

Reviews

Ronald D. Brunner, Toddi A. Steelman, Lindy Coe-Juell, Christina M. Cromley, Christine M. Edwards and Donna W. Tucker. *Adaptive Governance, Integrating Science, Policy and Decision Making*. Columbia University Press. 2005. Pp. xvi + 319. Price £51.50 (\$79.50) (hardback), £17.00 (\$29.50) (paperback). ISBN 0-231-13624-2 (hardback), 0-231-13625-0 (paperback).

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According to the Preface, the purpose of this book 'is to clarify how to expedite a transition to adaptive governance for people who are also concerned about problems of gridlock in natural resource policy and are in a position to make a difference'. The transition being one from 'scientific management' to the advocated adaptive governance, which the authors believe (and most would agree) is 'the appropriate goal and criterion for governance in a democracy'. In this context, scientific management, which has characterized much of the twentieth century, aspires to rise 'above politics, relying on science as the foundation for efficient policies made through a single central authority', whereas adaptive governance 'integrates scientific and other types of knowledge into politics to advance the common interest through open decision making structures'. Scientific management, as often as not, seeks to reduce a problem to those limited questions that can be answered on the basis of existing research-derived knowledge; so giving any proposed future action credibility but in the process never adequately acknowledging the intrinsic uncertainties that mean that in the end any decision is essentially political. The appeal to science (whether by foresters, conservationist or whomever) becomes the excuse or cloak that hides ignorance and the discomfort engendered when faced by uncertainty. In the absence of certainties, politics are unavoidable. Because no one has unique access to the truth, it is necessary to seek a consensus as to how to advance a common interest. Further, because of the lack of certainty over the outcome of any agreed action there has to be continuing monitoring of progress and the willingness among participants to both acknowledge failure as it is identified and to participate in the mutual search for new solutions.

This is a rather inadequate attempt to impart at least something of the essence of the points made by Brunner and Steelman in their long and fascinating opening chapter. To illustrate the development of their argument, they start by outlining a situation on the west coast of America where scientists decreed that to conserve fish in a particular river basin abstraction of water for irrigation had to be drastically, and for the farmers catastrophically, reduced. Despite uncertainty over the science a local judge deemed that the law required that the water be turned off, and so it was until the farmers forced open the headgates to their irrigation canals. In such a circumstance, Brunner and Steelman argue, 'it is difficult both politically and ethically to justify policies that serve the special interests of the few over the common interest of the many'. Judgements of the common interest depend on the assessment of the multiple interests in a particular community, including those represented by, among others, environmentalists, employees, employers, public officials and citizens responsible for education, fire protection, recreation and so on. As a consequence, 'assessments are better done in a local community than in a community of national or global scope'. At this local level, 'different judgements of the common interest must be resolved politically if the community is to act democratically'.

The next four chapters discuss particular examples of what might be the failure of scientific management, and the ultimate resolution by adaptive governance, in different parts of the United States. Firstly, Coe-Juell outlines a conflict between water extraction and fish on the Colorado river where acceptance by all players of the inherent limitations of the best available science lead to a gradualist approach where 'in essence, the fish will tell us as time goes on how they are doing' and so guide future action. The third and fourth examples discuss problems over maintaining grazing while improving grazing lands and a collaborative attempt to prevent overfishing of salmon in Oregon. By far the most interesting of these chapters, however, is that by Steelman and Tucker on a conflict over local use of national forest land (for grazing and most particularly firewood) in northern New Mexico. A new forest district ranger, with the delightful name of Crockett Dumas (for he is to exhibit the characteristics of both Davy Crockett and some of the racier characters in the novels of Alexandre Dumas), is faced with a sullen population resentful of the forest service and of its control of the resources they traditionally regard as their own. In the

background lurks the ultimate baddy in the form of an environmental organization that, on the grounds that there might be Mexican-spotted owls in these woods (allegedly none had ever been seen), wanted all exploitation, including firewood collection, banned. Dumas, mindful of his agencies mission – ‘To Care for the Land and Serve the People’ – sent his staff out on a consultation process the authors dubbed ‘horseback diplomacy’. Eventually they won the trust of the locals for the consultations lead to new policies on the location, timing and number of permits for personal use timber; timber sales better targeted to community needs and the development of contracts for silvicultural works that could be undertaken by local enterprise. In response, the environmentalists, seeking a zero-cut policy, went to law and a District Judge ordered a halt to all timber harvesting. The locals, now desperate for firewood, told Dumas that either he could mark trees for removal or they would just help themselves. He felt that he had no option but to send his staff to mark trees for ‘it was the right thing to do ... my job is to do with reality, not planning’. No significant reprimand resulted and indeed in time those involved were to receive a public accolade from Vice President Gore (a double-edged sword in view of the jealousy it provoked all round). There is much more to it than this and it makes a rollicking good story, although the authors do try to be dispassionate. It has all the features for a good Hollywood film, including a rather disillusioned hero finally departing into the sunset.

The penultimate chapter, by Christina Cromley, outlines various initiatives launched by Congressmen and Senators in Washington, DC, to promote consultation and adaptive governance with regard to natural resource policy making. These are sometimes rather general but more usually are in response to specific developments, such as an attempt to support community-based forestry in a part of California suffering unemployment because of a decline in timber harvest from federal lands. The book then closes with a return by the authors of the first chapter to discuss how these various examples support their thesis that there is a need to move towards adaptive governance with its ‘potential to harmonize once-competing interests with the common interest on a much broader scale’.

This is an interesting book that has much to commend it. Although the examples and discussion are entirely about the situation in the United States, with its very litigious culture and mass of environmental legislation, there is much that is more widely relevant. Indeed the extent to which the ideas advanced are becoming mainstream is well illustrated by the recently published report on the proceedings of the 17th Commonwealth Forestry Conference held in Sri Lanka last year (Forestry Commission, 2005). The third theme for discussion at this meeting is described in these terms.

‘Top-down centrist approaches to forest governance have often failed either to achieve social justice or sustainable forest management. Effective regulation needs community control of forest resources and land tenure ... public, non-government and private sector institutions must recognise the different needs and coping strategies of the very poor’ That there seems to be broad agreement, however, means that these ideas are neither being adopted nor without problems. The imposition by central government of simplified, even single-purpose objectives has often lead, as the examples in this book show, to hardship and perhaps destruction of that which it was initially intended to safeguard. But it is also disingenuous to suppose that rational decisions by an impoverished community necessarily lead to medium or long-term sustainability. Perhaps ensuring local needs while protecting a greater good is what adaptive governance is all about, but one is left with a sneaky suspicion that there are other examples with less happy endings than those presented in this book. Nevertheless, this book at times is most thought provoking and it can be recommended to all interested in forest and natural resource policy making.

Reference

Forestry Commission, 2005 *Forestry’s Contribution to Poverty Reduction, Proceedings of the 17th Commonwealth Forestry Conference*. Forestry Commission, Edinburgh.