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Engaging Landowners in the Conservation Conversation through Landowner-Listening Workshops

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ABSTRACT

Participatory approaches to natural resource research have become increasingly popular, ensuring local knowledge is incorporated into conservation decisions while also benefitting community members. Understanding if and how different methods achieve participatory research goals is important and lacking. In this study, we investigated how one approach, landowner-listening workshops, performed across six criteria for participatory research. We conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of two workshops including participant observation, qualitative analysis of the workshop transcript, and a post-workshop survey administered to 27 landowners and 22 conservation professionals. We found that landowner-listening workshops provided a unique space for open conversation, with all participants benefiting from knowledge exchange. However, workshops did not perform consistently on fostering the spread of participation, and there were mixed results on the clarity of objectives. Based on our findings, we conclude landowner-listening workshops show promise as participatory research that helps bridge the gap between professionals and landowners.

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Introduction

Participatory research methods emphasize partnership-driven approaches that involve and empower local community members (Ablah et al., 2016) and mutually benefit all partners (Williams, Shelley, and Sussman 2009). These methods are increasingly popular as researchers have realized the positive outcomes of diverse stakeholder involvement in research processes (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Participatory research offers promise for enhancing private lands conservation by engaging landowners and other partners to foster local ‘ownership’ of the conservation process (LaChapelle and McCool 2005). Professionals can learn from and more deeply appreciate landowner knowledge and values that must be considered to effectively manage resources (Chuenpagdee, Fraga, and Euán-Avila 2004). Landowner-listening workshops are a method for engaging diverse stakeholders in conservation through participatory research. Here we evaluate how these workshops engage landowners and professionals and can serve as a participatory research method.

Landowner-Listening Workshops as Participatory Research

The approach of landowner-listening, originally put forth as an approach by Partners for Conservation, focuses on bringing together landowners, offering each the opportunity to speak, and allowing conservation professionals a chance to listen (Partners for Conservation 2018). Similar to other participatory research methods, these workshops bring together groups with unique knowledge sets to increase trust and enhance research relevance (Israel et al. 2005). Landowner-listening workshops allow landowners to drive the conversation. Facilitators are charged with giving landowner participants voice and ensuring conservation professionals adopt listening postures in contrast to many professional-landowner settings where professionals often deliver knowledge as part of a conservation-driven agenda. While participatory efforts promoting knowledge exchange and diverse stakeholder engagement have been around for decades (Steins and Edwards 1999; Daniels and Walker 1996), much of the focus has been within the realm of collaborative management, rather than as a participatory research method.

With this study we sought to evaluate landowner-listening workshops using participatory research evaluative criteria to determine the degree to which this method offers a space for conservation professionals to listen to landowners as well as landowners to listen to each other and what this approach offers as a form of both data collection and stakeholder engagement. Aware of the challenges with participatory research processes [e.g., ensuring community trust and participation, handling of different values and beliefs, and awareness of internal power structures (Israel et al. 2005; Bergold and Thomas 2012)], we aimed to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of this method and the engagement of all participants. We explored how well workshops provided mutual benefit to and exchange of knowledge among landowners and professionals through a participatory research approach. After reviewing literature on participatory research evaluation, we brought together the most relevant evaluation criteria from Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey (2007) and Schulz, Israel, and Lantz (2003). These criteria were developed to evaluate processes most similar to landowner-led workshops, and combining their metrics afforded us a robust evaluation of process dynamics. We adapted their criteria to fit our focus on evaluating the process itself rather than long-term outcomes and management implications.

Methods

Study Areas

We conducted landowner-listening workshops as part of a larger project examining landowner perspectives on flood irrigation and working wet meadow conservation on private rangelands in the Intermountain West (Sketch, Dayer, and Metcalf *Forthcoming*). The Intermountain West spans parts of 11 states (California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona) from the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains to the Eastern slope of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada Mountains (Intermountain West Joint Venture 2013). Here we conducted two workshops in locations selected in coordination with the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV), a public-private partnership focused on

bird and habitat conservation across the region. Guided by project goals and participatory considerations, we chose sites important for bird conservation efforts where flood irrigation was occurring and where local conservation professionals had connections with landowners and wanted to partner on the project. We sought diverse landowner perspectives by including areas crossing state and/or county boundaries. The first workshop was held in the Southern Oregon portion of the Southern Oregon-Northeastern California (SONEC) region. Ranching is prominent in the area and the region has a long history of collaborative conservation of flood irrigated rangelands (Intermountain West Joint Venture 2016). The second workshop was held in the Little Snake River Valley of Southwest Wyoming with a geographical focus extending to the Yampa River Valley in Northwest Colorado. The primary land use in the Valley is agriculture and the region contains a large wet meadow complex providing habitat for multiple priority bird species (Wyoming Game and Fish Department 2014).

