial investments are often needed in staff development, materials and operational support, especially to field Extension faculty with limited funds for out-of-county work. An additional costly element could involve compensation for FTE contributions from needed non-extension faculty. Administration can also send a powerful signal that this type of process-oriented work is recognized as a legitimate scholastic endeavor through encouragement, recognition and rewards.

Future Challenges

At this point the project continues to face three challenges. The first has been to educate non-extension faculty and enlist their support in this coordinated approach to policy involvement. Although we have presented RIO as a college-wide effort and have received good support from the dean in this concept, the commonly encountered barriers to effective interdisciplinary work are alive and lurking in the reward systems, disciplines and the attitudes of individual faculty members.

The second challenge is evident within the extension issue teams. Public issues education is a new role for people whose successes have been in technology transfer. They find pride in masterfully applying technical material to helping clients solve problems, develop skills or adopt new practices. The world of issue education is colder and more confusing: new audiences, new systems and being responsible for activities in which people can hear things they do not necessarily agree with from other people with very different value systems.

The third challenge has been in dealing with programs that are already being conducted by agencies, interest groups and even other College of Forestry departments. Many of these programs address the issues we selected, some more directly than others. We are becoming aware of how strongly experts and organizations claim ownership on issues.

Agencies in particular use issues to generate new programs and do not look kindly on interfering educators. Interest groups likewise do not want an issue education program that succeeds in opening up citizens to a full range of information, perspectives and debate. Some look on issue education as unwarranted intervention in the markets for information and ideas. What this has meant for the RIO project is the need to include these groups wherever possible without being dissuaded or swayed by them. We are confident that a steady hand on the tiller toward clearly defined educational objectives will win over some of our initial detractors. We have been thankful for the support of the dean and other administrators when its been needed the most.

REFERENCES

- Garland, John J., and Paul W. Adams. "Coordinated Tactical Program Planning Among Specialists and Agents: The Oregon Extension Forestry Experience." *J. of Nat. Res. and Life Sci. Educ.* 21(1992):64-69.