Taking the pulse of civic engagement in forest management

by Mark Robson¹ and John R. Parkins²

ABSTRACT

Outdated and unresponsive institutional arrangements are the greatest single obstacle to the achievement of sustainable forestry in Canada. More open civic engagement processes and institutional arrangements are now emerging, however, compelling traditional actors to interact with many more issues and social forces. This article introduces a way of understanding and evaluating civic engagement processes for this special issue on civic engagement in forest management. It reviews the articles for this special issue and critically assesses where we have come from and where we might need to go as forest governance continues to evolve and meet the challenges of a 21st Century Canada.

Key words: institutional arrangements, sustainable forestry, forest governance, civic engagement, public participation, evaluation

RÉSUMÉ

Les ententes réglementaires obsolètes et inadéquates constituent le plus important obstacle à la réalisation de la foresterie durable au Canada. Des processus d'implication civique plus ouverts et de nouvelles ententes réglementaires sont de plus en plus présents, mais forcent les acteurs traditionnels à se mesurer à plus d'enjeux et à des forces sociales plus nombreuses. Cet article introduit une façon de comprendre et d'évaluer les processus d'implication civique qui sont à la base de ce numéro spécial sur l'implication civique au Canada. Il effectue une révision des articles formant ce numéro spécial et évalue de façon critique le chemin parcouru à ce jour et vers quoi nous nous dirigeons alors que la gestion des forêts continuera d'évoluer et de faire face aux défis du XXI^e siècle au Canada.

Mots clés : ententes réglementaires, foresterie durable, gestion des forêts, implication civique, participation publique, évaluation

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Introduction

Canada's forest regulatory system has been called "contentious, complicated and confusing, and, in many cases, incomprehensible" (Apsey *et al.* 2000). This reflects what philosopher John Ralston Saul (2000) has called Canada's "narrow corporatist" legal system, which is "a world of consultants and of specialist dialects" and "of confused, frustrated citizens." What is needed, Saul asserts, is to reduce the "enormous mound of law and regulation and administrative detail and to consolidate it," to provide an arena where citizens can engage in open and honest exchange and deliberation.

Along the same lines, Rod Carrow (1999), former Assistant Deputy Minister in New Brunswick and former Dean of

the Faculty of the Faculty of Forestry at University of Toronto, has asserted that badly outdated and unresponsive institutional arrangements are the greatest single obstacle to the achievement of sustainable forestry in Canada. Ljungman (1998) also maintains that this institutional malaise applies across many countries where powerful stakeholders with an interest in maintaining the status quo are the main obstacle to reform.

Although this institutional entrenchment is arguably well preserved in Canada, there do appear to be signs of change and this collection of papers exemplifies some movement along these lines. In contrast to previous generations, through more open processes of forest governance, the principal actors in contemporary forest management are now compelled to interact with many more issues and forces that cross jurisdictional lines, disciplinary divides, and cultural landscapes (Tippie and Wellman 1991). A movement toward more openness within governance institutions is also mirrored within the physical sciences side of ecosystem management where flexibility and adaptation are now commonly accepted concepts.

Holling's (1995) theory of ecosystem change asserts that flexibility in human organizations and institutions is required for adapting to ecosystem surprises. At the same time, civic engagement, from town meetings to advisory committees to formally mediated negotiations, is recognized to be more effective for creative and collaborative problem-solving than centralized bureaucratic management (Monge and Contrac-

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tor 2001). This opening up of the institutional context through civic engagement matters because local and contextual changes have transformed bureaucratic forest resource agencies in Canada and the U.S. over the past decades. The relatively closed system of the past appears to be, however slowly, opening up through a series of new policies and processes that increase public involvement and the need to address a broader range of ecological values (Tippie and Wellman 1991).

Part of this movement toward a more open system of governance in Canada has come from historical analysis as well as lessons from other parts of the world. Historical research continues to demonstrate the varied and effective ways that human communities have sustainably managed natural resources for thousands of years (Agrawal and Gibson 2001). In a complementary way, common property research indicates that community-centred management can be a sustainable alternative to state-centred management of natural resources (Ostrom 1990). This research has added to the strong push worldwide toward more transparent and inclusive forms of governance in natural resource management and specific developments in Canada.

Policy initiatives at the provincial and national levels have responded to this democratic impulse in forest management by incorporating civic engagement into forest planning and policy development. Civic engagement encompasses a wide range of activities that include more passive approaches like public meetings to more active approaches like stakeholder advisory committees (SACs). Although a diversity of approaches to civic engagement is often warranted, it is the view of many reform-minded practitioners and researchers that active approaches, including long-term dialogue, collaborative learning and shared decision-making have the potential to involve the public more meaningfully in the forest planning process (Cheng and Mattor 2006, McGurk *et al.* 2006). In fact, forest SACs have become a central component of forest planning processes in at least nine of 10 provinces and are required in five: Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and New Brunswick (Parkins *et al.* 2006).

