

Building Adaptive Governance

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Part of Panel 61

For nearly two decades, scholars and practitioners have advocated that adaptive management and governance can be a strategy for increasing our ability to address complex problems, learn from past experience, and respond to changing conditions. Despite the attention that adaptive management receives in reports, articles, and speeches, adaptive management is far from institutionalized in natural resource management and governance. This paper explores one of the central challenges to adaptive governance of natural resources - the alignment and misalignment of institutional arrangements at the constitutive levels of governance and the operational levels of governance. For front line managers and their nongovernmental partners to govern the operations of natural resource management adaptively, "the rules of the game" need to support this adaptive management. Bureaucracies, with their hierarchies, standardizations, and simplifications provide stability in the face of rapidly changing complex environmental, economic, and social conditions. This is particularly true in the United States, where the founding fathers created a system political that defaults to stasis. Our political institutions subject new ideas to considerable debate and deliberation, creating a sort of stability and security in the face of change. The fundamental challenge of this system is that it can be slow to respond to rapidly changing environmental, economic, and social circumstances. While these stable institutions provide some kinds of resilience, in natural resource management many of the Progressive Era and Environmental Era institutions were built on the belief that complexity, variation, and imperfect knowledge could be addressed through simplifying assumptions, order and regularity, extensive advance planning, and direction from above. These inherited institutions often discourage learning and change at the operational levels of governance, making it difficult to respond to dynamic, uncertain, and changing conditions. This presentation will explore challenges and successes in efforts to foster adaptive management by aligning the constitutive institutions of natural resource management with collaborative management efforts at the operational levels. Specifically, this paper will look at the rise of collaborative groups that have organized around public forest management in the American West, and how these collaborative groups and associated non-governmental organizations have organized themselves to advocate for changing national forest and public lands policy to make them more able to adapt to particularized, complex, and changing circumstances.