Landowner-Listening Workshop Methodology

Each of the landowner-listening workshops brought together landowners and professionals for a day of facilitated discussions and panels. The focal population was private ranchers who had at least some experience with flood irrigation. The applied conservation purpose of the workshop was to explore facilitators and constraints to maintaining flood irrigation and how these factors might interrelate (Sketch, Dayer, and Metcalf [Forthcoming](#)).

To plan and implement the workshops we collaborated with the IWJV, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Partners for Conservation, State fish and wildlife agency personnel, local NGO staff, and one or two local landowners (i.e., one in Oregon, two in Wyoming). We held monthly planning calls with partners to co-produce research methods and instruments including the semi-structured script and workshop agenda¹. Local conservation professionals led the invitation process for both landowners and other professionals, guided by the researchers. A spreadsheet with participants' demographic information and operation characteristics (e.g., experience with flood irrigation, age, gender, size of the operation, involvement in conservation programs, location) was maintained by researchers to promote diverse perspectives among invitees. Local partners were provided with an information sheet and script to facilitate landowner invitations. Professionals with relevant connections to working wet meadow conservation were identified by local partners and invited by researchers. Prior to the workshop, researchers and local partners sent all invitees a fact sheet on the research project, a consent form to review, and an agenda. The researchers emailed landowners who agreed to serve on panels a brief list of question prompts to consider in advance. For each workshop, we identified a local, professional facilitator with experience interacting with agricultural producers on water-related issues. The facilitators and researchers met several times to review research objectives, approach, and instruments. While the workshops were initially set up in conjunction with local professionals, the workshops themselves were primarily driven by invited landowners with the facilitator's guidance.

Workshops began with coffee, a light breakfast, and informal mingling between participants to foster fellowship (Muth 2004). The facilitator then provided an overview of the agenda and initiated introductions. The day included presentations and panels by landowners, facilitated discussions around questions posed to landowners, and impromptu discussions among landowners and professionals. Discussions were oriented around three topics: experiences directly with flood irrigation, decisions related to continuing flood irrigation, and interactions with programs and policies related to flood irrigation. Question prompts were crafted by the researchers in consultation with local partners and the facilitator to ensure contextual relevance. During the workshops, one researcher was primarily focused on documenting observations while the other worked closely with the facilitator to maintain focus on research objectives and ask follow-up questions when appropriate.

Data Collection and Analysis

We based our evaluative criteria for the workshops on the participatory research evaluation of Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey (2007), including: clarity of/focus on objectives, spread of representation, spread of voices heard, relationship development, benefit to participants, and knowledge exchange (see Table 1 for definitions of each criterion and which source(s) they were adapted from). We used a mixed-methods approach to data collection that involved participant observation, surveying participants post-workshop, and workshop transcript analysis. When possible, criteria were assessed with multiple methods to enable triangulation (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

We recorded participant observation data on a worksheet including definitions and indicators of each criterion. Observations were documented by the same researcher at both workshops for consistency. The second researcher at the workshop took notes when not supporting the facilitator. Different people filled the secondary research role at each workshop. We transcribed notes from the observation spreadsheet into Microsoft Word and qualitatively analyzed using a codebook for the seven criteria. Audio recordings of the workshops were transcribed and analyzed by deductive coding with each criterion as a category using Nvivo software.

We administered debrief surveys following the workshop, but before participants departed, with the landowner- and professional-specific versions². We asked participants to return the completed survey in a privacy envelope to ensure anonymity. We entered scaled survey responses into MS Excel and calculated frequencies and transcribed responses to open-ended survey responses before qualitatively analyzing them for each criterion.

Results

Twelve landowners and seven professionals participated in the Oregon workshop representing three counties in the bi-state region with 10 landowners from Oregon and 2 landowners from California. In Wyoming, 19 landowners and 20 professionals participated in the workshop, with 7 landowners from Wyoming, 11 landowners from Colorado, and 1 landowner who ranched in both states. We received completed surveys

Table 1. Evaluative criteria for landowner-led workshops adapted from Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey (2007) and Schulz, Israel, and Lantz (2003)'s framework for participatory research evaluation and our data sources.