In addition to provincial policy and legislation, some forest SACs are part of certification initiatives such as the Sustainable Forest Management system (Canadian Standards Association 2002) and the Forest Stewardship Council's National Boreal Standard (FSC 2004).

Forest SACs are especially important in that the dwellers and users of common pool resources like forests, are often capable of self-organizing to manage resources more sustainably than state agencies alone, whether jointly with governments or with considerable autonomy (Ostrom and Wertime 1998, Nilsson 2000). A preference for SACs comes from an understanding that local dwellers and users often have greater knowledge of the local environment, the rules required to govern it, and the greater self interest that arises from being more dependent on the long-term potential benefits of future resource flows.

Some of the articles that are contained within this special issue deal with SACs as a very common mode of civic engagement in the Canadian forest sector, but the articles as a whole provide an opportunity to reflect and assess the state of forest governance in Canada—as it relates in particular to the role of local and non-local publics in the process of forest manage-

ment and policy development. The remainder of this introductory article offers a way of understanding and evaluating civic engagement processes from a multi-faceted perspective, a brief review of the articles in this special issue and a critical assessment of where we have come from and where we might need to go as forest governance continues to evolve and meet the challenges of a 21st Century Canada.

Evaluating Civic Engagement

Based on a definition of sustainable forest management that is codified by the Canadian Council of Forest Minister's Criteria and Indicators of Sustainable Forest Management, civic engagement is an important component of sustainability with specific attention to levels of satisfaction with public participation processes (CCFM 2003). In ways that are not entirely dissimilar to forest inventory work, data gathering and evaluation of civic engagement is important to improve efforts, develop guidelines for resource managers and identify the strengths and limits of civic engagement as it is currently practised across Canada.

In a broad sense, success can be defined in different ways: normatively, instrumentally or substantively (Fiorino 1990, Perhac 1996). *Normative* notions of success evaluate civic engagement as a right of citizens and part of living in a healthy democratic society, so success is defined by the extent to which public values are incorporated into forest management planning. *Instrumental* rationales evaluate success by the extent to which conflict is resolved, trust is built, or citizens "buy into" a public involvement process. *Substantive* rationales evaluate success by the extent to which there is objectively better decision-making a deeper understanding, or creative thinking.

In addition to these broad parameters for evaluation, civic engagement can be evaluated in terms of its three general components: context, process and outcomes³. *Context* refers to the elements that a public participation process faces (e.g., interconnectedness of citizens in a local community); *process* is the discourse that occurs (e.g., openness of dialogue on a committee); and *outcomes* result from elements of the context and the process (e.g., agreement on a plan).

Evaluations can go beyond these components to include the impacts of civic engagement on society or even ecological health. In fact, one of the largest interdisciplinary studies in the world, initiated by Dr. Elinor Ostrom, a 2009 Nobel Laureate (Economics), for her work in sustainable governance of natural resources, includes evaluating the relationship between community-level civic engagement and forest health (Ostrom and Wertime 1998).

Evaluations can be conducted with specific criteria, whether tangible (number of participants who advised on a plan's development), or intangible (extent of learning that occurred). They can be conducted from the point of view of experts or the participants involved. Evaluations can be conducted at different spatial scales—from a single location to many—or focus on different times during a civic engagement exercise, whether the process component (extent of learning

³For a more detailed assessment of these three components of evaluating civic engagement processes, see Beckley *et al.* (2006) and Robson and Kant (2007, 2009).

that occurred) or the outcome component, whether short-term outcomes (agreement on a plan) or long-term outcomes (building of trust among participants).

Evaluations can compare actual outcomes with the goals of a civic engagement exercise to determine if goals have been achieved or similar cases can be compared and evaluated or compared to a theoretical ideal to test theory. Finally, evaluations can go beyond specific civic engagement exercises to compare the effectiveness and efficiency of civic engagement to alternative methods of conflict resolution, such as the court system or formally mediated negotiations.

Evaluations that use qualitative approaches (e.g., face-to-face interviews) are often conducted to evaluate more challenging intangible criteria and ensure researchers fully understand the nuances of processes and the context to ensure high validity in results (i.e., the researchers are measuring what they think they are measuring). In contrast, evaluations by a neutral third party are often conducted to evaluate simpler tangible criteria and maintain objectivity to ensure high reliability in results (i.e., the same result is repeatedly found).

