EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WATERSHED COUNCILS IN FOUR WESTERN STATES

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ABSTRACT

Expectations appear fairly high that stakeholder-based, local watershed groups can be effective in contributing towards the success of watershed restoration programs. Findings from a recent report, "An Evaluation of Selected Watershed Councils in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California" by Charles Huntington and this author, address the issue. The three-part study evaluated fourteen watershed councils from four western states. Its purpose was to analyze the relationships between conservation effectiveness and organizational attributes of the councils, and to develop conclusions about these councils' abilities to address regional watershed restoration needs. Part I used standardized metrics and criteria to evaluate the ecological basis and effectiveness of the councils' restoration programs. Part II applied a separate set of metrics and criteria to evaluate the structure, function, and planning processes of the same councils. The results of these two independent evaluations were integrated in Part III to determine if any relationship existed between the quality of their restoration programs and their organizational processes. Conclusions were drawn about the groups' accomplishments and limitations, and recommendations were presented about how they might be more effective in restoring watersheds. A list of positive organizational attributes is presented to assist new and existing watershed councils.

INTRODUCTION

Local watershed organizations have become increasingly popular in the past decade, particularly in the West (Griffin, 1999). We seem to have certain expectations that stakeholder-driven, watershed councils will provide some contribution towards implementation of the many state and federally funded watershed restoration programs. Measuring the success of these efforts, however, continues to be a "thorny issue", with anecdotal results most common (Kenney, 1997). No one wants to waste their time with an ineffective group. People – participants, community, agencies, advocates, funders, and politicians - want positive results. Can these watershed groups really be effective, and if so, what lessons can help others be more effective?

In 1990, I began as a watershed coordinator for the French Creek Watershed Advisory Group in northern California and later worked with a neighboring group. Since then, I have been searching

the literature, participating in "think tank" sessions around the country, and documenting my own experiences about how to make these diverse, consensus-based processes more effective (Sommarstrom, 1994; Elder & Sommarstrom, 1997; Born & Genskow, 1999; Sommarstrom, 2000). The opportunity for me to systematically examine the effectiveness of selected watershed councils came about in 1999, through a study commissioned by Trout Unlimited and Pacific Rivers Council (Huntington and Sommarstrom, 2000).

This co-authored study analyzed the relationships between conservation effectiveness and organizational attributes of watershed councils in the Northwest. The report was divided into three parts:

I. Effectiveness at Developing and Implementing Restoration Programs
II. The Process of Council Operations: Effective Components
III. Conservation Effectiveness, Council Process, and Overall Conclusions

SELECTED WATERSHED COUNCILS

For the purpose of this study, a "watershed council" is defined as follows:

> A group of people involved in a process that often combines: a) the watershed approach for managing natural resources, b) collaborative partnerships between the public and private sectors, c) a composition of diverse interests and individuals having an interest or stake in the watershed - stakeholders, d) a local, community-based location, and e) consensus as the basis for decision-making.

In Oregon, the term is defined by the state as a voluntary, local group that represents a balance of interested and affected persons within the watershed (GWEB, 1995). Not all states, however, have developed a useful definition to distinguish a group of "unlikes" from a group of "likes"; instead, one has to look at a group's bylaws, membership composition, and decision-making rules to determine whether it meets this definition.

A list of the councils evaluated for the study can be found in Table 1. The groups were selected in a systematic-random manner, with a focus on Oregon councils. Of the 14 councils, 8 were from Oregon and 2 each were from California, Idaho, and Washington.

Table 1. Watershed Councils Selected for Evaluation

Name of Watershed Council (alphabetical)	Office Location	Area (sq. mi.)	Year Formed
Applegate Watershed Council	Ruch OR	763	1994
Cedar River Council	Seattle WA	188	1995
Coquille Watershed Association	Coquille OR	1059	1994
Grande Ronde Model Watershed Project	LaGrande OR	5265	1992

Name of Watershed Council (alphabetical)	Office Location	Area (sq. mi.)	Year Formed
Lemhi, Pahsimeroi, & East Fork of the Salmon Rivers Model Watershed Project (*)	Salmon ID	1289	1992
Lolo / Jim Ford Creek CRM Group (*)	Orofino ID	362	1990
Lower Columbia Watershed Council	Clatskanie OR	344	1997
Mattole Restoration Council	Petrolia CA	733	1983
McKenzie Watershed Council	Corvallis OR	1348	1993
Mid-Coast Watersheds Council (*)	Newport OR	2478	1994
South Coast Watersheds Council (*)	Gold Beach OR	1148	1994
Tualatin Watershed Council	Hillsboro OR	712	1996
Upper Feather River Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) Group	Quincy CA	3222	1985
Willapa Alliance (*)	South Bend WA	1252	1992

PART I: Effectiveness at Developing and Implementing Restoration Programs

The approach in Part I used standardized evaluation metrics (1-5 scale) and criteria to evaluate the ecological basis and effectiveness of the councils': a) restoration plans, b) conservation projects, and c) adaptive management (monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation). The analysis focused on identifying patterns of performance across groups, not ranking the performance of any specific council. Since Part I was not the emphasis of this author, only a brief summary follows of its conclusions.

