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Making Public-Sector Collaboration Work More Effectively

Explaining Institutional Change in Tough Cases of Collaboration: "Ideas" in the Blackfoot Watershed

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Current theories of community-based collaborative governance arrangements rely on the presence (or absence) of certain antecedent community conditions as well as incentives for institutional change deriving from the sociopolitical and economic environment. The combination of antecedent conditions and incentives is helpful in understanding why collaboratives emerge and succeed in "easy" cases (strong incentives, conducive antecedent conditions). Yet the combination is of little help in understanding the institutional change puzzle for collaboratives in "tough" cases (strong incentives, poor antecedent conditions). Examination of a "tough" case in the Blackfoot watershed (Montana), which eventually blossomed into a successful collaborative, shows the importance of a particular set of new ideas, or shared norms, around which participants coalesced. These new ideas for understanding public problems, the community itself, and the relationships among stakeholders, became a broad conceptual framework for guiding stakeholder interaction as they attempted to manage the many public problems facing the watershed.

C ommunity-based collaboratives have emerged in hundreds of U.S. communities wrestling with difficult environmental, economic, and other kinds of public problems (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Sabatier, Focht et al. 2005; Weber 2000). As a result, there is a growing literature on collaborative governance arrangements at the community or local level. As part of this broad scholarly effort, we are making good progress on understanding the critical elements of institutional design associated with success in such collaboratives (Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary 2005; Daniels and Walker 2001; Leach and Pelkey 2001; McGuire 2006; Ostrom 1990; Sabatier, Leach et al. 2005; Weber 1998). There also is a growing literature on the kinds of existing, or antecedent, conditions

associated with the successful adoption and operation of community-based collaborative governance arrangements (Daniels and Walker 2001; Ostrom 1990; Pretty 2003; Putnam 2000; Thomson and Perry 2006).

Yet the antecedent conditions literature, while important because it helps decision makers identify which communities are ripe for collaborative partnerships, offers little to no advice for communities in which the prescribed conditions do not apply. In fact, within the antecedent conditions literature, there is a presumption that collaborative governance arrangements are far less likely to succeed and, in the strongest form, should be avoided if a community lacks the appropriate prerequisites, such as strong social capital (Putnam 2000), high cultural or belief homogeneity (Sabatier, Leach et al. 2005), high policy belief homogeneity (Lubell 2000), dominance of the local economy by extractive industries (Lubell 2005), and poor scientific knowledge about the problems at issue (Lubell 2005; Sabatier, Leach et al. 2005; Weber 1998). This is because virtually all of these fixed conditions are difficult, if not impossible, to change, especially over the short term.[1] But what if the lessons being taught in the antecedent conditions literature are focusing our attention in the wrong direction on *fixed conditions* to the detriment of public problem resolution and management?

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The argument here is that communities lacking in the apposite conditions listed here may well be capable of adopting and operating successful community-based collaborative governance arrangements. Understanding this possibility requires that we shift our scholarly attention to the process of institutional change by

asking how and why does change occur such that a community with poor antecedent conditions is able to transition to the adoption and successful operation of a collaborative institution?

The question is important for a number of practical and theoretical reasons. Practically speaking, difficult public policy problems occur in all kinds of communities with varying degrees of antecedent conditions. In fact, logic suggests that communities with weak antecedent conditions as related to collaboratives likely will encounter the negative effects of difficult problems both more frequently and severely over time precisely because of their weak collective problem-solving capacity. At the same time, government agencies charged with managing such public problems often are forced to pursue policy implementation efforts in communities with weak social capital, high heterogeneity in values and beliefs systems, and so on. Further, unless we are willing to limit the choice of implementation programs and institutional arrangements when such communities are encountered, it would be nice to know whether there are ways around the conundrum described earlier when it comes to implementing a successful collaborative. Finally, as noted at the beginning of this piece, the use of collaborative institutions is on the rise across the United States and the world (Pretty 2003), and, as more communities hear of successes with collaboratives, the pressure builds to employ them, often in less than optimal community settings.

To explore the question of institutional change, data are drawn from an extraordinarily successful case of collaborative governance in the Blackfoot River watershed in the state of Montana. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, along with ranchers, environmentalists, timber interests, recreation groups, state and local agency administrators, other federal agency officials, and watershed landowners and citizens, began talking and collaborating in 1990, eventually forming the Blackfoot Challenge collaborative in 1993 as the primary vehicle for pursuing improved collective governance of the Blackfoot watershed.[2] Stakeholders meet at least once monthly, with meetings open to anyone; they meet socially at their annual community barbeque in Ovando, Montana; and, in the case of massive projects, such as the Blackfoot Community Forest Project,[3] they meet weekly with the community over an extended period of time (153 weekly meetings were held on the Blackfoot Community Project alone). The Blackfoot Challenge also regularly hosts stewardship outreach (workshops), demonstration projects, and watershed and community tours (six to eight each year), while an extensive education and

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outreach program is used to teach citizens the value of a cooperative conservation approach. The educational outreach alone annually involves more than 700 school children in a watershed with a total population of 8,000.

The successful collaborative efforts of the Blackfoot Challenge are well documented, have been recognized as an exemplar of how to do collaboration right, and are still going strong after more than 13 years in operation, despite the fact that the group has never employed a professional facilitator. Among other awards, the effort received the prestigious Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in 2006, and in 2003, it received an award from the federal Clean Water Action Plan that recognized the Blackfoot efforts as one of the "nation's best" for its watershed approach to stream restoration (Ash Institute 2006; Backus 2006; see the appendix for an abbreviated list of major accomplishments).

What we find in the Blackfoot Challenge case is an answer to the institutional change puzzle that extends and confirms conventional wisdom by recognizing the importance of incentives and antecedent community conditions. Most importantly, however, the Blackfoot case recognizes the limitations of the preceding factors, along with the limitations attached to the entrepreneurial leader concept, by introducing a fourth factor—ideas—to the explanatory mix.