Summary of Articles in this Issue

This special issue on civic engagement includes a variety of approaches to evaluation. It begins with Harshaw's (2010) paper on the conceptions and challenges of public participation in British Columbia. Harshaw presents multiple perspectives on public participation, including representative and participatory democracy as well as approaches to incorporate public perspectives in decision-making (i.e., shared decision-making, consensus building, and interest-based negotiation). He concludes with a discussion of the three principal deliberative forest planning and management frameworks that did or continue to operate in British Columbia (the Commission on Resources and the Environment, Land and Resource Management Plans, and sustainable forest management certification).

Tindall *et al.* (2010) offer a quantitative study on the social bases of public satisfaction with public participation in forest management decision-making in British Columbia. The study evaluates the factors associated with the impacts of civic engagement on society, specifically public judgements of satisfaction with public participation. Overall, satisfaction with public participation was found to be relatively low but slightly higher at the local level than at the provincial scale. The main findings, however, were that members of the general public who were more biocentrically oriented were less satisfied than those with ties to acquaintances employed in the forestry sector. Tindall *et al.* conclude with a discussion of the policy and research implications of their findings.

Christensen *et al.* (2010) offer a way of enhancing the ability of a First Nation community to have its values incorporated into a multitude of land-use planning initiatives, including forestry development. Christensen and colleagues found that cumulative effects assessment and social indicators research in the North may be strongly enhanced if research incorporates a local historical approach that addresses the decisions taken, lessons people have learned from the past and their visions for the future. They conclude by reflecting on how the act of research itself must be seen as part of a governance structure if the research is deemed culturally appropriate and offers opportunities to build decision-making capacity.

The second evaluation (Wyatt *et al.*) of civic engagement in a First Nations context asks what a distinct civic engagement process that could respond to Aboriginal rights, needs and expectations would look like. The study uses a multi-method approach to report findings from a quantitative analysis of 68 civic engagement processes within Quebec's forest sector and a qualitative case study of forestry participation in a single First Nation community. It identifies several characteristics of consultation processes used for First Nations but notes that consultations with First Nations typically reflect the same practices used for general public participation in forestry, raising the question of whether consultations truly go beyond generally accepted practices to also respond to Aboriginal rights, needs and expectations in Québec.

Robson and Hunt (2010) conduct a meta-analysis of research by integrating the findings from two quantitative Ontario-wide surveys and qualitative analyses of audits and case study interviews with members of Ontario's Local Citizens' Committees (LCCs). These multiple sources of data are used to evaluate two key aspects of stakeholder advisory committees: stakeholder representation and success. Data analysis indicates mixed results and concludes that representation is a challenging issue and that LCCs have a mixed level of success.

Martineau-Delisle and Solange's (2010) paper on the diverse impacts of civic engagement, in particular, of forest-related deliberative forums in Quebec, wraps up the issue. The study examines the diversity of potential impacts of civic engagement processes, assesses their significance and evaluates the capacity of existing processes to achieve them. Based on qualitative analysis of 24 participant interviews and a survey of 113 coordinators of forest-related civic engagement processes, the study provides practical information to conduct evaluations of public participation processes.

Social Science Research as Civic Engagement

In examining the papers in this special issues more holistically, it becomes quite clear that a notion of civic engagement in forest management can be defined and practised in very broad terms and in very different ways. From the participatory development of social indicators among Aboriginal people in the Yukon to the assessment of value orientations among the general public in Vancouver, there are many settings and many procedures under which civic engagement can take place. Moreover, there are particular approaches or tools for civic engagement such as Local Citizen Committees in Ontario or annual forest planning meetings with the Wemotaci of Quebec that scholars evaluate in this volume. But the act of civic engagement extends beyond these types of discrete events and activities that are sponsored by government and industry. Civic engagement also extends to the process of research itself and the process of social science data gathering in particular. Random sample survey research, in-depth interviews with key informants, observational research and document analysis are well defined, systematic, and scientifically robust ways of gathering data that can feed directly into forest management and planning processes. In this way, this collection of papers on civic engagement provides not only an assessment of on-going civic engagement activities in the Canadian forest sector, but they also provide something of a road map for how to implement civic engagement activities through social science research.

From Large-Scale to Small-Scale Civic Engagement

Another feature of civic engagement that emerges in these papers is one of scale. For the most part, authors are dealing with civic engagement activities at the local level where smaller groups of stakeholders, community leaders, or local publics are engaged in participatory resource management activities. With the introduction of forest certification initiatives (FSC 2004, CSA 2007) over the last decade, coupled with the proliferation of provincial policy and legislation, this movement from national- or regional-scale civic engagement activity to the local level is even more noticeable.

