People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

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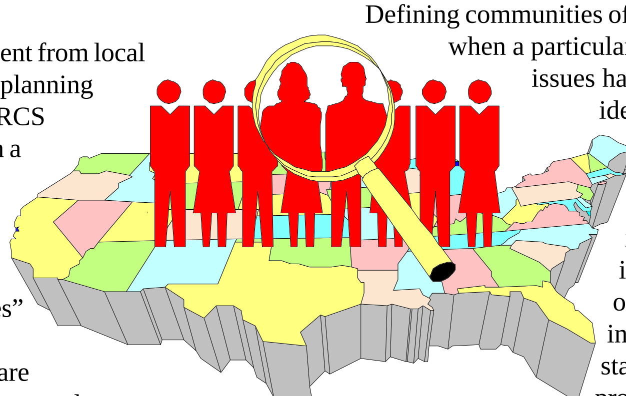
Defining Communities: An Issue Based Approach

Much of the work of the NRCS, today and in the future, will be done with local "communities". Community based planning sounds like an excellent idea, but raises some practical questions, such as: What are communities? How are communities best defined? These questions are faced by the conservation partnership as the NRCS moves into new and different planning roles.



Increased involvement from local communities in the planning process presents NRCS field personnel with a number of new challenges. Finding new and better ways to define "communities" is one of these challenges. Below are some brief ideas on several useful ways to think of "communities" during planning. The reader is also introduced to one method used to define communities. This approach, called the "ripple method", may be used to define "communities of interest". Communities of interest are intended to provide a practical, broadly inclusive set of views on any given set of issues.

Who Should Use This Approach?

This method may be used by anyone who wishes to determine the social, and to a certain degree, the spatial extent of interest in a particular issue or set of issues. This approach is also useful to anyone desiring to expand community involvement in planning.

When Should This Approach be Used?

This approach and method should be used when input from local communities is desired. Defining communities of interest works best when a particular issue or set of issues has been initially identified and stated. This method should then be used to initially identify those individuals or organizations interested in the stated issues or problems. Remember, however, that the issue(s) first identified may change as more input is gained. This should be expected and anticipated. Change in the way the issue(s) is perceived or stated should be welcomed. As the issue(s) changes, however, an effort should be made to keep the subject(s) matter something that can be realistically addressed through NRCS involvement.

What Are Communities?

Communities can be thought of in many different ways. In general, communities are groups of people who share some kind of

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characteristics. Perhaps the most common way to think of communities is in a spatial or geographic sense (also called "geospatial"). A town, city, county, parish, or other unit of space is commonly conceived to be a community. These geospatially defined communities are often useful constructs to use during planning. There are, however, several other, equally useful, ways to think of "communities". Remember, the way you define a "community" is also the way you will decide who provides input during planning. Some other ways to think of "communities" include:

Ethnic communities- includes members of a particular ethnic group, such as Hispanics, Koreans, Germans, or Thai. These communities may or may not be geospatially discrete.

Communities of faith- includes members of a particular socioreligious system, such as Amish, Quaker, Missouri Synod Lutherans, or Buddhists. These communities also may or may not be easily defined geospatially.

Linguistic communities- often people to whom English is a second language will form communities with unique behavioral and communication patterns, as well as sometimes be grouped together spatially.

Economic communities- people of different income levels often have different perceptions of issues. These economic communities tend to be geospatially discrete, and often correlate with other factors, such as education level.

Notice that all of the above definitions of community are relative to a single, common characteristic, such as ethnicity, language, religion, or economic factors. If you attempt to define local communities relative to such individual characteristics, then you may spend a lot of time and effort defining multiple communities to address a single issue. There are other, and possibly, better ways, to use the concept of "community" in planning.

What are "Communities of Interest"?

Communities of interest are defined relative to a particular issue or set of issues. The issue can be virtually anything, including questions or concerns about natural resource conservation. One of the concerns voiced by many NRCS employees is "How do I know that I've included everyone that should be included?". While it is very difficult to always include everyone who may have an interest in a given issue, using communities of interest may allow a broad representation of interested parties. Using "communities of interest", rather than communities defined on the basis of single characteristics (as explained above), allows cross-cutting of socioreligious, sociocultural, and socioeconomic boundaries.

Defining a Community of Interest Using the Ripple Method

How do you define a community of interest? First, an issue or a set of issues must be identified and stated. Remember, these initial issue statements are used ONLY as a starting point for discussion. Do not spend too much time on issue identification or definition at this point in the process. Keep in mind that the initial issue or issues is defined by only a small part of the potential community (such as you and your staff, or you and your local board).

Communities of interest are often most easily defined using what is called the "ripple" method of stakeholder identification. Defining communities of interest using the ripple method is best used in combination with more traditional methods of communication, such as notices in local newspapers and announcements at district board and county committee meetings.

