Forums

An Owner’s Manual to “Ownership”: A Reply to Lachapelle and McCool

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In a recent article in *Society & Natural Resources*, Lachapelle and McCool (2005) argue for developing the concept of “ownership” to address challenges and shortcomings in natural resource planning. The principal challenge they identify is “multiple and competing values and goals,” and the shortcomings include “one-way dissemination of information,” “disjointed execution of mandated planning phases,” and “grandstanding and political posturing.” The concept of ownership—“the association of citizens and agencies to collectively define, share, and address problem situations with an implicit redistribution of power” (p. 283)—is offered as a new, more productive direction for natural resource planning. They build on the idea of ownership as it is raised in the literature on collaborative processes for natural resource planning and management (e.g., Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000) and describe three characteristics to develop the definition of ownership: ownership in process, outcomes, and distribution.

The authors were forthcoming in their objective to “stimulate discourse about this emerging concept.” We found the article stimulating because the concept of ownership resonates with us (we have advanced similar ideas under the rubrics of community-based conservation [Minteer and Manning 2003a, 2003b] and participatory policy analysis [Haight and Ginger 2000]), and also because it raises important issues in natural resource planning. If principles of ownership are to guide natural resource planning, these issues must be addressed. Moreover, we believe that these principles can be strengthened by a directed program of social science research. In our reply to Lachapelle and McCool, we respond to issues raised by their paper and identify questions that might contribute to social science research in this arena.

Ownership in the Context of the Public Involvement Literature

Ownership is one of many iterations in the evolution in thought about natural resource planning and public involvement. Koontz et al. (2004) summarize a good

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portion of this evolution, tracing it back to the passage of the Administrative Procedures Act in 1946, with connections to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, public lands management, and water pollution control. Lachapelle and McCool’s (2005, 281) concept of “ownership” includes “processes by which voices are heard and considered legitimate or valid” and is meant to “reallocate influence or direct authority over decision making and the execution of outcomes.” This parallels ideas from Arnstein (1969) and subsequent literature on empowerment. Lachapelle and McCool emphasize the importance of shared problem definitions and mutual goals. They also suggest that ownership reallocates power over outcomes. Their argument highlights the need for empirical research to understand more fully how people draw on concepts of ownership (as compared to empowerment) in public involvement processes. Given wicked problems with competing goals and values, do participants draw on ownership to move beyond their differences to a state of common understandings? Do they draw on ownership to expand definitions of voices in processes and outcomes or to reinforce more narrow definitions of these voices?

Lachapelle and McCool seem to conflate ownership with collaborative, transactional planning approaches. Their examples of successful ownership in planning involve relatively small groups of appointed (or self-appointed) stakeholders who are assigned (or assume) the responsibility of creating a plan. However, there exist multiple approaches to public involvement and, by extension here, to ownership. As Fiorino (1990) outlined, these approaches can be evaluated using criteria based on substantive, normative, and instrumental arguments. Steelman and Ascher (1997) provide a comparative framework that illustrates the trade-offs of choosing involvement methods. The framework includes criteria such as representation, openness, information input and exchange, legitimacy, decision rules, potential for manipulation, technical competency, potential for compromise, and timeliness. This highlights the importance of evaluating approaches to public involvement and the potential to incorporate concepts of ownership as criteria in a broader framework for evaluating and choosing public involvement approaches.

**Changing Nature of Public Involvement Approaches**

Lachapelle and McCool (2005) suggest that “agencies have also maintained a technocratic orientation to [public] involvement, often viewing public input as little more than another source of data” (p. 280). We wonder if processes of natural resource planning are progressing beyond this characterization, and if this progress is based on the developing literature, professional education, and progressive planners and managers. Our thoughts arise from our research related to natural resource planning. The Visitor Experience and Resource Protection framework developed and adopted by the National Park Service requires development of “a public involvement strategy” as its second step (following the first step of assembling an interdisciplinary project team) (NPS 1997; Manning 2001). In Vermont, state and federal agencies have engaged citizens in decision making about forest management by drawing on nontraditional methods (Haight and Ginger 2000; Green Mountain National Forest 2005, 105). The literature contains a number of case examples that suggest that agencies at various scales are using many forms of public involvement and drawing on more collaborative approaches (e.g., Koontz et al. 2004). Comprehensive research is needed to document the changing nature and extent of public involvement approaches used in natural resource planning.
Ownership in the Context of Competing Values

In describing the characteristics of the concept of ownership, Lachapelle and McCool (2005) state (citing Jenkins 1995) that participants in such planning “must have the right to have their interpretation accepted as correct and authoritative” (p. 281). In the context of competing values, this statement is problematic. There will be cases in which some values prevail over others. Indeed, given legislative mandates that apply to many instances of natural resource planning, some values should be accepted as more “correct and authoritative” than others. For example, Congress designated national parks and wilderness areas for purposes of preservation, and resource extraction values are not in accord with this mandate. In general, research is needed to investigate whether and how participants in collaborative processes address values differences while maintaining accountability to legal mandates, as well as ownership in the process and outcomes, across scales.1

