



How do those in resource

Members of both forest industry and environmental organizations acknowledged that no completely objective, unbiased science exists, that all groups possess part of the truth, and that all have their perceptions of history.

by Mike Simpson, Principal, M.F. Simpson Consulting

The forest industry and environmental organizations have different world views, stereotypes, organizational cultures, approaches to knowledge and information, and communication styles. But how do these differences affect interactions between the two groups and how they perceive each other? I hoped to shed light on this difficult question in a recent research project carried out as a Master of Arts candidate in Conflict Analysis and Management at Royal Roads University.

To identify the stereotypes, differences in organizational culture, and assumptions held by each group about the other, I conducted a Web-based survey and focus group interviews with members of the two groups. This work was based on the idea that a better understanding of the groups' perceptions and world views could help reduce natural resource-related impasses, or resolve them more quickly. The survey took place in early 2004, and was followed by with three half-day focus groups in Vancouver, Williams Lake, and Kamloops in April 2004.

The findings show that differences were perceived to be greatest when non-local groups (such as multinational environmental organizations) were involved. Representatives of local and regional environmental organizations and forest industry members from British Columbia tend to rely on experience as a vehicle for understanding reality, and perceived that members of larger multinational environmental organizations relied on models not based on experience. Members of local and regional environmental organizations did appreciate the ability of large national organizations to raise important issues.

Members of both groups acknowledged that no completely objective, unbiased science exists, that all groups possess part of the truth, and that all have their perceptions of history. They also felt it took maturity and experience to acknowledge that it was acceptable for others to disagree with them. Although members of both groups believed that new information does not necessarily persuade those with strongly held views to change their opinions, many still believed that education is the key to reducing conflict.

Members of local and regional environmental organizations and forest industry members held similar stereotypes about large national or interna-

tional environmental organizations. Forest industry representatives felt that they responded differently to various environmental organizations, based on each organization's history. Traditional stereotypes persist despite efforts, such as consensus-based land-use planning, which have required these groups to interact with each other. These stereotypes appear more polarized on larger geographic scales and less so on smaller geographic scales. Group members tend to hold themselves in higher esteem compared with how group members with opposing views see them.

Culture affects the interaction of the forest industry and environmental organizations in many ways. Members of both groups felt that academic, organizational, and professional cultures can constrain an individual's ability to fully understand natural resource management issues. The organizational culture of a forest products company or environmental organization was often perceived as different by the outside group than by the individuals comprising it. There is great diversity within every organization, and within the forest industry and environmental movement as a whole.

As components of culture, communication and language were seen as contributors to natural resource management conflicts. Members of each group believed they communicated effectively, but that other groups didn't. Forest industry and local environmental representatives felt that it was more productive communicating on the ground in the presence of an issue rather than communicating in an office or meeting room about abstract ideas. Ownership, or control over the process of interaction, whether granted by government or an initiative taken by a group, was important in how successfully diverse interests interacted and managed conflicting opinions about natural resource management.

Recommendations

This research led to the following recommendations that I believe can help diverse interests to engage effectively when discussing natural resource management issues.

- Promote interdisciplinary approaches to natural resource management and the environment by:
 - including mandatory courses on philosophy and epistemology in post-secondary natural resource programs;
 - encouraging group members to expand their knowledge and perspective beyond their niche;




conflicts perceive each other?

and

- merging resource professions (e.g., foresters and biologists) into one organization to eliminate cultural barriers between professions and to highlight similarities and common interests.
- Decentralize provincial and federal government decision making about natural resource management and environmental issues to the community or regional level. Research shows that the most durable, long-lasting solutions to complex issues are best derived by the people who care most about the area, and who are affected by the consequences.
- Recognize and respect the knowledge, commitment, interests, and energy of local and regional environmental organizations. For adequate participation in local planning processes, government funding of these organizations is required to support information gathering and to provide opportunities for them to participate at a level similar to that of the forest industry.
- Stay focused on the group's vision when discussing natural resource management or environmental issues. This vision may be interpreted as a desired future condition, which the

group hopes will be the outcome of the planning process. Focusing on the end result, rather than on how to get there, may reduce conflict and allow diverse groups to identify a shared vision. This will also encourage groups to talk about their interests, rather than their positions—a basic tenet of conflict management.

- Increase awareness of how each group's world view, culture, and communication affect group interaction. Natural resource managers and individuals in environmental organizations must recognize that social and psychological factors are at work (e.g., categorizing, stereotyping, and reliance on previously held views), and that an objective reality may not exist for every situation, issue, or circumstance. Awareness of these factors is a skill that can be acquired through training and workshops.
- Use appropriate information and communication styles to suit a particular audience. If an audience is targeted in a way that doesn't take into account who they are, then the outcome may be a reinforcement of previously held views and stereotypes, rather than education and enlightenment. 

More information and acknowledgements

For more information, please contact Mike Simpson, MA, RPF Williams Lake, BC [**mfs518@telus.net**](mailto:mfs518@telus.net)

FORREX supported the project via funding from the Forest Investment Account, Forest Science Program. FORREX staff members Shawn Morford and Henry Michel (formerly FORREX's Aboriginal Forestry Specialist) provided input to Simpson and helped facilitate focus group interviews.