

Community-Based Ecosystem Stewardship

There is a growing interest on the part of citizenry and public land users to be actively involved in solving environmental and natural resource issues and concerns. This trend is not necessarily served by the complex array of laws, regulations, and procedures that have evolved over the last century - a century in which more, not less, was expected from government and during which citizens interacted with government as advocates for competing interests rather than as problem solvers themselves. If a new age of citizen-centered governance and environmental stewardship is to emerge from this very recent history, fundamental changes in the roles of both citizens and government will be needed.

As guidelines for those changes, the following concepts of stewardship apply:

- Stewardship is a way of thinking and acting that leads to a sustainable and productive relationship between people and the land. Although the essence of stewardship is to serve the larger interests of society (including future generations), to be practical it must also serve self-interest.
- There is strong evidence that communities of people tend to share a common “sense of place” relative to the surrounding landscapes and environments. This natural connection of people (i.e. communities) and landscapes can potentially serve as a powerful tool for restoring and managing landscapes to the benefit of people who live there, as well as the society at large.
- Stewardship can neither be imposed nor regulated but is a matter of free will and choice. Peer pressure, as expressed through commonly held land and environmental ethics, can be a powerful influence supporting stewardship.
- When government assumes too much responsibility for stewardship, its practice at the community level can diminish or fail to grow and be practiced in a manner that reflects the larger interests of society.
- Local economies and social/cultural settings are interdependent with their landscapes. Ecosystems must be thought of as including these human endeavors if they are to be managed successfully.
- Ecosystems at landscape scales need to be understood as combinations of mostly natural, partially altered, and highly altered land units of diverse ownership. Citizen-centered stewardship should be oriented toward managing these land units with an understanding of their relationship to the larger ecosystem, not withstanding self-interest and freedom of choice.
- Ecosystem stewardship should, in part, be oriented toward sustaining a full array of native flora and fauna, and ecological processes that optimize ecosystem functions and services.

These concepts give rise to the idea of “community-based ecosystem stewardship,” the process of citizens, government, and science working together in a new, citizen-empowered relationship that shares knowledge, builds consensus, and promotes shared ownership and responsibility for solutions to present and future natural resource and environmental challenges. Locally held and shared responsibility for ecosystem stewardship can provide a much more natural and sustainable process for managing ecosystems than can government regulations and programs alone. If people are to manage “their” ecosystems in a manner that sustains their own needs and interests, as well as those of the larger society and future generations, they must have access to reliable information and be empowered to use their own knowledge, skills, creativity, and resources to solve problems and adapt to changing conditions over time.

Taken together, the following principles provide a foundation for establishing and practicing community-based ecosystem stewardship. Partnerships between and among the various entities involved should flow from, and be guided by, these same principles.

Principles

Citizen Empowerment – People need to meaningfully participate in making decisions that affect their lives and surroundings. Without such participation, they tend to resist, or even defy, those decisions. It is through the social and cultural networks of place that people learn to manage and care for their social, cultural, and natural environments. And this knowledge tends to pass from generation to generation among people who live there. These geographically-based social and cultural systems offer great potential for ecosystem stewardship, provided that local people are empowered to form and work toward an expanded and shared vision of community health and ecosystem integrity.

Inclusiveness – For ecosystem stewardship to develop and thrive, communities must become safe environments in which a wide range of information and values can be openly shared and understood. The process must be deeply democratic with empowerment extending to all people from the community of place, and to people who are not part of the community of place but wish to contribute their knowledge and interests to the vision and its implementation. Consensus building helps to ensure that all relevant information and concerns that can be acted on are resolved in a manner that supports shared ownership and responsibility. An inclusive vision that is supported by the broader community of place, as well as by the larger society, is one that can be successfully implemented.

Institutional Change – Community-based ecosystem stewardship requires that agencies and other institutions transform the way they interact with citizens and each other. Agencies must become more integral to local communities - their social networks and culture – while continuing to fulfill their mandates and responsibilities. Inclusive, citizen-centered processes that empower people with information, knowledge sharing, consensus building and choice must be fostered and supported while maintaining credibility at local, regional, and national levels. Certain formal processes of government should be transformed to support community-based ecosystem stewardship, particularly land-use planning and NEPA reviews. These processes must foster and support community-based ecosystem stewardship while reaching out to the larger society for inclusion, input, and support.

Transformational Leadership – Community-based ecosystem stewardship starts with transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are respected individuals with or without formal authority in communities and institutions that are willing to take risks to effect change. Their authority to act comes from within – the belief that it is the right thing to do. They tend to have a strong vision of community-based stewardship and believe in the ability of people to work together for change. They lead from behind by working through informal networks and using consensus-building processes to achieve results. Transformational leaders naturally extend and share leadership with others, listen carefully, willingly share their own resources and information, give credit to others rather than themselves, and work diligently toward broad understanding and agreement. It is important that people with formal authority recognize transformational leaders in their own organizations, and to enable them to work effectively on behalf of the organization in community-based processes.

