

## INTRODUCTION

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For the past several decades, interested citizens, policymakers, and regulators in the United States and elsewhere have asked: What role should community members play in the development and implementation of environmental policies? How can participation formats and processes be improved to maximize the value and impact of public input in environmental decision making? This book attempts to enhance our understanding of how community members and other interested parties engage in various kinds of participation, both within and outside institutionally prescribed formats, to influence environmental policy decisions. More specifically, chapters included in this volume are grounded in the assumption that issues of communication play a central role in questions related to effective public participation in environmental decision making. We hope that the communication theories and practices explored here can lead to improvements in the design, implementation, and assessment of both traditional and innovative public-participation mechanisms and formats.

### THE ISSUE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION MAKING

Since the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969, public participation in environmental decision making in the United States has become gradually institutionalized at federal, state, and local

levels. The movement to involve citizens in environmental policy has spread to other countries as well through international forums such as the United Nations and the World Bank. At the same time, controversies over a wide variety of environmental issues, including facility siting, permit granting, natural resource management, land use, environmental justice, brown-fields revitalization, smart growth, and international trade agreements, have led to an increasing focus on matters of public participation. Citizens, activists, and advocacy organizations in the United States and elsewhere have discovered firsthand the shortcomings of contemporary approaches to and mechanisms for citizen involvement, and have demanded changes in the way public participation is solicited and used.

More recently, public participation practitioners, citizens, and academics alike have begun to seek ways to promote more meaningful citizen involvement in environmental decisions. In some cases, government institutions responsible for providing for public involvement in environmental policymaking have explored changes to address the limitations of existing approaches. In the United States, for example, agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management have experimented with new forms of citizen involvement such as community-based collaborations, community advisory boards, citizen review panels, and on-line discussion forums as ways to develop mechanisms to improve public participation in environmental decisions.

A growing number of scholars and activists, and other interested citizens, have focused attention on the role of public participation in environmental decision making (Arnstein, 1969; Chess & Purcell, 1999; Daniels & Walker, 2001; Delicath, 2001; Fiorino, 1990, 1996; Kaminstein, 1996; Kasperson, 1986; Lynn & Busenberg, 1995; Renn, Webler, & Wiedemann, 1995; Rosenbaum, 1978; Tuler & Webler, 1995; Webler, Tuler, & Krueger, 2001). This extensive literature has identified a number of shortcomings in traditional participation mechanisms (such as public hearings or comment periods), including:

- (1) Public participation typically operates on technocratic models of rationality in which policymakers, administrative officials, and experts see their role as one of educating and persuading the public about the legitimacy of their decisions.
- (2) Public participation often occurs too late in the decision-making process, sometimes even after decisions have already been made.

- (3) Public participation often follows an adversarial trajectory, especially when public participation processes are conducted in a “decide-announce-defend” mode on the part of officials.
- (4) Public participation often lacks adequate mechanisms and forums for informed dialogue among stakeholders.
- (5) Public participation often lacks adequate provisions to ensure that input gained through public participation makes a real impact on decision outcomes.

Along with criticizing traditional mechanisms, many scholars and practitioners have attempted to articulate a set of assumptions and values, grounded in ideals of participatory democracy, upon which alternative public participation processes can be developed and evaluated (Delicath, 2001; Fiorino, 1989a, 1989b; Laird, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1978). Principal among these assumptions are the following: (1) people should have a say in decisions that will affect their lives; (2) early and ongoing, informed and empowered public participation is the hallmark of sound public policy; and (3) the public must be involved in determining how they will participate in choosing what forums and mechanisms will be used in identifying what resources are needed to ensure informed participation, and in determining how public input will affect decision-making outcomes. These assumptions have led a number of scholars to outline approaches to more democratic public participation in environmental decision making based on notions of fairness and competence (Renn, Webler, & Wiedemann, 1995), collaborative learning (Daniels & Walker, 2001) and rhetorical models of risk communication (Katz & Miller, 1996; Rowan, 1994; Waddell, 1996). Still others have examined specific mechanisms that attempt to give the public a larger role in environmental policy decision making, such as community advisory boards, citizen panels, citizen advisory committees, and citizen juries (Applegate, 1998; Crosby, 1995; Goldenberg & Frideres, 1986; Vari, 1995).