Conclusions

- Most council restoration projects appeared to have been ecologically beneficial (52% clearly, 36% likely) to salmonids or to restoring stream processes.
  - Examples: projects involving riparian restoration, road treatments, fish passage, livestock exclosures.

- Improvement in restoration programs, however, will be needed if these groups are to be truly effective at rehabilitating watersheds and restoring at-risk salmonid populations.
  - The many low scores indicate councils represent a new and imperfect experiment.

- The benefits of many projects were limited by an inability to address one or more underlying causes of environmental degradation ("stressors") in other areas of the watershed.
  - Examples: forest practices, urbanization, water diversions

- Lower priority restoration sites were often used instead of high priority sites, since too few

landowners were volunteering their property for more important projects.

PART II - The Process of Council Operations

This section evaluated the process portion of watershed council operations (e.g., their structure, function and planning approach), and determined the process components which appear to enable certain councils to be more effective than others in addressing environmental and fisheries problems. Collected information on each council involved: a) interviews with at least one council representative, b) review of materials produced by the council, and c) review of articles written by other researchers about the council.

Key factors for organizational success came from a review of the relevant literature on these topics: collaborative group processes, community-based partnerships, conflict resolution, consensus, coordinated resource planning and management (CRMP) process, meeting management, and natural resource / watershed planning. These factors were grouped into 11 categories related to a group's Structure and Function, and 3 categories for Planning Process:

Evaluation & Criteria Factors:

A. Originating Factors
B. Authority
C. Composition & Size
D. Staffing
E. Decision-making Process
F. Communication
G. Issues and Focus
H. Education and Training (adult)
I. Funding
J. Agency Relations
K. Self-Evaluation
L. Plan Development
M. Plan Communication
N. Plan Implementation

Within each category, three to eight individual factors specified the needed information for analysis. Of the original 74 factors, 36 were selected as metrics to be used as the criteria for evaluation. Table 2 lists the categories and these selected metrics, along with each one's assumption or preferred condition (e.g., 7-15 people on decision-making body; clarity in plan content). All 14 councils were compared and contrasted qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The author ranked each council on a 1 to 5 scale (5 highest) for the evaluation metrics, primarily as a means of comparison with the results of Part I for the analysis of Part III.

Table 2. Selected Criteria and Assumptions for Watershed Council Evaluation

CRITERIA CATEGORY	ASSUMPTIONS FOR EVALUATION
Originating Factors	Local sponsors / originators indicate community-based support Initiated with broad & diverse local support Catalyzing issue not perceived as just an externally driven crisis but also in the community=s self-interest
Authority	Local government approval helpful for political buy-in, followed by multi-party endorsements Clear relationship with others Documentation available to identify organization=s status Explicit coordination within basin or with adjacent watersheds Formal advisory provides more influence than informal (if desired), which is better than no advisory role
Composition & Size	Size of decision-making body is 7-15 people as ability to function well is impaired by too large a group Best to have balance of key interests at the table, with none missing Strong participation by local government and landowners desired for implementation effectiveness Low turnover rate and smooth transition with alternates preferred to maintain continuity
Staffing	Coordinators full-time (if needed), adequately funded, well trained, and viewed as independent staff accountable to the council Support staff needed Roles of staff clear Turnover minimal & not attributable to organizational difficulties Office space adequate in size & accessible to members
Decision-making Process	Consensus approach to allow for win/win solutions Clarity, equity & fairness in decision process Council feels independent of sponsors= control Use of select sub-committees with clear duties to study & make recommendations to full council, as needed
Commun-ication	Public needs easy access to council=s activities through: a variety of means, frequently, & throughout process
Issues & Focus	Clarity of approach to issues and/or projects Obvious role of science in decisions Criteria explicit Openness in decisions Move past opportunistic approach to strategic one ASacred cow@ issues not allowed to fester

CRITERIA CATEGORY	ASSUMPTIONS FOR EVALUATION
Education & Training	Adult / community watershed education addressed explicitly through a variety of means and frequently
Funding	Diverse & stable funding sources for organizational costs Sufficient funds & opportunities to meet identified needs
Agency Relations	Positive level of communication, coordination, and cooperation with each level of government & pertinent agencies
Self-Evaluation	Regular opportunity provided to evaluate group=s effectiveness, with clear process & results available Accomplishments well documented & publicized Trust and understanding of the council have become established: (a) within the group, and (b) within the community
Plan Develop-ment	A plan for the entire watershed adopted by the council and updated as needed An open process of joint fact-finding with the members, technical advisors, and community was used to provide understanding, relevance, and buy-in Appropriate scientific involvement
Plan Communi-cation	Clarity in plan content Goals, objectives, strategies, and tasks specifically described Understandable to lay audience Well publicized Readily accessible to anyone requesting a copy
Plan Implement-ation	Broad-based support present by those needing to implement the plan Active use by staff and members Adaptive management explicitly being used, with trend & project monitoring clearly applied to adjustments in the plan on a regular basis

