



Wanted: Natural Resource-based Land Use Planning for Watersheds

(New Paradigms Need Not Apply)

Those of us in the water resources field are now officially inundated with the word “watershed.” Watershed plans, watershed position papers, watershed stakeholder meetings, watershed proposals and—well, you get the idea.

What does it all mean? It sounds new and exciting. It also sounds intimidating. As we enter the new era of water resource protection, about the only thing we can say for sure is: *there are many ways to skin a watershed!* Recognizing this, we nonetheless brazenly present NEMO’s preferred approach to watershed programs. (This *Soapbox* focuses on the overall issues—for more details on process, see some of our other publications).

Over the years, we’ve learned a few lessons, usually as a result of our own mistakes. For what it’s worth, here they are...

Lesson 1: It’s *Still* About Land Use Planning

Whether it’s sustainable development, ecosystem management or watershed management, it pretty much boils down to land use planning. Watershed management is a form of land use management, not an arcane new discipline, and land use management happens at the local (town, township, county) level. Watershed management initiatives should not ignore or underplay this fact. Exciting “paradigm shifts” that ultimately serve as an excuse to bail out from the messy realities of working at the local level will prove to be of little worth.

The charge for those interested in protecting water resources is not to *replace* local political boundaries with Mother Nature’s watershed boundaries, but to find creative and effective ways to *reconcile* the two. This may seem like a fine point, but it’s an important one often lost in the enthusiasm for “switching over” to watersheds.

The equation [watershed management = land use management = local decisions] leads to another important conclusion: water resource programs—or any other natural resource initiatives—can no longer be conducted in isolation from other issues. Federal and state regulatory agencies have long had the luxury of compartmentalizing programs based on topic (this is about air quality, this is about nonpoint source pollution, this is about stream buffers).

This is basically impossible at the local level, where the political context of the land use decision making process virtually ensures that any and all issues will be folded into a complex web of community considerations. This is not necessarily, or even usually, a bad thing. For instance, emerging realization of the close relationship of natural resource protection to quality of life and community character is, in our opinion, the strongest factor arguing for the ultimate success of watershed management programs.

Lesson 2: Don't Just Facilitate, Lead!

There is a crying need for natural resource and planning professionals to provide some leadership to local groups and decision-makers attempting watershed management!

While local ownership of watershed efforts must occur if we are to have any hope of effective watershed protection, too much deference to a “locally-led” philosophy often results in a rudderless ship. Community-based watershed management requires leadership of many kinds, not all of it local.

Local officials and other community leaders need help from resource professionals and planners on conducting natural resource assessments and charting a course through the watershed planning process. That help is a form of leadership, in distinct contrast to mechanical “facilitation” of local efforts.

In an ideal world, simple facilitation of local expertise would be all that's required. But we're not living in an ideal world, and local knowledge, while invaluable to the watershed planning process, does not often comprise the total sum of all that's required. In addition, the ability to take a “step back” and look at things from a broader, regional perspective is a critical element that often only outside professionals can bring. Facilitation with no “value-added” expertise or advice amounts to an abdication of responsibility.

Natural resource professionals and planners must step up and help communities to understand and prioritize issues, and develop a practical pathway to reach consensus. And leadership by one camp alone is not enough—they need to do it together. Integrated planning and natural resource expertise are needed to accomplish good watershed management, but with few exceptions natural resource professionals are not planners, and visa-versa.

So, we tend to get planning without natural resources factored in, or a “watershed planning” initiative that is run by well-meaning natural resource folks who have no experience in the planning process. The former scenario is what we're all trying to avoid. The latter scenario often results in a “planning” process that is really an extended brainstorming session, resulting in a watershed “plan” that is a hodge-podge of ideas with little chance of being implemented. By combining forces, planners and natural resource experts can arm communities with both the information and the process by which to chart their future.

Lesson 3: Keep it Workable

Our preference is to approach a project as a planning effort involving a relatively small group (10-20?) of key players/effective contributors/natural leaders. These folks, in concert with natural resource and planning professionals, then compile an inventory of natural resources and take it from there. The composition of the group evolves as priority issues emerge, and as initiatives based on those issues are developed.

Although representation of various key “sectors” are important, it is also important to keep the initial work group small enough so that inventories and preliminary analyses can progress smoothly and rapidly. We believe that a focused group of good individuals working together can get a heck of a lot done.

Some other approaches, in an attempt to be all-inclusive and to avoid ambushes by adverse factions, end up sacrificing the ability of a project to move forward or produce a workable plan. How many of us have had these words handed down to us with the solemnity of commandments

writ in stone: *Identify all the Stakeholders! List all the Issues!* Sounds great in theory, but if implemented without discrimination this approach can lead to extremely large and unwieldy efforts. It's tough to build a tight plan based on that foundation.

Some will argue that our approach may leave a critical person or faction out of the process. True—but this is always a danger, no matter how many stakeholders you round up. In an evolving project, you can move to mend such mistakes. To us, the benefits of a small, focused and workable planning team far outweigh the dangers of the “come one, come all” approach.

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This is not elitism or watershed management by fiat, by the way—it's a matter of **timing**. It's not *whether* you bring the broader public into the process, it's *when* you do it. Our experience and instincts tell us that you do so not at the very beginning of the planning process, but after you've done your homework in a small group and have at least the outlines of a plan. Remember, we're talking about strategic timing of *active public participation*, not public outreach—it's always important to keep the public informed and apprised of your efforts from start to finish.

Lesson 4: Keep it Simple

As we've tried to stress here, watershed planning is still planning, and watershed zoning is still zoning. The geographic framework may be different, but the basic processes and tools remain the same. Our feeling is that good natural resource-based planning follows much the same steps whether the area of focus is a neighborhood, a town, a county or a watershed (see Soapbox 3: Sustainable: Attainable?).

Sometimes professionals make natural resource-based planning seem much more complicated than it is. Most watershed management will be implemented through local land use commissions, often comprised of volunteers. One way to ensure vapor lock in the planning process is to confuse these folks with thick technical reports and reams of complicated maps. Once that occurs, you've lost the game.

Technical materials have their place as working tools for the professionals. However, it is incumbent upon these professionals to condense and simplify technical information before it's presented to lay officials. (*Caution: plug for NEMO follows*). Through professional education, the most technical data can be made understandable, and presented to community leaders in a form that can be readily used as the basis for better decision making.

The bottom line is, **communities need to know they CAN do this!** They might not be able to do it all by themselves (Lesson 2), but they needn't equate watershed management with a manned mission to Jupiter.

Lesson 5:????

We haven't learned it yet. So keep posted, as we wait together for NEMO's next embarrassing but instructive mistake. Like you (admit it!), we're making this stuff up as we go along. We keep up with the manuals and reports, but getting the *process* right is the thing. That requires local knowledge, a little imagination, a healthy dose of trusting your own instincts and experience, and a willingness to accept some leadership. Now *that's* a new paradigm!

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