Although there is growing agreement about the assumptions and values of democratic participation, the shortcomings of contemporary approaches to public participation, and the general types of changes necessary to achieve more meaningful citizen involvement in environmental decision making, discussions of these issues have paid inadequate attention to issues of communication. One of the main objectives of this book is to highlight the centrality of communication in matters of public participation in environmental decision making.

COMMUNICATION APPROACHES TO  
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Chapters in this volume are grounded in environmental communication studies, an emerging research tradition that explores the ways in which communication—strategic symbolic action shared among people and organizations—impacts both our conception of and our interaction with the physical world (Cantrill & Oravec, 1996; DeLuca, 1999; Herndl & Brown, 1996; Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992; Muir & Veenendall, 1996; Peterson, 1997). Scholars within this tradition have noted that environmental communication serves at least two important functions, both of which are relevant to issues of public participation in environmental decision making. First, environmental communication serves an instrumental function. As human beings make daily decisions, as individuals and in communities, about how they intend to manage and care for the physical spaces around them, those decisions are greatly influenced by advocacy for various environmental values, priorities, and policies. Hence, environmental communication scholarship offers critical analyses of the persuasive efforts of advocates from across the political spectrum, including individuals, grassroots organizations, corporations, and government agencies, who attempt to shape decision-making processes and policy outcomes. This practical function of environmental communication is clearly relevant to the study of public participation mechanisms and practices. Participants in environmental decision making utilize strategic communication in efforts to set agendas, define problems, and advocate solutions, as well as to cultivate trust, articulate community voice and vision, and build legitimacy for decisions.

Second, environmental communication serves a constitutive function. In many respects, “the environment” is not simply a material object or site out there beyond the individual, but is also a symbolic construct created and organized through discourse. Environmental communication scholarship raises ontological issues related to tensions between conceptions of a nature that is physically experienced as material substance and a “Nature” that is symbolically constructed and enacted through discourse (Herndl & Brown, 1996). This function of environmental communication is particularly relevant to public participation. All participants in environmental decision making communicate in ways that not only represent problems, causes, solutions, legitimacy, interests, and values, but also construct those very issues in question. Indeed, as Fischer and Forester point out, public participation in environmental decision making is “a constant discursive

struggle over the criteria of social classification, the boundaries of problem categories, the intersubjective interpretation of common experiences, the conceptual framing of problems, and the definitions of ideas that guide the ways people create the shared meanings which motivate them to act” (1993, pp. 1–2).

The recognition that our communication about environmental matters serves both instrumental and constitutive functions provides the theoretical and critical foundation of this volume, and allows for a more thorough examination of the dynamics of stakeholder involvement in deliberations about environmental issues. Operating from various approaches to the study of communication, authors in this volume come to a number of conclusions that add to—and at times cast doubt on—the accepted wisdom about the purposes, structures, and outcomes of public participation in environmental decision making.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

The chapters in this book are organized in three parts. Part 1, “Theorizing and Constructing More Effective Public Participation Processes,” explores the role of communication theory in designing, executing, and evaluating mechanisms for effective public participation in environmental decision making. Drawing on literature from group communication, Susan L. Senecah outlines a practical theory involving what she calls the “trinity of voice,” and argues for its utility as a tool for assessing the effectiveness of participatory processes. Amanda C. Graham presents a social communication framework, based on values of openness, shared responsibility, and interpersonal relationships, as an alternative model that opens up the possibility for enhanced engagement among stakeholders in environmental decision-making contexts. Working from a “competing values” theory of group decision making, Jennifer Duffield Hamilton explores the extent to which participants’ expectations about the purpose, structure, and outcomes of public participation may influence the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms. Finally, William J. Kinsella problematizes distinctions between “experts” and “the public” that are common in traditional public participation practices and scholarship, with the goal of identifying both how community members can become more capable of evaluating expert arguments and how expert knowledge should fit within the larger framework of environmental policymaking. Kinsella argues that “expertise” should be conceived as a “public resource”—a kind of social knowledge that accounts

for both expert and local knowledge, and to which both specialists and non-specialists contribute.