Results

In addition to many observations, the critical process factors found common to the four most "successful" councils were:

Positive originating factors, with clarity of initial purpose and broad support;
Ready access to experienced staff or assistance in organizational and planning processes;
Ability to clearly communicate all aspects of the council's activities;
Ability to persevere and overcome any serious obstacles;
Access to stable funding to maintain quality staff;
Willingness to deal with difficult issues with an open process and clear strategy;

Not needing to assign blame for problems, but making everyone part of the solution; Spending sufficient time to do joint fact-finding on the watershed plan with members and the community.

Conclusions

Almost all of the councils were performing reasonably well. However, most of the councils would benefit from being more effective and the newer ones would benefit from learning more quickly rather than prolong the learning process through trial and error. Good process is a critical part of success and should not be treated as an afterthought.

While no cookbook can create a "perfect" watershed council, certain ingredients are still necessary to make the process work. Measures of council performance, like those in Table 2, can be quite useful to gauge the level of progress at each stage of the group's evolution. Performing self-evaluations, based on such criteria, allows a group to measure its own strengths and weaknesses, and move towards making any needed improvements.

Recommendations:

1. Councils need to evaluate their process based on the evaluation criteria (Table 2) in order to minimize avoidable mistakes.
2. Assistance is needed to improve their decision-making process: a) consensus needs to be made more explicit and clear; b) ability to resolve conflict needs to be nurtured.
3. The focus on project implementation should not dominate the need to develop changes in community attitude and personal approach, which will be the longest lasting effects of the council process.
4. Greater emphasis is needed on building trust and understanding within the community, and not just within the council.
5. Assistance is needed to improve the watershed planning process and plan quality.
6. Reasonable, long-term expectations of councils should be determined and their desired longevity debated, or council sustainability will become increasingly tenuous.
7. State programs should help improve the effectiveness of the councils' organizational operations as a means of increasing the likelihood of success of both state and local watershed restoration efforts.

PART III: Conservation Effectiveness and Council Process

Correlation between Content and Process:

Relationships between the restoration value of the councils' programs (e.g., content) and their organizational process were most clearly noticeable for the following:

- Technically stronger conservation plan content ranked well with better planning .

- Those with better conservation plans and process tended to:
    a) avoid low restoration value projects, and
    b) implement projects with higher mean restoration value.

These findings should not be surprising. A solid planning process, which includes joint fact-finding between local and scientific communities, clarity of plan intent, community ownership, and built-in adaptability, reflects a substantial commitment of resources and should lead to a technically better plan. Following a good plan also helps focus on higher priority projects and avoid lower priority, opportunistic ones.

<u>What the Councils are Doing Well:</u>

! Providing neutral forums for local involvement and cordial discussions among diverse interests
! Developing trust and understanding among council members
! Improving agency relationships - better cooperation, coordination, and communication than before the council.
! Helping to bring the community=s attention to the needs of fish and water issues.
! Getting some landowners to participate and implement projects or practices that might not have been done otherwise
! Persevering despite financial, social and technical obstacles
! Getting projects implemented on the ground

<u>What the Councils are Not Doing So Well:</u>

- Not addressing management practices or watershed issues well, with a bias for on-the-ground projects. Without dealing with long-term changes, projects tend to address short-term problems and symptoms instead of causes.
- Not being clear on how to reach decisions through the consensus process. The confusion causes some councils to avoid controversial or >sacred cow= issues, or make >lowest common denominator= decisions.
- Not dealing with intractable issues, which may be the major “stressors” within the watershed. Issues larger than a single watershed (e.g., forest practices, water law) are not well addressed by councils.
- Not focusing on building trust and understanding with the watershed community, causing lower satisfaction levels with the council by those not involved.
- Not all are developing watershed plans that are understandable, supportable, implementable, and adaptable.
- Not implementing projects on a priority basis, but instead as landowner opportunity arises - even with good plans and priority setting.

CONCLUSIONS

Watershed councils provide one of many approaches to addressing watershed conditions, salmonid habitat needs, and water quality concerns. They fill a niche that cannot otherwise be filled, particularly with private landowner or mixed ownership watersheds. Almost all councils evaluated in this study represented an improvement over the status quo or "no council" scenario. While doing a number of things well, councils also have certain limitations. Some limitations appear to be inherent to the scale or intractability of the more complex issues. Other weaknesses, though challenging, may be avoidable or minimized by councils if key factors for organizational success are more explicitly considered. With the present sense of urgency to recover listed salmon and steelhead or to meet water quality targets in impaired streams, it behooves all parties to improve the likelihood of achieving better council effectiveness.

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