First, the broader environment within which the Blackfoot watershed stakeholders found themselves at the end of the 1980s created significant *incentives* for change. This was attributable to the high problem severity—degradation was severe, obvious, and negatively affected stakeholder ability to maximize their self-defined goals—and the wicked, cross-cutting, interdependent character of the problems.[4] In this sense, the Blackfoot case confirms rational choice theories of institutional change that emphasize the role of incentives and rational, goal-maximizing behavior on the part of individuals. Participants in the Blackfoot Challenge expected benefits from a collaborative arrangement that promised potential reductions in transaction costs and a clearer, more certain path to the achievement of important individual goals (interviews, May 2006). Yet, as the antecedent community conditions literature makes clear, a "strong" incentive for change from the status quo may or may not be sufficient to promote institutional change. This is precisely because antecedent community conditions go to the heart of a community's capacity for resolving collective action problems. Put differently, if "strong" incentives are matched with "strong" community

capacity, then yes, the expectation is that institutional change is "easiest," or most likely. On the other hand, if "strong" community capacity is matched with "weak" incentive for change, there is no clear need or demand for change; hence we would not expect institutional change. The Blackfoot case, for its part, is a "tough" case of institutional change. Why? Despite strong incentive for change, there existed little community capacity to effect the desired institutional change. Thus, while the combination of incentives and antecedent conditions can be quite useful in understanding the institutional change puzzle, especially for the "easiest," or low-hanging-fruit-type cases, such an explanatory framework is fundamentally unable to explain the move toward a collaborative institution in the "tough"—high incentive, low community capacity/antecedent conditions—Blackfoot case. Something more is needed.

One possibility for filling this missing piece of the explanatory puzzle is the policy entrepreneur, or entrepreneurial leader, concept (Blomquist 1992; Heikkila and Gerlak 2005; Kettl 2006; Thomas 2003; Vasi and Macy 2003; Weber 1998). In fact, the story of institutional change in the Blackfoot case *does* involve a set of entrepreneurial leaders coming together in a collaborative setting. They include, among others, a prominent local rancher as co-chair of the Blackfoot Challenge, a federal official with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the other co-chair, an ex-state forester with ample experience within the University of Montana system, a local guest ranch owner, and leaders of the local Trout Unlimited and Nature Conservancy chapters. These entrepreneurial leaders clearly helped establish the *initial* collaborative efforts in the Blackfoot case. Such leaders also were instrumental in cajoling and persuading self-interested, rational stakeholders to stick with the collaboration long enough to reap individual as well as collective benefits (interviews, May 2006).

Yet the missing piece of the institutional change puzzle that commands our attention in the Blackfoot case involves a particular set of *new ideas* around which collaborative participants coalesced. These new ideas, or shared norms, for understanding public problems, the community itself, and the relationships among competing ideas, interests, actors, and sectors of society, were essential to the institutional change process (see also Hayek 1952; North 2005, 1–6).[5] Taken together, they became a broad conceptual framework for guiding stakeholder interaction as stakeholders discussed and attempted to manage and resolve the public problems facing the Blackfoot watershed. These norms were not written down; rather, they served as an informal set of rules emphasizing the shared values and understandings of their "place"—the Blackfoot watershed—that then defined the parameters, hence the constraints and outer limits, of the collaborative's

problem-solving efforts.[6] Importantly, the entrepreneurial leaders initially came together on the basis of very basic and general ideas: We have a series of problems, we can do better, and our "piece of Montana" is worth fighting for (interviews, May 2006). It was not until after stakeholders—the entrepreneurial leaders along with dozens of other watershed stakeholders—came together and started deliberating over a new future for the watershed, however, that the new ideas end up being crafted, or discovered. In this way, the initial collaborative interaction of a diverse set of stakeholders created an idea-based foundation that succeeded in enveloping, or cosseting, the inevitable self-interest of stakeholders. The idea-based foundation also succeeded in framing, or constraining, the behavior and messages conveyed by entrepreneurial leaders and other stakeholders by emphasizing common ground and offering a conceptual outline of what was acceptable and what was not. In turn, this "framing" *decreased* the risks (hence uncertainty) associated with participant behavior within the collaborative, thereby fostering trust, the sharing of private information so critical to enduring and innovative solutions, and the willingness to sacrifice, if necessary, some personal gain for the collective good of the watershed and its inhabitants.[7] In short, the net result of these new ideas was an environment in which stakeholders were encouraged to behave differently, and more collectively, than before, thus helping to facilitate the successful collaboration that followed.[8]

Given space considerations, the fact that the role of incentives in institutional change is well covered elsewhere (e.g., Miller 1992; Ostrom 1990; Williamson 1985), and that the value added by this article involves the ideas part of the institutional change puzzle, the analysis will confine itself primarily to the elaboration of the ideas of significance to change in the Blackfoot case. Prior to this elaboration, however, the story begins with a description of the background of the Blackfoot Challenge case and how the environment produced incentives for change.

The Blackfoot Valley and Watershed: Incentives for Change

Much like many other rural landscapes across the American West in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the 1.5-million-acre Blackfoot watershed was inundated by a series of difficult, cross-cutting, interconnected, and relentless public problems. Stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century, traditional extractive resource use and development by private landowners (ranchers, farmers, and timber companies) and public agencies (U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management), as well as increasing recreation demands had significantly degraded a wide variety of natural resources and impaired the ability of the broader ecosystem to function in a healthy, sustainable manner. As a result, by the late 1980s, the Blackfoot watershed was home to

many threatened and endangered species (i.e., Bull trout, grizzly bears, wolves, Canadian lynx, Westslope cutthroat trout—some were listed later than the late 1980s) and was encountering severe problems with dewatered streams (insufficient and, in some cases, zero flows for at least part of the year), substandard water quality, invasive noxious weeds, and other signs of deteriorating ecosystem health.