Criteria	Adapted from	Definition	Landowner survey	Professional survey	Participant observation	Transcript
Focus on objectives (clarity of objectives)	"Transparency" (Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey 2007)	The ability to maintain a focus on the goals and objectives of the process and if participants understood the goals and objectives	X		X	X
Spread of representation	"Spread of representation, diversity of views" (Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey 2007); "Extent of member involvement" (Schulz, Israel, and Lantz 2003)	The diversity of participants in attendance		X		X
Spread of voices heard	"Participant's opportunity and capacity to influence" (Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey 2007); "Shared ownership" (Schulz, Israel, and Lantz 2003)	The equity of different perspectives and voices heard	X		X	X
Relationship development	"Capacity building-building relationships and skills" (Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey 2007)	The extent to which new connections and correspondences were fostered by the workshop	X	X	X	X
Benefit to participants	"Perceived personal, organizational, and community benefits of participation" (Schulz, Israel, and Lantz 2003)	The extent to which participants felt they gained from the workshop	X	X	X	X
Knowledge exchange	"Social learning" (Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey 2007)	The spread of knowledge between stakeholders (including a better understanding of landowner needs by professionals)	X	X	X	X

from 12 landowners (100% response rate [RR]) and 6 professionals (86% RR) at the Oregon workshop, and from 15 landowners (80% RR), and 16 professionals (79% RR) at the Wyoming workshop.

Clarity Of/Focus on Objectives

We found mixed results related to the clarity of/focus on objectives. At the Oregon workshop, all but 1 landowner (11 of 12, 92%) felt the objectives of the workshop were clear beforehand. At the Wyoming workshop, 8 landowners (57%) reported that the objectives of the workshop were clear before the workshop, and 6 landowners (43%) felt they were not.

We observed that participants stayed focused on the workshop objectives with discussions staying on the topic of flood irrigation, or at least the larger context related to rangeland decisions. In the Oregon workshop, however, the professionals sometimes took the discussion in a different direction. For instance, 1 professional moved the conversation to the topic of agricultural zoning, asking landowners their opinions. The facilitator allowed some of these digressions to take their course for a few minutes before refocusing the discussion.

Spread of Representation

The survey of professionals indicated divergent workshop results toward the spread of representation. All but 1 professional (11 of 12, 92%) in Wyoming responded “yes” that all voices and opinions of landowners’ experiences with the issue were present. We heard the opposite in Oregon with 1 responding “yes” and 5 (83%) responding “no.” When asked whose voices were missing, professionals listed small operators and hobby farmers, less progressive producers, and those who had already converted away from flood irrigation.

While we did not measure participant demographics in the surveys, we were able to get a sense of the breadth of participants based on participant observation, the landowner diversity spreadsheet, and the transcript. In contrast to some of the written responses of some practitioners, we observed a range of operations including landowners who owned small operations of ~100 irrigated acres to those who ran large operations across multiple counties and states. Additionally, landowners in both workshops had operations where they had converted away from the flood on some of their fields.

Spread of Voices Heard

All landowners in both workshops felt they were able to openly voice their thoughts and opinions ‘always’ ($n=10$, 83% in Oregon; $n=11$, 73% in Wyoming) or “most of the time” ($n=2$, 17% in Oregon and $n=4$, 27% in Wyoming). Despite this perception of open conversation, several landowners, particularly in the Wyoming workshop, suggested that they were at times hesitant to speak up. One landowner from the Wyoming workshop wrote, “I don’t want to offer things that may be counterproductive,” and

another wrote that they were, “a little intimidated at times due to the expertise of some participants.” We observed in the Wyoming workshop, that landowners who participated in the panels spoke more than others, even during the parts of the day open to discussion among all participants. Still, we did note that the majority of the landowners contributed to the discussion. One exception was in Wyoming where the two female landowners did not speak at all, except when introducing themselves to the group. In Oregon, the one female landowner spoke throughout the workshop.

In both workshops, the facilitators specifically encouraged participation from landowners who had not spoken as much as others. After one of the Wyoming panels, but before discussion, the facilitator emphasized the importance of hearing diverse viewpoints, saying, “We really would like to hear other perspectives of the things that you heard in the panel that resonated with you or the things you feel like in your situations are a little bit different.” The facilitator again asked landowners who had not been as vocal to speak up, stating, “Who has some thoughts? Especially anybody who has not had much to say.”

Relationship Development

The majority of participants felt they formed a meaningful connection with someone new at the workshop. Landowners, in particular, felt they developed relationships; all but 1 landowner ($n=10$, 91%) in Wyoming and all but 2 landowners in Oregon responded “yes” ($n=9$, 82%) to the question about relationship building. Slightly fewer professionals felt they formed a meaningful connection in both Wyoming (“yes” $n=11$, 79%) and Oregon (“yes” $n=4$, 67%). In addition to new relationships, a few participants in Wyoming (one landowner and three professionals) commented that the workshops helped them reinforce existing relationships or put names to faces from the community. For instance, one landowner wrote that they, “re-formed old connections.” One landowner in the Little Snake indicated the workshop provided them with, “new watersheds to work with,” alluding to the expanded social network developed during the workshop.