The "ripple" method of stakeholder identification is an approach that intentionally begins with a group of stakeholders identified by a central organizer (such as an NRCS field office).

The second step in defining a community of interest involves holding a series of meetings intended to both disseminate and gather information about the issue at hand. It must be remembered that a basic requirement of sound issue identification is a common understanding of terms. This understanding should extend to all those discussing an issue or set of issues. Be prepared to spend time at the initial meetings making sure everyone present agrees on what different terms mean.

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Based on your initial issue statements, do your best to define a group of interested persons and organizations. This initial group should be kept to no more that fifteen individuals and organizations, in order to keep responses at a manageable level. If your early identification of interested parties yields a much larger number, you might consider having more than one meeting. At the first meeting of this initial group, ask each person attending to give you the names and, if possible, the addresses and phone numbers of two other people or organizations that may be interested in the issue at hand.

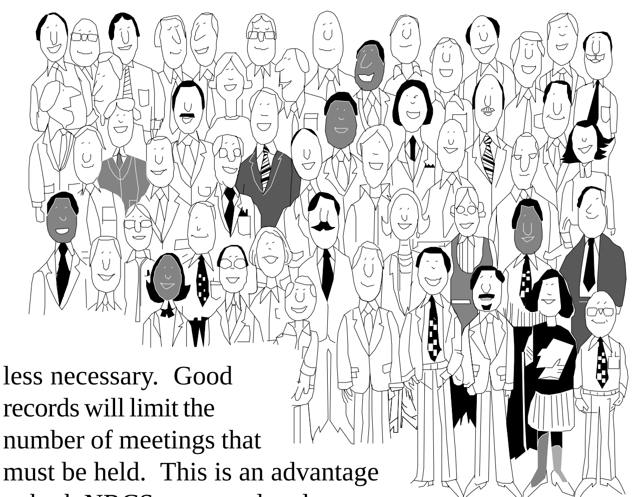
As input is gained, the originally stated issues will very probably change to reflect community concerns. It must be made clear to all participants that final decisions will be made only after a community of interest is defined. Contact the second group of people identified by the first set. If you feel that there is an adequate range of interests represented by one round of “rippling”, you can stop, or you can ask the second set of people to once again identify at least two others that may have an interest in the issue. Often, you will be able to tell that you have contacted enough people if you start getting names of people already contacted, or meeting attendees have a difficult time naming other interested parties.

A word of caution: Try to be aware of any social or cultural constraints people may have, such as an unwillingness to “speak for others”. Such an awareness will allow you to devise more appropriate ways to ask people to name other interested parties.

As each set of new interested parties is identified, meet with them, gain their input, and modify the issue statements as necessary. At this point, you will have in hand an issue or series of issues that is the result of input from a community of interested people and organizations. You should also be in possession of a list of these interested parties, along with their contact information, and views on the issues at hand. This is community involvement at the practical level.
At this point, with the issues in hand, as defined by the community of interest, you can begin the process to make treatment decisions. You already have all the contact information for the community of interest, and well defined issues. The discussion about treatment options can go forward with the community of interest, and you can be assured that community input is being gained from a broad range of interested parties.

It is highly advisable to maintain some type of database of the interested parties, their addresses and phone numbers, and any specific interests that they may have identified (such as pheasant habitat along field borders, etc.). You should also be prepared to capture, in writing, the definitions of terms agreed to during group discussions of issues. Having good records of such definitions will save time later, as some people may wish to change their interpretation of different terms.

Starting a database may require a certain level of effort initially, but in the long run will save time, in that you will not have to “ripple” certain issues again to identify communities of interest. As this method is used on a wide variety of issues and concerns (and your database of contacts expands), repetition of the “ripple” method becomes less and



less necessary. Good records will limit the number of meetings that must be held. This is an advantage to both NRCS personnel and customers.
One thing that must be mentioned in association with the ripple method is the necessity of structuring the meetings or contacts in order to obtain information and familiarize all concerned with the issues until an adequate range of interests is obtained. At that point, decisions can be made and courses of action defined with greater confidence that all interested parties have a say.

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Where can I get more information?

For further information on defining communities of interest, contact Michael Johnson, anthropologist, NRCS Social Sciences Institute, at (520) 626-4685, or any other Social Science Institute member.

Further reading on community definition and group interview techniques can be found in:

Morgan, David L. 1997. Focus Groups as Qualitative Research. Qualitative Research Methods Series Vol. 16, 2nd edition. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, California.

USDA-NRCS. 1996. Resource Book: Conducting Small Group and Focus Group Meetings. Resource Book Release 1.1, USDA-NRCS Social Sciences Institute. Greensboro, North Carolina.

Van Kammen, Welmoet, and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber. 1998. Practical Aspects of Interview Data Collection and Data Management. In Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods, pp. 375-398. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, California.

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