The large number of command and control, single issue (fragmented) policies that state and federal environmental policy initiatives passed in the 1970s and 1980s, and the litigation that was a common response, failed to stop the broad-based degradation. The legislation and litigation also contributed to higher operating costs for farmers and ranchers and increased polarization and distrust among private landowners, government regulators, environmentalists, and other stakeholders.[9] As related by a longtime Blackfoot resident,

> We didn't like the federal government intruding into what we thought was our business and our control over land and water rights. We didn't trust the agency folks coming into the Blackfoot and telling us what to do. The ranchers didn't like or trust the environmentalists, the environmentalists didn't trust the ranchers or the timber companies or the [U.S.] Forest Service, and government types saw us as impediments to progress, and vice versa and on and on. . . . People stopped working together and [instead] retreated into their own little worlds. It was not a good time for the Blackfoot. No one was really sure who they could trust, in part because no one valued the same things. (interviews, May 2006)

In addition, the scientific databases capable of understanding and monitoring the nature and extent of the relationships between the multiple resource issues in the Blackfoot fit one of four categories. They either did not exist, or, if they did exist, the databases were woefully incomplete, fragmented and specific to the proprietary needs of the major public and private landowners in the area, or based on incompatible scientific protocols (apples versus oranges) (interviews, May 2006). Finally, the Blackfoot watershed faced the kinds of new development pressures capable of transforming the character of the area, according to several Blackfoot Challenge members, into the "strip mall, house-around-every-bend-in-the-river, over-developed, and esthetically disastrous Bitterroot Valley [another

Montana area that has seen extensive, largely unregulated development]" (interviews, May 2006).

In short, citizens and landowners living in the Blackfoot area, along with the government managers responsible for more than half the landscape, faced a difficult situation. The sheer complexity of trying to manage across the entire 1.5-million-acre landscape was daunting, the condition of natural resources was extremely poor and getting worse, the scientific information needed to move forward effectively was lacking, and development pressures were relentless and only likely to grow in the future. In addition, the community fabric was shredded, with weak social capital and distrust and vindictiveness replacing productive discussion and collective problem solving. Thus, there were strong incentives to change the way the community approached the governance of such difficult public problems. What was much less certain in 1990, however, was the form any new governance arrangement would take. From the perspective of research associated with collaborative governance arrangements that concentrates on the importance of antecedent conditions for future institutional adoption and success, the Blackfoot watershed was a poster child for a community least likely to adopt, much less succeed in the operation of a collaborative partnership.

A Case in Which Ideas Matter

North (2005, 5), Ellickson (1991), and Knott and Miller (1989), among many others, argue that rationality is not the only factor informing human choice, and that "institutional structure, . . . a combination of formal rules, informal constraints, and their enforcement characteristics" is also critical to understanding choices and institutional change (North 2005, 6). Changes in any one of these three parameters—formal rules, informal constraints, and the enforcement of both—can result in institutional change. North (2005), in agreement with Hayek (1952), then expends considerable effort fleshing out the concept that the ideas, or norms, of informal constraints are of particular importance to understanding institutional change because they, along with formal rules, "shape our present and influence our future" (North 2005, 6).[10] Yet the ideas of some matter more than others precisely because the institutionally shaped "structure of human interaction determines who are the entrepreneurs whose choices matter and how such choices get implemented by the decision rules of the structure" (North 2005, 6).

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As such, the argument here is that there actually were multiple entrepreneurs across the key stakeholding groups in the Blackfoot watershed—environmentalists, ranchers, recreationists (hunters, fishers, hikers, campers, rafters, off-road vehicle enthusiasts), small business owners, government officials from all three levels, timber interests, and other landowners. These key players, by choosing to interact with one another as they struggled to respond to the incentives provided by the environment within which they found themselves, gradually developed and accepted a series of new ideas that succeeded in integrating and reconciling a variety of different, quite distinctive approaches to the public problem-solving sphere. These ideas turn out to be essential to understanding the choice and use of a collaborative institution in the Blackfoot because they frame self-interest as something that must always be balanced against others' legitimate goals as well as against broader, collectively defined public interests. At the same time, each of these ideas recognizes and seeks to harmonize, reconcile, and better manage the inherent conflicts within the existing community. Put another way, the voluntary acceptance of new ideas for guiding the community forward emphasizes shared values and a common perspective on the problems being encountered, thereby becoming a powerful, if abstract, tool for facilitating mutually beneficial agreements by encouraging a community-oriented structure to frame stakeholder interaction. The transformative character of the ideas thus plays a critical role in facilitating the transition to, as well as the design and acceptance of the formal collaborative institution in the Blackfoot case.

The seven new ideas of importance to explaining the transition between poor antecedent conditions and the adoption and eventual success of a collaborative governance arrangement in the Blackfoot are as follows:

- A commitment to place
- A common vision of place
- An equity-based, holistic mission
- A new framework for property rights
- The transformation of interpersonal perspectives—from adversaries to neighbors
- A changing perspective on public problems
- The changed shape of useful knowledge

Commitment to Place
The many stakeholders who decided to come together in 1990 to search for more effective ways of governing the Blackfoot watershed can all be described as "having a love of their place—the Blackfoot area. The pristine beauty, the great views, the clean air, the feeling of being connected to the natural landscape and having to depend on it for a living, [and] the solitude gave people something to fight for, to try to preserve" (interviews, May 2006). In the American West, Kemmis (1990) argues that such a commitment

to "place" can be a catalyst for self-governance. It mobilizes citizens to care enough to participate in the act of governing "their" place by reminding community members of what they have in common—reliance on the natural landscape (Kemmis 1990, 78). Sturtevant and Lange, for their part, find that the "strong attachment to place" drives community members to deemphasize self-interested behavior. Members "agree to put their interests, . . . and [their] sense of duty to represent . . . [their own] particular perspective . . . aside in the interest of the collective and [the] ecosystem" (1995, 10). Moreover, according to Cheng and Daniels, the commitment to place in small-scale watershed efforts such as the Blackfoot case tends to "frame . . . watershed issues . . . as a direct relationship between watershed health and community well-being" (2005, 30). The shift in focus transforms the way stakeholders view one another. They "beg[i]n to view themselves as members of a shared community, a new ingroup, . . . an esteemed group to which an individual perceives membership and attributes loyalty and a sense of belonging. Ingroup members tend to perceive one another as trustworthy and correct in their motives" (Cheng and Daniels 2005, 30) as opposed to being members of different groups with opposing goals and values. In these ways, the commitment to "place" became an idea that fostered new, positive, trust-based community bonds among the previously estranged Blackfoot stakeholders, thus helping to alleviate the lack of propitious socially based antecedent conditions.