Capacity Building – The ability to accomplish community-based ecosystem stewardship depends upon the capacity to get things done within and among participating communities and institutions. Capacity mobilizes widely available knowledge, information, skills, and tools through trust, commitment, accountability, and the overall quality of working relationships serving the common interest. Building and maintaining capacity means honoring commitments to people, principles, and processes; bridging ideological, organizational and cultural boundaries; and acting in wholly trustworthy and accountable ways. Capacity can be judged and measured by the degree to which credible, useful, and constructive information is passed through and processed by the social networks of place, and by the support extended by the larger society that their interests are being considered

and served. Building and maintaining capacity is a critical stewardship practice; it requires constant and lasting vigilance and attention.

Applied Science – For science to be successfully applied in community-based ecosystem stewardship it must support mutual discovery and learning. Both the source and nature of science and information used must enjoy support by all concerned interests, and it must respect and integrate local knowledge and expertise. This process is perhaps best served by scientists (or other agency personnel) who hold trust and credibility at both community and institutional levels serving as reliable and trusted sources of information flow and communication. When done well, science should become part of the local wisdom. Agencies and institutions must commit to serving community-based ecosystem stewardship with highly reliable and interdisciplinary science, information, and expertise. Ideally, agencies and institutions should work together at local and regional scales toward that end.

Cultural Absorption – The questions now faced in our modern world concerning a sustainable relationship with our environment are often exceedingly complex and demand that people and institutions work together for solutions. Ultimately, however, the knowledge and wisdom gained by working together must be absorbed into the local culture if it is to be effectively applied and sustained. Information related to ecosystem stewardship will be adopted by the local culture when it supports self-interest, and/or enriches quality of life, including greater independence, autonomy, and empowerment. Cultural absorption requires respecting and working within established communication and “caretaking” networks through a process of cultural adaptation, mutual learning, shared respect and understanding, and discipline to credibility and accountability.

Ecosystem Integrity – Restoring and maintaining healthy and sustainable ecological systems and functions at landscape scales is the desired outcome of community-based ecosystem stewardship. But this cannot be achieved without healthy and sustainable economic and social conditions associated with those same landscapes. Therefore, ecosystem integrity must consider human social and economic endeavors as part of the ecosystem. The aim of stewardship is to move toward a sustainable and even mutually enhancing interrelationship between humans and the ecosystems they are part of (i.e.; productive harmony).

Community-based ecosystem stewardship pursues ecosystem integrity through a social process centering on “people of place.” To some, this might suggest that only local considerations are needed; however, no ecosystem is capable of functioning independently from others. Each must be understood in the context of the larger whole, even at global scales. Nor are ecosystems static. They must have the capacity to adapt to changing conditions over time, a property of ecosystems that becomes more important in the face of major new influences such as possible climatic change and invasive exotic species. Understanding and managing for these complexities must be approached as a collaborative process among people of place, science, and, when appropriate, other ecologically interdependent communities. However, the process must always be oriented toward empowering people of place with the information, understanding, and choices needed for them to succeed.

During most of the last century many ecosystems have been mostly managed for commercial uses and activities. Such management has often left ecosystems less biologically diverse, functionally damaged, less resilient to natural disturbances such as fire, and more open to invasion by exotic species. Ecosystem integrity requires management approaches for restoring viable populations of a full array of native species and communities along with essential ecosystem functions. These ecosystem properties are essential for sustaining associated economies and social values and ethics.

Collaboration – In the context of community-based ecosystem stewardship, collaboration is the process and skill of people and institutions working together to find appropriate solutions to complex and interrelated social, economic, and ecological challenges. Collaboration usually begins with formal or informal processes for identifying common goals and objectives and continues to evolve and strengthen as people and institutions work together to achieve a shared vision. Ultimately,

collaboration should lead to new and lasting relationships for identifying and serving the common interest, becoming transformational to people and institutions while doing so. It is driven and sustained by mutual discovery and learning, empowerment, creativity, and institutional support for responsible local stewardship. When mature, collaboration is characterized by:

- **individuals and organizations committed to shared goals and objectives**
- **organizational alignment with, and support of, stewardship principles and practices**
- **established joint strategies supported by agreed upon roles and responsibilities**
- **goals that are jointly pursued through dispersed leadership with shared control**
- **shared risk and accountability**
- **pooled, shared, and leveraged resources**
- **transparent procedures and processes that are openly accountable to other observers and interests**
- **open door policies accommodating new people and ideas**
- **consensus driven decision-making processes**
- **built in adaptive mechanisms for accommodating change**

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