Ownership and Issues of Representation and Equity

We are concerned about issues of representation and equity, especially when relatively small groups of individuals take “ownership” of plans at local levels. How representative are such groups? Are matters of social justice adequately considered? Who speaks for future generations and other “mute stakeholders”? Moreover, there is evidence that deliberation among homogeneous ideological enclaves can lead to polarization, rather than drawing citizens together (Sunstein 2002). Given the potential for development interests to dominate at local levels (Layzer 2002), some manifestations of ownership could unintentionally subvert the ideological foundation of the concepts celebrated by Lachapelle and McCool by excluding traditionally underrepresented groups and ideas. Research and attention are required to examine how concepts of ownership at local levels are drawn on and what requirements are placed on involvement processes to ensure representation of diverse and traditionally underrepresented groups.

Ownership, Scale, and Shifts in Power

Lachapelle and McCool suggest that “ownership implies a shift in power.” It is not clear whether they mean devolution of power and authority from national to more local levels, although the examples they highlight seem to imply this direction. As they and we note, ownership involves important matters of scale. When and where national-level resources and issues are at stake, or where there are important spillover effects of local resource management, we believe it is inappropriate to grant exclusive ownership to local representatives. Shifting power in any direction has important implications for the concept of ownership as it defines selected values and interests “in” or “out” of the planning process. The shift in the framing of the Roadless Area Rule from the Clinton Administration to the Bush Administration illustrates the importance of scale and shifts in power in resource planning and management and, by extension, ownership in planning and management processes. The Clinton Administration policy emphasized national-level policy directions for forest management (USDA Forest Service 2001). The Bush Administration changed the policy to emphasize local direction (USDA Forest Service 2005). At some point in space and time, coordination of local decisions may (we think, will) be needed.
to achieve broader scale ecological and social objectives, and this will require planning leadership at higher levels (Babbitt 2005). How these dynamics affect concepts of ownership in resource planning and management is an issue that deserves close study.

**Responsibility and Accountability in Ownership**

We wonder to what degree and how the concept of ownership includes dimensions of responsibility and accountability. Lachapelle and McCool (2005) do not highlight responsibility and accountability as characteristics of ownership. However, they do suggest that their concept of ownership involves shared responsibility by inquiring “to what extent are natural resource agencies prepared to promote engagement and share responsibility for creation of plans and management areas under their jurisdiction” (p. 283) and “Who benefits from collaborative processes that result from an increased sense of responsibility and stewardship? Who pays the costs?” (p. 284).

We believe that responsibility and accountability warrant more attention. While standard definitions of ownership might convey a sense of rights in common parlance, responsibility and accountability are important to understanding ownership and how it relates to natural resource management in at least two ways. First, public agencies are responsible for and accountable to the legal mandates under which they operate. As noted earlier, attending to these mandates is a critical component of understanding the dynamics of collaborative processes. Second, it would be useful to investigate the degree to which participants in collaborative processes understand ownership to encompass responsibility and accountability as compared to the right to have their values and interests included. To what degree and through what processes do they come to think that they have a stake in the process and outcome and are to be held responsible for their actions, proposals, decisions, etc.? How does this sense of responsibility play out in the context of multiple “owners” with different agendas for their shared possession?

**Contributions of Social Science**

Social science (or science of any sort) gets short shrift in Lachapelle and McCool’s discussion of ownership. It is not until the last paragraph of the article that they suggest that “Social scientists play important roles in addressing these issues” (p. 284). In fact, the take-home message seems to be the opposite. They emphasize that outdated models of planning “stressing reliance on scientists” will (or should) be replaced by the ownership model because science cannot address vital and inescapable normative issues and related value judgments. We are more optimistic about the role of science in addressing the questions and issues outlined earlier, in informing the value judgments that (we agree) must ultimately be rendered, and even in exploring, describing, and analyzing the values that underlie ownership (Manning and Lawson 2002). Social science theory and methods (e.g., survey research, sampling, ethnography) can be useful in natural resource planning. Ownership will require scientists as well as facilitators.

Ownership is an inherently appealing concept. In plain language, people should be involved in determining their own destiny, and if they are, they are more likely to support management efforts designed to move in this direction. However, there are many issues and related questions—matters of representation, equity, process,
accountability, scale, power, the role of science—associated with defining the concept of ownership. For us, the article by Lachapelle and McCool accomplished its objective: It stimulated us to think about the issues outlined here. We think what is needed now is further development of the scientific and professional literature to support development of an “owner’s manual to ownership.”

Note

1. Duane (1997) provides an instructive comparative case study of community participation in ecosystem management for public lands in California that illustrates the importance of attending to legal mandates.

References

USDA Forest Service. 2005. Special areas; State petitions for inventoried roadless area management; Roadless area conservation national advisory committee; Final rule and notice. Fed. Reg. 70:25653.