A Common Vision of Place
A final idea that helped in the transition from poor antecedent conditions to the eventual collaborative institution involved the common "core" vision Blackfoot stakeholders developed for their "place." Less conceptual and more concrete than the other ideas, the fact that there was widespread agreement on the broad outline, or characteristics defining the Blackfoot watershed, reminded participants that they shared more in common than they once believed possible. The shared vision centered on general characteristics capable of "attracting, and continuing to attract, people interested in a classic western landscape with rugged natural features, few people, and limited development" (interviews, May 2006). Key characteristics for stakeholders included the preservation of these elements:

- A rustic, or rural setting
- Wide open spaces
- A working landscape involving traditional livelihoods (e.g., ranching, farming, logging)
- A healthy, vibrant, visible nature (wildlife and nature-based aesthetics are part of the community experience)
- Owner-occupied housing versus absentee owners who only occasionally lived in the Blackfoot area

- Limited conveniences in terms of retail shopping, restaurant diversity, and access to urban-style malls (interviews, May 2006)

An Equity-Based, Holistic Mission

Individuals in the Blackfoot watershed, as is typical elsewhere in the political world, were practiced at constructing and supporting narrowly defined programs and policies designed to promote their self-interests and to thwart others with goals contrary to their own. Yet, stepping back from the traditional zero-sum fray and, as described earlier, increasingly unsatisfied with the less than optimal status quo, the many stakeholders in the Blackfoot crafted and accepted a new approach to problem solving grounded in equity and holism. The equity-based, holistic norm means that multiple broad policy goals each held equal claim on the Blackfoot's policy process and the decisions it produced (see also Raymond 2003, 26–27; Weber 2000). Specifically, stakeholders agreed that the restoration and preservation of the environment, economy, and community for the long term defined the common *policy* ground toward which each could and would devote their time, resources, and energies. The belief in positive sum (win–win) outcomes in which all stakeholders could benefit strengthened each participants' connection to each other and to the collective whole because "it promoted the idea that everyone was in it together" (interviews, May 2006). Embracing and implementing this idea did not mean that the inevitable trade-offs were ignored; rather, like community-based collaboratives in other communities, the Blackfoot stakeholders recognized that individual decisions might favor one policy domain over another. The more important test for this idea involved the balance of outcomes over time and whether that balance adhered to the equity-based holism contained within the environment, economy, and community approach (interviews, May 2006; see also Weber 2003, chap. 3).

Chief among the programmatic examples of this idea in action is the Blackfoot Community Forest Project. This is a comprehensive and pioneering effort to restore the ecological and biological integrity of 88,000 acres of Blackfoot land by purchasing private land from Plum Creek Timber, deeding it to the U.S. Forest Service (Lolo National Forest) in perpetuity, and creating a large common public, or community, area that is jointly owned and managed by community stakeholders. The extensive application of conservation easements that allow landowners to continue working the land, while also providing environmental

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protection, is another such example. These easements now cover 90,000 acres of the total of 300,000 privately owned acres in the watershed.[11] In addition, the easements, once signed by the landowner, are vehicles for "building trust between the Challenge and landowners because owners see that we value them and their livelihood. This often opens the door to additional environmental restoration and water conservation projects on the property" (interviews, May 2006).

Property Rights: A New Hybrid

The intrinsic Lockean perspective on property rights has long been the dominant perspective in the Blackfoot watershed, just as it has been throughout most of the American West. Individuals stake a legal claim to a particular piece of property as its owner(s) and then are allowed to use and manage it as they see fit (subject to some basic restrictions such as nuisance, for example). With respect to water, the prior appropriations doctrine holds sway and permits those who develop and use water for certain consumptive beneficial uses (e.g., agriculture, industrial processes, domestic consumption) to have virtually complete control over the resource, with seniority of the right in question being the key to understanding the distribution of control (Raymond 2003).

The dominant Lockean perspective was challenged by a competing *instrumentalist* view on property found in many of the environmental and social policy laws crafted during the 1960s and 1970s. From this perspective, "property is simply a human institution created to further the equitable ends of society. It is therefore subject to change to meet evolving social goals. . . . Property . . . exists at the continued pleasure of the political system" (Raymond 2003, 45–46; see also Cohen 1967). As a result, the structure of property rights favored in contemporary environmental laws at both the state and federal levels tended to layer *forced* collective (social) obligations onto the intrinsic right of property ownership. Environmental advocates, in particular, sought to extend these collective obligations beyond humans to include plants and animals. Yet it is important to recognize that the instrumentalist conception of property is not wedded to any one form of property over any other. If society decides tomorrow to abolish or severely restrict private property owners' rights for some greater public good (see, e.g., *Kelo v. New London,* 2005),[12] then society has spoken and private property á la Locke must suffer the consequences.

Yet the new idea infusing the Blackfoot watershed's stakeholders during the early 1990s did not favor either of these fundamentally opposed property frameworks at the expense of the other. Instead, community members opted for an integrated idea of property that respects both the intrinsic and instrumental frameworks as legitimate, albeit within a new, balanced conception of property (Raymond 2003, 57–63). The new balance respects individual claims to property ownership, control, and usage to the extent they are beneficial, but it voluntarily accepts the imposition of collective responsibilities on such rights per the instrumentalist framework to the extent they are not. As part of this, the definition of "beneficial" has been expanded to include explicit consideration of community needs and of environmental protection, whether it be, for example, in terms of

- Valuing endangered species as an accepted, integrated part of the larger watershed (see Appendix I, item 5 for greater detail)
- Allowing contractors physical access to private property for the purpose of reconstructing and restoring natural stream pathways and dynamics (in order to restore damaged riparian areas and endangered fish populations—see Appendix I, item 3)
- Willingly sharing the sacrifices required by inadequate water resources during periods of drought (see Appendix I, item 7)
- Carving out and collectively managing a new 88,000-acre "community" forest according to collective values (privately owned but managed according to collective rules developed within the watershed)

In all of these cases, "property . . . is not the object controlled by the owner. Rather, property is best defined as a social relationship giving an owner power over other individuals that restricts their control or use of an item or resource" (Macpherson 1978). This view of property as "'a right, not a thing' . . . brings its social implications front and center—the power of ownership may cause significant injury to others" (Raymond 2003, 41).