Participant observation also revealed many preexisting relationships among landowners and professionals as they greeted each other or talked about past experiences with each other. During breaks, we observed several landowners and professionals discussing topics brought up throughout the workshops over coffee or food.

Benefit to Participants

When asked if they “got everything” they wanted out of the workshop, the majority of participants felt they benefitted from the workshop with no landowners disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. Most landowners “agreed” ($n=11$, 85% in Oregon; $n=8$, 47% in Wyoming) or “strongly agreed” ($n=1$, 8% in Oregon; $n=4$, 24% in Wyoming) with the statement, and a few responded “neither” ($n=1$, 8% in Oregon; $n=3$, 18% in Wyoming). In both workshops, landowners felt the event was worth their time, with several specifically mentioning appreciation of being heard. One landowner wrote, “You were here to listen and not tell us.” Multiple landowners

mentioned gaining knowledge and different perspectives on water and conservation issues, such as stating that the workshop, “broadened my perspective on flood irrigation benefits and water issues generally.” Similarly, conservation professionals frequently commented on gaining a, “deeper understanding of landowner perspective on flood irrigation.” Only one landowner responded that the workshop was not worth their time, commenting, “too much meeting, more boots.”

Landowners also voiced during the workshop that they benefited from and were satisfied with the workshop. For instance, at the Oregon workshop, one landowner explained, “This is extremely important what is being done here today and thank you guys [researchers and professionals] for setting up the opportunity.”

Knowledge Exchange

In both workshops, all but 1 professional either “agreed” ($n = 12$, 55%) or “strongly agreed” ($n = 9$, 41%) that they gained, “a better understanding of what landowners are concerned about” and a, “deeper understanding of the threats to flood irrigation,” with only one professional responding “neither.” Examples included learning about, “issues being dealt with by landowners” and, “a better understanding of landowner needs and interests.” One professional specifically responded that they learned, “the perceived threats to flood irrigation are different than conservationists believe.” Overall, similar to our “benefit to participants” findings, both landowners and professionals expressed a broadening of perspectives and awareness from the experiences of other participants. For instance, a landowner in Wyoming responded that they, “learned about other flood irrigation scenarios other than my own or my community’s” and a professional in Oregon wrote that the workshops, “give a very candid opportunity to hear first-hand how they (landowners) feel and what things they are worried about.”

In line with survey findings, we observed the interactive format of the workshop promoted knowledge exchange. Participants appreciated the opportunity to be heard and have a conversation. One landowner said during the Oregon workshop, “I think it is important to do what you guys are doing in this situation, which is coming and discussing these things because the more education you have, the easier it is to fight those battles.”

We observed that professionals and landowners were interested in learning from each other throughout the day. Particularly in the Oregon workshop, professionals asked questions of the landowners such as what they thought of potential conservation programs and policies. Some landowners also seemed interested in learning from professionals as they called on their scientific expertise, such as related to the availability of data on the amount of hay forage consumed by birds.

Discussion and Recommendations

While participatory research methods have been touted for their mutual benefits to participants and organizers alike (Williams, Shelley, and Sussman 2009) there remains a need to empirically evaluate how well these processes achieve their aims (Blackstock, Kelly, and Horsey 2007). We evaluated the degree to which participants felt engaged by

a participatory method, landowner-listening workshops, and reflected on the capacity of these workshops to serve as a participatory research approach in the realm of private lands conservation. We found that the workshops offer advantages for all participants, allowing space for professionals to hear about landowner needs and space for landowners to share their stories with professionals and each other. Landowners appreciated being listened to and having the chance to communicate with others. Our findings suggest the need for and importance of participatory research to inform policy and programs for landowners.

Landowner-listening workshops are particularly advantageous because of their unique emphasis on providing a venue for landowners to have their voices heard by conservation professionals. With respect to private lands conservation, our findings suggest there are benefits from having professionals present while emphasizing that landowners are the primary participants. The resulting knowledge exchange and relationship development are mutually beneficial for all involved and likely increase the depth and nuance of information gathered by researchers (Mueller et al. 2010). Gaining insight into locally relevant information is critical for designing programs and policy for private landowners applicable to their needs and interests (Sorice and Donlan 2015). Fostering these benefits to participants can also enhance participant buy-in (Williams, Shelley, and Sussman 2009).