Harshaw (2010) identifies several regional-scale initiatives in British Columbia such as CORE and LRMP, and these initiatives are similar to other provincial-scale initiatives such as Special Places 2000 in Alberta or Lands for Life in Ontario that were once prominent across Canada. Perhaps as a reflection of limited success, much of the pressure for public involvement in forest management is no longer released through these large-scale initiatives. In their place, an extensive network of local initiatives, often at the community level, is now in place.

There are obvious advantages to these small-scale activities in their capacity to engage with local publics, but there are also a number of important limitations. As reflected by authors in this volume, local advisory committees often struggle to maintain a diverse base of local representatives—with frequent gaps in representation from conservation groups, Aboriginal communities, and a lack of involvement by women.

Local processes may have advantages in terms of adaptation to local cultures, needs, and interests, but research by Wyatt and colleagues (2010) show that locally distinctive processes are often distinctive in name only. Moreover, research shows that local processes can be more easily controlled by dominant political or economic interests in government and industry. Therefore, local-level processes can be more easily “engineered” or “directed” by powerful local interests and hence limit the possibilities for alternative voices and alternative ideas to emerge. For these reasons, a general sense from authors in this special issue is that the trend toward local civic engagement in forest management in Canada is both an opportunity and a cautionary tale—whereby the mechanisms of democratic society are observable but the actual everyday processes of democracy are often limited.

Research by Tindall and colleagues (2010) offers an important dimension to this discussion of scale by showing that satisfaction with forest management amongst the general public is differentiated in fairly systematic ways. Urban residents tend to have more biocentric-value orientations and are generally less satisfied with forest management practices, whereas rural residents tend to have more anthropocentric-value orientations and are generally more satisfied. These differences in satisfaction have implications for this trend toward local-level civic engagement in forest management in that existing mechanisms for civic engagement (such as Local Citizen Committees in Ontario) are more readily available to those who live in smaller, rural, resource-dependent communities.

On one hand, the emphasis on civic engagement with those mostly closely affected by forestry activities is understandable and appropriate—citizens in close proximity to

forestry activity have more at stake. But this particular mode of civic engagement also misses a large majority of Canadians who live in urban centres, and more importantly, have a value orientation and cultural distinctions that are often quite different from those in more rural areas. In other words, the dominant mode of civic engagement is oriented toward local rural publics, with little opportunities for non-local urban publics to engage in forest management processes. To what extent is this a problem? Is this focus on local public engagement adequate to maintain public support for forest management in Canada? If broader civic engagement is desirable, are new tools for civic engagement required? These are just a few questions that begin to emerge in this conversation about the scale of civic engagement.

Civic Engagement for the 21st Century

A final topic, which follows from the preceding questions, involves a call for more experimentation or adaptive management in the social dimensions of forest management. For the better part of 20 years, the forest sector has deployed a set of conventional tools for public involvement in forest management. These include the ubiquitous stakeholder advisory committee, the open house, the toll-free number, and the occasional mail or telephone survey. These conventional tools for public involvement are popular because they are relatively safe (outcomes are predictable) and easy to implement. But perhaps these are not the best criteria any longer for determining a process of civic engagement.

Although these tools have arguably served the forest sector well in that they have become a dominant feature of social forestry in Canada and have taken the sector from a relatively closed bureaucratic system 30 years ago to a more open system today, it may be time to re-examine the suitability of these conventional methods for civic engagement in a 21st Century Canada. We are now a nation that is highly urbanized and highly diverse in terms of the cultures, ethnicities, and values that are pressing for greater recognition within our forest management systems. We are also in a period of forest industry transition, where many of the conventional modes of production are under threat and many new modes of doing business are under development. In this context, more than ever we need a system to support social sustainability that is up to the challenge.

Inasmuch as adaptation and change are needed within our forestry business models, we need adaptation and change within our civic engagement models as well. Twenty-first Century civic engagement will need to be more robust in terms of constructively dealing with conflict and a diversity of values, it will utilize state-of-the-art tools for civic engagement (many of these tools are described in detail by groups such as the Deliberative Democracy Consortium) and it will harness the best of social science research capacity in Canada and around the world.

These are important considerations for social sustainability in the Canadian forest sector, and they will require coordinated attention from industry, government, academic and civil society institutions. Civic engagement is therefore not a luxury but an important path towards the good governance of forest ecosystems (Duane 1997).

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