This is not to say that Blackfoot watershed stakeholders agree with the more radical idea, as expressed by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas in *Sierra Club v. Morton* (1972), and others, that rocks, trees, and other inanimate objects have equal rights, or that animals are considered on a par with humans.[13] Rather, it appears to be a pragmatic recognition that a voluntary relaxation of individual property rights to incorporate these added collectively oriented considerations might bring about better outcomes for all concerned. At the same time, property owners are not relaxing their intrinsic rights without conditions or without using their property "power" to gain quid pro quo protections against the uncertainties inherent in sharing "control" over their property.

In the conditions case, for example, individual ranchers and farmers with senior water rights are willing to take less than their legal share of water (property) in drought years in order to ensure that their fellow community members' livelihoods are viable over the long term. But they are not willing to do this if the cost of their generosity is the eventual loss of their "earned" water rights (interviews, May 2006).

In the bargaining case, perhaps the best example in the Blackfoot involves endangered grizzly bears. Ranchers understand the aesthetic, wilderness, and ecological value that grizzlies bring to this part of Montana, and they are willing to support the active encouragement of a larger bear population—but not without specific programs taken to minimize the risks to their substantial investments in livestock (e.g., electric fences around calving yards, carcass pickups). In each case, the willingness to share control over the property right is coupled with guaranteed protections that translate the uncertainty into a manageable risk that property owners are then willing to take for the sake of the collective good.

Changes in Interpersonal Perspectives: From Adversaries to Neighbors
As described previously, stakeholders and citizens in the Blackfoot watershed throughout the 1970s and 1980s were more practiced at battling and treating each other as adversaries than as civic partners, or neighbors. Defining characteristics of interpersonal relationships included hostile perceptions of others and "their agendas," simplistic and negative stereotypes and caricatures of others with different interests and perspectives, and mutual fear (interviews, May 2006). Yet stakeholders in the Blackfoot came together in their monthly community-wide meetings and worked to incorporate the idea that success in getting to the collective good required a transformation of their interpersonal relationships.

Going around thinking of everyone else as an enemy or someone who was against me and mine was only going to stop us from getting at the really important problems that brought us together in the first place. But if we could go back to a simpler idea, one that everyone present could recognize and understand, the idea that we're all in this together as *neighbors,* then maybe we had a chance. (interviews, May 2006; emphasis added)

Employing the neighbors concept, and the idea of "being neighborly," focuses stakeholders on the importance of relationship building and a desire for positive social interaction, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that "kindliness or helpfulness toward . . . fellow humans"[14] is central to collective problem-solving efforts. Within this relatively simple

concept, however, there is some complexity, especially as applied by the stakeholders in the Blackfoot watershed. Interviews with key stakeholders made it clear that neighbors are many things, including someone who

- Practices reciprocity with others and is willing to help others when asked
- Recognizes an obligation to some collective purpose or goal beyond oneself
- Eschews threats, intimidation, and violence, and instead embraces discussion and compromise as a primary means for achieving their individual and collective goals (This does not mean that spirited, hardball negotiations are foregone, but that alternatives to deliberation and compromise come as last resorts.)
- Recognizes and tolerates differences with others
- Treats others with civility, respect, honesty, and integrity and on down the line

Redefining the Problem Set

Instead of being satisfied with defining public problems as discrete, controllable, fixed entities and fragmented according to their bureaucratically defined, jurisdictional "stovepipes," Blackfoot stakeholders accepted that the reality of the problem set they were dealing with had changed in fundamental ways. Problems in the watershed were "part of an integrated whole," "always connected to something else," and "loaded with uncertainty and confusion because you almost never knew when you made one part better or worse what would happen to the other parts" (interviews, May 2006). Nor was it possible, according to one stakeholder, to "completely solve a problem. I mean, seriously, even if we did our best to contain the nonnative noxious weed problem, or the fish population problem, does anyone think that with more and more visitors coming into the Blackfoot every year we will ever get completely on top of these and then say, OK, let's turn our attention to something else?" (interviews, May 2006). Further, stakeholders, many of whom depend directly on natural systems for their livelihood, view nature as both a formidable ally and an enemy that can never be controlled, but that has to be accounted for in any management plan, particularly in terms of having enough flexibility to accommodate the "whims of mother nature" (interviews, May 2006).

The idea that the problems central to reversing the decline and degradation of the communities and natural resources in the watershed were overlapping and interdependent, complex, relentless, and more amenable to an experimental, integrated, and adaptive approach was not new. Nor was the concept that human systems, if they are to be effective over the long term, need to account for and work with, rather than against, natural system processes.[15] However, when thinking about the transition to a collaborative governance arrangement, the idea *was* new and remarkable in the Blackfoot context precisely because of its embrace across the full swath of stakeholders, whether they were environmentalists, ranchers, government officials, timber interests, and so on. In addition, the idea reinforced the sense of interdependency among the many stakeholders sharing the varying responsibilities for managing problems in the Blackfoot, while also lending itself to the development of a sense of shared struggle against a common foe (interviews, May 2006). The belief in this idea is reflected by the comprehensive array of programmatic efforts employed across the watershed, from water quality, fish recovery, stream restoration, and more environmentally friendly logging projects to drought management, endangered species, and conservation easements. The idea is also apparent in the early 1990s embrace of a large 350,000-acre information mapping effort targeting the core ecological area of watershed. The primary purpose of the "core" area approach was to allow the strategic allocation of resources to the most valuable and troubled areas, and to those areas where efforts were likely to be most effective.