Our results also suggest several limitations of the landowner-listening workshop, with some likely due to the unique collaboration of researchers and local partners in planning and implementing the workshops. For instance, some professionals, particularly in the Oregon workshop, felt certain voices and opinions were missing from the conversation. Having local professionals determine who to invite to the workshops may have limited the spread of representation as they may be more familiar with landowners more likely to be involved with conservation or hold particular viewpoints despite efforts to invite diverse participation. Relying on professionals' familiarity with the area and landowners may provide an efficient means for recruiting participants, especially when researchers are unfamiliar with the area, but future workshops might consider more exhaustive efforts to ensure inclusive participation. Most qualitative researchers will be familiar with similar challenges that complicate focus group recruitment, where those most passionate about an issue are most likely to participate (Hennink, 2007). Since the goal of landowner-listening workshops as a qualitative method is not to produce results generalizable to the population-level, this limitation should be noted but does not diminish the workshop value.

Similarly, ceding partial control to partners for workshop preparation led to different approaches for recruitment between workshops which may have impacted results, but was also an important part of co-production (Lemos et al. 2018). In Oregon and Colorado, partners invited specific landowners directly, whereas in Wyoming partners sent the invitation to a broader list of Wyoming landowners they had interacted with previously without personal invites. This difference in recruitment method might explain the more diverse representation in Wyoming. Divergent recruitment methods also help explain the higher attendance in Wyoming, a result of local partners inviting more participants than the researchers recommended (based on the ideal size for all being able to engage in the discussion). Higher attendance alone may have itself

bolstered representation. Allowing local partners to lead the invitation process may also cause confusion with respect to workshop objectives, depending on the recruitment approach. Maintaining recruitment and participant preparations consistent across all prospective participants, as in traditional research processes, is not always possible with co-production, as local partners may not prioritize consistency of research protocols in the same way researchers do. Balancing the role of the researcher in participatory processes can be a challenge and is often highly fluid and dependent on the situation (Dickson and Green 2001). It may be more effective in the future application of landowner-listening workshops for researchers to be more involved in the recruitment process, rather than placing this responsibility in the hands of local partners.

Relatedly, participatory research methods such as the landowner-listening workshop can overlook important, yet nuanced, social complexities and power dynamics amongst participants (Long et al. 2016). Social complexities may have been at play in our workshops, reducing the “spread of voices heard” if more “powerful” landowners in the community participated disproportionately. Any existing power differentials could have been exacerbated by our format of panels which may have empowered panelists to speak more than others. Panels are typically a part of landowner-listening workshops, used to kickstart the conversation and encourage other landowners to engage in discussions. We requested that local partners identify panelists who would offer a diversity of perspectives before relinquishing the floor to others. However, it is possible that the panels had the opposite effect, inadvertently suppressing the participation of some of the non-panelist landowners in attendance. Given our observation that the landowners on the panels tended to speak more than non-panel participants, we recommend that the value and potential drawbacks of panels be carefully considered before using them in the future. Additionally, incorporating other formats of workshop facilitation such as small groups and around-the-table sharing may ensure more voices are heard.

The workshops were also a learning process for us, the researchers. While we are experienced in co-producing research with conservation professionals, this approach took that to a new level in applying a method suggested by our conservation colleagues. It had added complexity in engaging conservation professionals in essentially observing the data collection with landowners, and, in doing so, they also became study subjects rather than simply the landowners. Yet, this unique attribute of the process also resulted in great benefits; as we interpreted project findings with them for our primary research objectives about landowners’ experiences with flood irrigation (Sketch, Dayer, and Metcalf [Forthcoming](#)) they were able to share their own insights from being present to hear the thoughts of landowners. Further, this was our first experience in relinquishing control to a local facilitator to guide a conversation to gather our data, which was challenging at times as we fought the urge to redirect the conversation. Yet, we saw the benefits of the participants feeling comfortable with the local facilitators and very open with their thoughts as they might not have been with us as outsiders.

Landowner-listening workshops offer promise for gaining insight into landowner perceptions of private lands conservation. Based on our findings, we recommend their use, particularly when there is a need for landowner voices to be heard by conservation professionals and there are local conservation professionals and landowners eager to partner with researchers to additionally document the insights. To further understand their

potential, we recommend continued evaluation of landowner-listening workshops. Our research only applied the workshops to one natural resource management issue (flood irrigation) and did not include a counterfactual as a comparison (Centre for Research on Impact 2018). Future research could involve diverse communities as well as a comparison of the method to other qualitative research approaches. Future evaluation could benefit from post-workshop interviews of participants to gain deeper insight into the achievement of workshop objectives. Our research here provides the foundation for future evaluations and applications of landowner-listening workshops within the realm of natural resource participatory research.

Notes

1. Available upon request.
2. Available upon request

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