Part 2, "Evaluating Mechanisms for Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making," takes a critical look at public participation practices and processes within current institutional frameworks in the United States and abroad. The chapters in this section offer case studies of local and national public participation processes in institutional contexts such as NEPA, the U.S. EPA, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Department of Energy. International contexts of public participation, such as regional trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Free Trade Areas of the Americas (FTAA), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank (WB), and the United Nations are examined as well.

Judith Hendry offers a specific critique of public participation requirements within the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), with a particular focus on how the Environmental Assessment segment of the law operates as a *de facto* advocacy tool to validate *a priori* decisions rather than as a decision-making tool to arrive at carefully weighed decisions. The next two chapters examine public participation practices in the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Gregg B. Walker assesses the efforts by the Clinton administration to gather public comments as part of the USFS implementation of the 1999 Roadless Initiative, a plan that called for the protection of nearly 40 million acres of roadless areas throughout the U.S. national forest system. Walker's chapter reveals that despite institutional commitments to civic engagement and a concerted effort to solicit public input, the Roadless Initiative public participation strategy exemplified a "business as usual" approach rather than innovation and civic deliberation. Steve Schwarze's chapter looks at the USFS management plans developed for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northeastern Minnesota and finds that the agency's public participation efforts resulted in damage to its own legitimacy. Schwarze argues that the bureaucratic and instrumental rationality that guides the Forest Service's solicitation of public participation and its account of public participation as reported in USFS plans creates an "institutional trap" that erodes stakeholder confidence and trust in the organization. The next pair of chapters examines structures and practices related to citizen review panels. Stephen P. Depoe argues that the effectiveness of the Fernald Citizens Task Force and the Fernald Health Effects Subcommittee, panels established by the Department of Energy to provide consensus-based recommendations regarding environmental remediation and health research related to America's

nuclear weapons complex, differed greatly in large part because of the institutional structures and tasks of the groups as well as because of how discursive practices within the panels were constrained by conventional models of expert knowledge and risk communication. After identifying problems associated with the Georgia Ports Authority's adoption of a consensus-based stakeholder approach to resolving conflicts associated with a plan to deepen Savannah's harbor, Caitlin Wills-Toker calls for abandoning not only consensus-based approaches, but other detached and abstract models of participation as well. Finally, J. Robert Cox examines two regional trade agreements—the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)—to identify structures that resist transparency and the participation of civil society groups in trade negotiations and dispute-settlement procedures. Cox reveals an urgent need to consider public participation on regional and global scales and argues that the ability of civil society groups to participate in trade forums is dependent on articulating a compelling rationale for their inclusion and a coherent vision of alternative agreements that promote a just and sustainable economy.

Part 3, “Emergent Participation Practices Among Activist Communities,” explores alternative, noninstitutional resources for and strategies of public participation in environmental decision making. In this section, public participation is broadly conceived and includes considerations of the roles of social capital, toxic tours, and cultural activism as novel means of citizen involvement in environmental policymaking. Following from the issues previously raised by Cox, Amos Tevelow examines the structural and rhetorical capacities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to participate in international governance disputes surrounding issues of environment, agriculture, natural resources, disease, and human rights. Tevelow argues that NGO cooperation in a global policy network requires the cultivation of social capital in ways that can overcome major gaps in culture, resources, and power. Tevelow cautions, however, that social capital used as a policy tool may actually undermine more fundamental reforms by “humanizing” governance without rigorously and explicitly addressing issues of equity and justice. The final two chapters explore novel and innovative cultural practices of grassroots environmental justice organizations and their relationship to public participation in environmental decision making. Phaedra C. Pezzullo explores the persuasive dimensions of toxic tours as complex rhetorical strategies through which community-based “guides” or advocates provide a powerful critique

against dominant discourses of toxic waste. Pezzullo explores how tours impact public participation by educating government representatives and creating opportunities for citizens to share strategies for responding to environmental injustice. Finally, John W. Delicath examines the role that cultural activism and photography play in the struggle for environmental justice. Delicath argues that participation theorists must consider the issues of what motivates, inspires, prepares, and empowers the public to participate in environmental decision making and examines the strategy of cultural activism as a means to explore the relationship between citizen advocacy in noninstitutionalized settings and public participation in institutionalized contexts.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE VOLUME

