



## How to elicit better public participation

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A reference guide on public participation in forest management, published by the Sustainable Forest Management Network, provides practical tools for natural resource managers who are currently expected to implement an inclusive and responsive model of decision making. For example, forest certification systems, such as the Canadian Standards Association and the Forest Stewardship Council, require extensive public participation.

However, most forest managers are not trained in participatory processes.

To meet that need, **Thomas Beckley, John Parkins, and Stephen Sheppard's** "A Review of Public Participation in Sustainable Forest Management: A Reference Guide" synthesizes some of the most relevant literature and research on public participation, and applies it in a Canadian context.

The need for public participation is particularly relevant in BC because most of the province's forests are on Crown land—that is, they are managed as a public trust by licence-holders on behalf of the public—and many aboriginal and non-aboriginal BC communities depend on forest resources. The authors acknowledge that though the guide has some applicability to First Nations, different approaches and tools may be needed for participatory approaches involving aboriginal communities. They recommend Dr. Marc Stevenson's 2005 synthesis document "Traditional Knowledge and Sustainable Forest Management."

The authors classify tools as either direct (face-to-face) or indirect (non face-to-face), and further divide them into tools useful to either small or large groups. Direct tools include public advisory committees, focus groups, workshops, round tables, open houses, and public hearings, as well as modern technologies, such as community-based Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and three-dimensional landscape visualization. Indirect tools include comment sheets, toll-free lines, referenda, and surveys. While face-to-face methods tend to be more participatory, this is changing due to increas-



Elena Jones photo

Researchers are trying to understand the effects of the mountain pine beetle on woodland caribou habitat. Read more on page 8.

ing use of remote methods such as Web-based dialogue tools.

A section on evaluation outlines performance indicators for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a participatory process. A "continuum of public participation," spanning nominal participation (e.g., information exchange) to full participation (e.g., co-management), helps conceptualize the level of

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# Effective public input means better decisions

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participation expected when using a particular tool. A matrix helps identify tools suitable to the different stages of a participatory planning process.

Specific public participation tools may not rate highly for every performance indicator. For example, direct methods such as workshops and round tables provide great opportunities for learning, for establishing dialogue between individuals with diverse values, and for identifying workable solutions. Conversely, indirect methods, such as surveys, provide little opportunity for participants to learn more about an issue. But they are often cost-efficient, anonymous, and more representative of the broad public. A participatory process should not be thought of as a single event or application of a single tool, but a long-term process integrating a series of appropriate tools.

Participation should begin at the early stages of information gathering and goal identification, ideally with stakeholder analysis as a first step. Representatives of the different groups should be involved in

planning the participatory process and helping to select appropriate tools. Effective public participation initiatives create a place where criticism and respectful dissent are welcome. The authors caution that offering people an opportunity to provide input without any real intention to follow through is a recipe for disaster.

Research and experience from the natural resource management sector worldwide have proven that public participation leads to better decisions, and builds trust. It also reduces uncertainties, delays, conflicts, and legal costs. In Canada, despite all the talk about public participation, there hasn't been much synthesized information on tools for natural resource managers to use. Use of the tools described in this guide could help move natural resource decision makers from talking about public participation and controlling dissent towards meaningfully incorporating public values into the planning process. 🌲

*Copies of the guide can be obtained by emailing [cynthia.kaufman@sfmnetwork.ca](mailto:cynthia.kaufman@sfmnetwork.ca)*

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