The Shape of Knowledge: The Kinds That Matter

The stakeholders who came together in the Blackfoot watershed approached the role of knowledge in problem solving from the same angle as other community-based collaborative efforts getting started at approximately the same time (Weber 2003). Traditional sources of knowledge such as the physical and natural sciences (e.g., silviculture, biology, ecology, chemistry) were viewed as too narrow and limited in their ability to capture the full complexity of ecological interaction and were simply incapable, by definition, of mapping or understanding the critical human dimensions—social, political, economic, and administrative—through which any scientific conclusions necessarily must be filtered. Similarly, stakeholders believed that the traditional bureaucratic and interest group repositories of information that tend to dominate formal problem-solving exercises needed leavening with the local, practical expertise of those community members most practiced, or familiar with particular problems and the

> Instead of being satisfied with defining public problems as discrete, controllable, fixed entities and fragmented according to their bureaucratically defined, jurisdictional "stovepipes," Blackfoot stakeholders accepted that the reality of the problem set they were dealing with had changed in fundamental ways.

capacities of the human and natural systems in question (see also Scott 1998, 309–41). The inclusion of social science and community-based "folk knowledge"[16] in problem-solving processes not only brings new and valued information to the table but also "increases the likelihood that the dynamic of human institutions . . . will be matched with that of ecological processes to the greatest extent possible, . . . [thus] produc[ing] a more robust set of alternatives for solving problems, and a more reliable and realistic estimate of the parameters affecting program success."[17]

The idea of a broad knowledge base highlights the interdependence among stakeholders by promising more effective governance outcomes *if* stakeholders pool their knowledge assets. It also flattens power within the group by removing the knowledge monopoly enjoyed by some and elevating the value added by practice-based and human systems knowledge, thus giving a larger array of stakeholders influence within the collective decision process. Taken together, the new sense of interdependence and the acceptance of knowledge-based power sharing emanating from the broad knowledge base idea serve as informal constraints on stakeholder behavior by favoring cooperative practices more so than other behaviors.

In the Blackfoot case, many of the programs are infused with evidence of broad-based knowledge, whether by definition, as with projects designed only after extensive public meetings gather, and synthesize the knowledge and values of a diverse set of stakeholders (e.g., the Blackfoot Community Forest), or in terms of specific program design. For example, senior water rights holders within the farming and ranching communities were willing to take the added risk implied by the drought management (shared sacrifice) plan only after careful consideration based primarily on experiential data. In this instance, while science was instrumental in setting the instream flow parameter required for maintaining fish populations, individual landowners relied on practical, site-based knowledge developed from decades, and even generations of use, to determine whether they realistically could accept the reduced flows in drought years without doing irreparable long-term harm to their livelihoods (interviews, May 2006). A ranching stakeholder describes what he calls the "monumental change" in this way:

> Within a very short time after the Blackfoot Challenge started working on things I noticed a turnaround in how the people working the land were treated by the government officials working with the Challenge. Instead of irritation and feeling like we bother them and have nothing important to add [when it comes to public problems they are responsible for], they now ask for my take on things. They ask "How would

you do this? If we were to do this, would this work on your piece of land? Or, "how can we help you with your problems?" They always used to just present the science and tell us what we had to do to help *them* with their problems. Then they would expect us to hop to it. But now they are willing to listen to the things we know from having lived here and worked here for so long. It's really different. (interviews, May 2006)

Conclusion

Facing a situation with significant loss of ecosystem capacity and strained, even ruptured, social and problem-solving relationships among the many stakeholding groups, key leaders of these same groups nonetheless recognized that long-term resolution of the problems afflicting the watershed and communities of the Blackfoot would require them to find a way to work together for the common good. But this was no ordinary or easy case. While there were strong incentives in the Blackfoot watershed to adopt a new way of doing business given past and ongoing failures, the case did not possess the preferred set of positive antecedent community conditions widely recognized as conducive to promoting the adoption of collaborative institutions. The remarkable thing is that despite the poor antecedent conditions, Blackfoot stakeholders found a way forward and eventually succeeded in crafting and operating a successful collaborative problem-solving institution that has now been in existence for more than 13 years. Some might be tempted to conclude that this outcome demonstrates the explanatory power of a parsimonious, incentives-based, rational choice model. In other words, incentives are enough to overcome even poor antecedent conditions. A closer examination of the evidence in the Blackfoot case, however, suggests that an added factor was at work. This was the package of new ideas, or social norms that became a critical, if abstract, tool for encouraging a community-oriented structure to frame stakeholder interaction.

This finding adds a new dimension to understanding how communities can transition to collaborative governance institutions, and by doing so opens up new possibilities for the "tough" category of community-based cases. These are the communities facing strong incentives for change, yet beset by poor antecedent conditions, that current theories of collaboratives strongly suggest should be avoided. The "ideas" finding thus offers agency practitioners with policy and problem-solving responsibilities in tough community settings, and community stakeholders living with the same problems, a new tool for overcoming the collective action hump, and thereby renewed hope for successfully managing and resolving the difficult public problems at issue. The findings also dovetail with research lessons on the role of public managers in

collaborative settings. Perhaps á la Feldman et al. (2006), the "ideas" are another "opportunity" that attentive public managers can recognize and help to establish as they struggle to foster effective deliberation in collaboratives. As well, the new ideas fit comfortably within Kettl's (2006) recognition of the need for new strategies of collaboration and new skills for public managers when working across the inevitable boundaries of contemporary public administration. The "ideas" element also complements Thomson and Perry's (2006) discovery of the importance of norms inside "the black box" of collaborative processes.

A key caveat to all this, of course, is that the Blackfoot findings derive from a single case; additional confirmation of the findings with other similarly situated cases is needed before the ideas factor can be considered definitive. Nor is it clear how the various pieces of the ideas package fit together, whether some pieces are more important than others, or whether the entire package of seven ideas is absolutely critical to making the transition to the new institution. It also may be the case that the ideas themselves, and the receptivity of community members to them, are somehow a product of the deeper cultural fabric of the Blackfoot watershed community. Were they religious and did they have pastors who stressed the importance of neighborliness, for example? Again, further empirical exploration is required in order to tease out these additional possibilities and how they fit with the findings on ideas.

At a minimum, however, the introduction of "ideas" holds the potential of taking scholars a step closer to fleshing out a more robust and empirically verifiable explanatory framework for understanding institutional change that is grounded in the differing conditions found in communities. Moreover, to the extent that ideas are an important factor in institutional change, it serves as an added reminder that in some, perhaps most communities, we cannot simply plop a collaborative into place and expect it to work, even if it is designed properly.