This book explores the communication practices of various stakeholders (citizens, grassroots organizations, advocacy groups, industry representatives, scientists and technical experts, federal regulators, government agencies) engaged in a variety of environmental decision-making contexts (natural-resource management, use of public lands, nuclear remediation, environmental justice, and world trade). Included are case studies that analyze individuals and organizations participating in a wide range of activities, both within institutional mechanisms (public hearings, NEPA processes, citizen advisory boards) and through alternative forms of environmental advocacy.

At one level, the chapters in this volume provide support for a number of commonly held conclusions concerning how public participation can be improved. It is clear that lawmakers, regulators, and others charged with developing and implementing environmental policies at local, national, and international levels need to articulate a clearer sense of decision space (where and when decisions are to be made) and decision authority (who makes the decision based on what factors) in ways that clarify how public participation will meaningfully impact environmental decisions.

At the same time, the book invites a more complex, critical examination of public participation that recognizes both the instrumental and constitutive functions of communication in environmental controversies. The studies in this volume reveal that public participation in environmental decision making is both shaped by and, in many cases, constrained by the ways in which environmental issues, problems, and solutions are defined or framed through the strategic communication practices of various stakeholders.



Contributors to this volume identify a number of cautionary notes regarding the possibilities and limitations of public participation in environmental decision making, including:

- The general principles of meaningful public participation consistently identified in the literature require constant operationalization. Researchers must always look to contextual factors when explaining why a particular mechanism or instance of participation was or was not successful.
- Providing structured opportunities for public input, including the use of innovative mechanisms to encourage participation, does not by itself guarantee meaningful citizen involvement leading to publicly supportable decisions.
- The meaning and value of public participation depends to a significant extent on how concepts such as “participation” and “participant” are defined by those involved in the process. Participants’ expectations about the purpose, opportunities, structures, and outcomes of public participation, including their own potential to affect outcomes, will influence the effectiveness of participatory processes and the level of satisfaction with decisions.
- Efforts by policymakers, environmental advocates, and others to achieve meaningful public participation may be constrained by more deep-seated commitments to institutional rationalities or economic imperatives that are articulated in dominant discourses of expertise, knowledge, risk, and legitimacy.
- How environmental issues are spatialized at various levels of government (local, regional, national, international) and defined geographically, as affecting certain people and environments in particular places, structures and often constrains effective communication and meaningful public participation.
- Models or theories of meaningful public involvement in environmental decision making must account for the growing significance and impact of alternative modes of environmental advocacy, including toxic tours and cultural activism, as ways in which individuals gain the confidence and skills to participate in, and to transform, institutionalized processes of public participation.

In sum, the volume highlights ongoing tensions between philosophical calls for more democratic public participation in environmental decision making

and the practices of institutions and public officials who too often acknowledge or solicit community input without adequately allowing for that input to influence policy choices or regulatory outcomes.

In applying communication theories to public participation in environmental decision making, we urge participants in environmental controversies to acknowledge the legitimacy of both technical expertise and local knowledge, and to seek a more productive dialogue among multiple discourses in which citizens, experts, and other participants articulate, interrogate, and transform each other's perspectives. An approach to public participation that accounts for both the instrumental and constitutive dimensions of environmental communication would recognize the contingent nature of knowledge and emphasize an interactive exchange of ideas in which all participants both communicate and appeal to facts, knowledge, and reason as well as beliefs, values, and emotions. Those who seek to improve public participation in environmental decision making should strive to develop mechanisms and forums of engagement that emphasize civic discovery, interpersonal relationships, collaborative learning, and deliberative rhetorics "through which citizens test and create social knowledge in order to uncover, assess, and resolve shared problems" (Goodnight, 1982, p. 214). We hope that this volume contributes to that effort.