Notes

1. The one exception might be the scientific knowledge condition, if enough resources were poured into the community over the span of a few years' time.
2. Extensive semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 18 key stakeholders involved in the collaborative Blackfoot effort in May 2006. At least one and in most cases two representatives from each of the stakeholding groups were interviewed.
3. This is a comprehensive and pioneering effort to restore the ecological and biological integrity of 88,000 acres of Blackfoot land by purchasing private land from Plum Creek Timber, deeding it

to the U.S. Forest Service (Lolo National Forest) in perpetuity, and creating a large common public, or community, area that is jointly owned and managed by community stakeholders according to the "community values" developed within the many weekly community-wide meetings dedicated to this topic.
4. This is also analogous to what Ostrom (1990), Lubell (2005, 182), and others call "attributes of the resource," especially the severity as well as the heterogeneous and dispersed character of the problems facing a community.
5. The "ideas" at work in the Blackfoot case are derived from the interview data. After establishing the "facts" of a tough setting—low trust, considerable conflict, and a general unwillingness to work together—*prior to* the start of efforts to bring people together in the early 1990s, interviewees were asked, "How do you explain the transition from such a tough setting to the collaborative successes of the Blackfoot Challenge?" Virtually all of the respondents identified several entrepreneurial leaders as key to the transition, yet this is well established in the literature—not something new. However, careful review and synthesis of the interview data also highlighted the importance of the seven ideas reported here. As should be expected, other communities struggling with tough settings may well find a similar, perhaps even identical, set of new ideas of assistance in moving forward toward eventual collaborative success. Yet some communities may find that only a few new ideas are important, or that a wholly different and even longer list of new ideas are important. The key point here is that the idea-based foundation succeeds in framing, or constraining, the behavior and messages conveyed by entrepreneurial leaders and other stakeholders by emphasizing common ground and offering a conceptual outline of what is acceptable and what is not.
6. The shared norms discussed here are different from the participant and/or professional norms discussed in other places devoted to the study of collaborative partnerships (see, e.g., Bardach 1998; Sabatier, Focht, et al. 2005). The difference is that the shared norms as ideas presented here define mutually agreeable conceptual goals enveloping the collaborative interaction among the many diverse stakeholders, while participant norms are focused on the terms with which stakeholders deliberate and engage one another as they strive to remain true to the broader, more abstract conceptual ideas as goals.
7. See also Miller (1992) and Weber (1998) for the critical importance of reducing uncertainty with respect to the behavior of others in collective action settings.
8. Policy entrepreneurs in the Blackfoot case then reenter the picture as an important factor; they

take responsibility for promoting and carrying forward the collectively produced "new ideas" within the overall collaborative process (interviews, May 2006). Given that this is a single case study, it cannot be determined whether the reentry of policy entrepreneurs in this new role is necessary for collaborative success or whether the new ideas are capable of moving the collaboration forward on their own.

9. Such polarization and conflict were quite common in rural parts of the American West during the 1980s and 1990s. See, for example, Kemmis (2001) and Weber (2000, 2003). DeWitt John's *Civic Environmentalism* (1994) and Weber's *Pluralism by the Rules* (1998), on the other hand, chronicle similar collaborative developments in response to conflict-oriented, top-down command and control environmental policies at the state and national levels, respectively.

10. See also Gormley (1995, 54) and Weber (2003). Raymond likewise notes that norms "are social rules that control human behavior outside the legal apparatus of government" (2003, 27).

11. The acreage total counts all private property not owned and actively managed by Plum Creek Timber.

12. The case of *Kelo v. New London* expanded the definition of blighted property underlying the application of eminent domain to include a governments' lawful taking of private property for development by other private parties if the new ownership/property use promises to produce greater government revenues (tax proceeds). The Supreme Court's ruling allowed states the discretion to pass legislation prohibiting such an expansive reading of blighted; to date, more than two dozen states have done so.

13. *Sierra Club v. Morton* expanded the concept of standing—who gets the key to the courthouse door—to include general harm such as actions that would destroy or otherwise adversely affect scenery and natural and historic objects. Prior to this time, the harm required for standing had to be an individualized "injury in fact," either economic or physical in nature. The Sierra Club lost this case because it did not claim that any of its members actually used the forest areas in question. Justice Douglas advocated for an even more expansive revision of the standing doctrine in his opinion. Douglas's opinion, while it did make it into law, is often held up as an example of the contemporary environmental movement's success in influencing the thinking of key elites in the United States.

14. See *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language.*

15. See, for examples, research into adaptive management (e.g., Lee 1993), the dynamics of ecological systems (e.g., Holling and Sanderson 1996), and wicked problems (Roberts 1997).

16. Examples of folk knowledge in a community-based setting include the history of watershed drainage patterns, the resilience of and changes in particular forest ecosystems over time, recollections of historical conditions promoting the health of riparian areas and fisheries, or stored memories regarding what does and does not work when it comes to managing nature.

17. See Weber (2003, 247). This is a key tenet of the emerging field of sustainability science (see Kates et al. 2001).

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Appendix: Policy and Program Outcomes for the Blackfoot Challenge's Cooperative Conservation Efforts

The Blackfoot Challenge's cooperative conservation efforts have numerous major, verifiable policy and program successes to its credit. The following is an abbreviated list taken from the internal site report submitted to Harvard University's Ash Institute as part of its 2006 Innovations in American Government competition.

1. *Budget and fundraising successes* are often a proxy for programmatic success, or lack thereof, especially when it comes to civic institutions which have no legislatively mandated, permanent operating budgets. . . . On this count there is clear evidence that efforts in the Blackfoot watershed are enjoying broad, sustained programmatic successes. There is no way that so many different sources of funding would be willing to commit so much money to the Blackfoot's cooperative conservation efforts without an established and verifiable record of success. Funding momentum also is growing. The Blackfoot Challenge's budget has increased dramatically, from less than $50,000/year in 2000 to more than $600,000/year in 2003 and 2004, and more than $2,000,000 annually in the 2005 and 2006 years, yet with minimal staffing growth. Challenge members have been able to apply for and receive millions in federal agency funding (U.S. Department of Agriculture) for stream restoration and fish recovery that is expected to continue to the tune of $300,000 to $500,000 annually for the next 3 to 4 years (2007–2010) at minimum. Individuals and private foundations are also key contributors to the Blackfoot Challenge, contributing $1,390,000 during 2005 alone, with even more pledged for 2006.

2. *Conservation easement* coverage on 90,000 acres, which is 30% of the private property not owned and actively managed by Plum Creek Timber. Fully 43,000 acres are covered by U.S. Fishery and Wildlife Service easements and 47,000 acres of easements are coordinated through the Blackfoot Challenge. Both sets of easements employ the innovative approach described earlier in this report. One significant esthetics result is that one will never see a build-

ing, home or otherwise, along an 18 mile stretch of the Blackfoot River. The broad coverage also means that considerable steps have been taken toward the dual goals of maintaining the rural character of the landscape and of providing long-term natural resource protection in perpetuity. In addition, the easements, once signed by the landowner, are vehicles for "building trust between the Challenge and landowners because owners see that we value them and their livelihood. This often opens the door to additional environmental restoration and water conservation projects on the property."

3. *Stream and riparian area restoration that are critical to listed endangered and threatened species* (Westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout). Over 100 miles of a possible 1,900 miles of perennial streams capable of supporting fish have been restored to ecological health, with 83 miles occurring in the last six years. A large majority of these efforts have been targeted at the areas which science predicts will have the greatest ecological value.

4. *Water quality.* In 1996, habitat destruction, excess sediment-loading, and metals contamination led the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) to list 56 streams in the watershed as impaired. Impaired means they do not fully support beneficial uses such as aquatic habitat, recreation and drinking water. A monitoring effort was conducted in 2004 ($150,000 cost) on a suite of physical, chemical and biological items in 12 sites. All but one of the sites showed good biological integrity, minor to no impairment, and full support of aquatic life and other beneficial uses. The problem site is most likely the result of severe forest fires in 2003 (Ingman, BC Status and Trends Report). As a result of Challenge efforts nine restored streams have now been removed from the MDEQ list. Finally, it should be noted that in 2003, the federal Clean Water Action Plan recognized the Blackfoot efforts as one of the "nation's best" for its watershed approach to stream restoration.

5. *Endangered species (other than fish) and wildlife conservation.*
   5.1. Human-grizzly bear conflicts have been reduced by 67% in the last 5 years despite significant increases in bear

sightings and anecdotal evidence over the last 10 years that grizzlies, listed as threatened under the ESA, are re-colonizing many parts of the Blackfoot area. Programs contributing to these results—more bears, yet fewer conflicts—include abatement measures such as the building of 14,000 linear feet of electrified predator-friendly fencing (60% of calving yards are now fenced), the installation of 80 bear-resistant dumpsters, and a carcass pickup program. The restored ecological health of wetlands and other riparian areas, the many conservation easements, and the rationalization of land ownership by the Blackfoot Community Project to the benefit of wildlife migration corridors are also important here.

5.2. Elk populations, a traditional, key member of the area's ecosystem, are steadily increasing at the rate of 5% per annum (Blackfoot Watershed, State of the Basin Report 2005, 10).

5.3. Trumpeter swans are native to the area, but have been declining for decades. A trumpeter swan reintroduction program started in 2005 and released 10 birds in the hopes that they will migrate, then return and colonize the Blackfoot area. More than a dozen more swans are scheduled for release in June 2006, with more birds to follow in the years ahead.

5.4. Populations of Canadian lynx, listed as endangered under the ESA, while declining in most areas of the U.S. West, appear to be stable according to John Squires, a USFS wildlife research biologist who has monitored and researched 80 lynx in the area since 1998.

6. *Fish recovery efforts.* The fish populations of bull trout and cutthroat, and fish habitat conditions, in the Blackfoot River and its tributaries were in serious decline by the late 1980s according to two surveys by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) in 1985 and 1989. The data also showed that 17 of the 19 major tributaries to the main Blackfoot River were suffering from significant impairment. The Blackfoot's CC efforts have made a dramatic positive difference. Habitat restoration, conservation easements, stream restoration, and the removal of fish passage barriers blocking 460 miles of fish habitat have led to a 10-fold increase in cutthroat trout populations from 1989 to 2004, while the primary way to count bull trout popula-

tions—the number of spawning redds—has seen an explosion on two of three key streams, rising from 10 or fewer redds in 1989 to an average of over 50 redds in both cases over the ensuing 14 year period. A third key stream has seen a 33% decline. In 1999, Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the Interior for President Clinton, called the Blackfoot fish restoration projects the best working model in the country for recovering listed bull trout populations.

7. *Drought management and water efficiency improvements.* Water rights are perhaps the most sacred property right in the West and are typically not a matter for negotiation, much less sharing with others. The lack of sharing arises from a physical reality as much as anything—most western rivers are over-allocated, and there is no water to share except in high water years. The Blackfoot watershed is no exception to this rule. It also suffers from both periodical and chronic human-related dewatering along 165 miles of streams (out of 3,700 miles total). Yet, cooperative conservation has succeeded in alleviating such problems through a four-part approach.

● Shared sacrifice. In drought years, water users have agreed to share the pain and "donate" 60 cubic feet per second to Blackfoot River instream flows to benefit fish. The rights holders do not lose their rights for lack of use because the contribution is considered a beneficial use under state water law.

● Fishing of any kind is banned during high temperature, low water periods in order not to add to the high biological stress encountered by fish and other aquatic animals.

● Off-stream stock watering. Piping systems transport water to watering troughs for livestock located away from stream banks. This minimizes the destruction of stream banks by cattle, thereby minimizing destructive sediment loads, minimizing stream widening and "shallowing" (which unnaturally slows the flow and increases the water temperature), and allowing riparian vegetation to take hold and provide shade to streams (helps keep the coldwater resource cold).

Source: Ash Institute (2006).