

An Experience in John Day, Oregon—The Need for USGS Agenda-less Science in Collaborative Partnerships

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The purpose of this write-up is to briefly relate an experience that I had recently in John Day, Oregon, as a science instructor in the BLM Partnership Series Course entitled ‘Community-based Partnerships & Ecosystems’. It may show my naiveté, and I suggest that it is a naiveté shared by many USGS scientists. The story that I will relate has two points—the need for ‘agenda-less’ science is great, and collaborative problem solving is an important framework in which science can contribute to the solution of societal problems. We scientists at the USGS may take our impartiality for granted because we are surrounded by it on a day-to-day basis, or perhaps because we don’t realize that our immersion in a world of impartiality is not the normal experience for some segments of our society.

By way of background, John Day is a small town in eastern Oregon in which the main source of income has been from logging in the Malheur National Forest. The forest has essentially been closed to timbering since 1992. The Forest Service requested the BLM class on partnerships that I was a part of (as a science instructor), and we arrived in John Day with some apprehension. Feedback to BLM from preliminary readings of the ‘mood’ of the community was that we were likely to encounter considerable hostility. It’s what we’ve all heard about—the government blamed for cutting people off from their livelihoods, environmentalists viewed with suspicion, an us-vs.-them sense in the community. We started the class the first day, and from a cursory look around the room, the body language alone was enough to confirm our fears. The other instructors, who have experience with this kind of situation, began the class. When the instructors attempted to engage the ‘class’ in discussion, the participants provided ‘input’ that was emotionally charged and challenging to deal with. Near the end of the first day, we decided to regroup somewhat and set aside an hour for ‘guided venting’. We felt that people needed to be heard, rather than instructed. We left that first day somewhat discouraged, and some of the class participants indicated that they didn’t plan to return the next morning. The Forest Supervisor was concerned. Things were not going well. We all regrouped that evening and talked about it, and decided to see what the morning brought (not having another choice!)

On the second day, the participants returned, and seemed a little more open to what they were hearing. Anyone familiar with meetings such as this might dismiss the first day’s hostility as the need to ‘storm’, before settling down to ‘norm’ and then ‘perform’. That probably was a factor, but recurrent themes expressed by the citizens were ‘gridlock’ and ‘frustration’. As we listened to their story, it became clear that they had made several attempts to work with the Forest Service to reopen the forest, recognizing that old practices were no longer viable. They tried to build consensus for a plan, and each time, a single environmentalist would take legal action to stop a plan agreed to by most.

The instructors started to make some progress on the second day. Mid-morning on the second day, I gave the science presentation. As instructors, we have been asked to make the course 'interactive' when possible, and I usually start my presentation with the question "What do you think of when you hear the word 'scientist'?" I write the answers on a flip chart, and then work those perceptions into my presentation, referring back to them often. Typically, the answers tend toward images of 'laboratories' or 'test tubes' or 'white coats', and the idea of remote, introverted geeks is one that elicits chuckles from the participants. John Day was different. The first person to raise his hand was the owner of the lumber mill. He couldn't wait for me to call on him so that he could say loudly and firmly: "Falsification of data!" It stopped me momentarily in my tracks, but I said 'OK' and wrote it on the flip chart. Then, another voice shouted out "Agenda!" It went on in this vein for quite some time. A few people offered words such as 'objective' but someone would shout "at least they *should* be!" and everyone nodded in agreement. I made a joke about them being a tough crowd and proceeded with my presentation, which emphasized the need for scientists to offer their insights when asked to come to the table but not to be advocates of a certain position. I stressed the issues of uncertainty and the wisdom of adaptive management given the uncertainty associated with scientific conclusions. The class is about partnerships, and the science component is consistent with the philosophy of the course. During the course of the talk, I saw a lot of heads nodding in agreement. Having been a USGS geologist for 27 years, it didn't strike me that I was saying anything particularly profound, but it was a welcome message.

The true 'transformation' took place during the rest of that day, and the next. The other instructors deserve enormous credit for the transformation that occurred in the community. By the end, a professional facilitator who lives in the community and knows the personalities, the issues, the economic deprivation suffered in the town, and the sense of hopelessness that had taken root, told us that 'a major transformation has occurred in this community because of this course'. It was palpable. It had been suggested to the community in the course of the class that they needed to keep trying to bring the environmentalists to the table, in spite of their past experiences. One member of the community said "You know, we have environmentalists in our own town, but we're now so hostile to environmentalists that they won't step forward and admit it! We need to make it safe to be an environmentalist in this town."

At the end of the third day, after a number of group exercises that help people discover the experience of collaborative problem solving, the group passed around a 'talking stick' and each person was invited to say anything they wanted. One man admitted that he had been raised a rancher and had learned to 'take care of himself', not to 'depend on anyone', and that 'if you want something done right, do it yourself'. He realized, in the course of the last few days, that these were not necessarily attributes that were best suited to working in a collaborative effort, and that he had learned something very valuable. When the talking stick was passed to the Forest Supervisor, she couldn't keep the tears at bay. A man with calloused hands passed her the Kleenex, and everyone understood the sentiments she expressed--her mixture of frustration over the past, and sense of hope for the future.

People stayed longer than normal to complete the ‘ceremony’ and a sense of hope had replaced the total despair from a few days earlier. After the ‘talking stick’ ceremony was over, people lingered. The owner of the mill walked over to me and apologized for his hostile comment the second day when I had asked for images of scientists during my science presentation. I assured him that I appreciated the honesty of his answer, because that reflected his experience. It helped me to know that.

The Forest Supervisor approached me, gave me a Forest Service pin and said, “You were awesome—you joked with us, you listened to us, you weren’t hostile to us—this has never happened here before.” I realized that I took for granted being a USGS scientist, because this wasn’t about me, it was about the USGS. Many a USGS scientist could have gone to John Day in my stead and enjoyed the same reception. The lesson—science has something to offer, but not all the answers. Moreover, ‘agenda-less science’ is not the norm for citizens who have experiences like those in John Day, Oregon.

The other lesson I learned is the power of collaborative problem solving approaches. They are powerful. They are also being embraced more and more by those tired of the legal wrangling that so often results in gridlock and either-or solutions. In this report of my experience in John Day, I’ve left out many details and anecdotes that would add nuance to the story. Transformations can take place. They still have much work before them, and it won’t be easy, but these are people not used to having things come easily to them. They have asked to have us back. The head of the BLM Partnership Series, Charles Preglar, sent an email to all of the instructors, with the following message:

... I want to add my personal thanks to all who had a hand (on site or at home) with this delivery. We had a lot of things at stake in this "roll of the dice" (although I was betting on the "house") and I am extremely pleased with all reports so far. We have now been to:

- Tonopah, NV (Nye County)
- Boise, ID (Owyhee County)
- Socorro, NM (w/ Catron County folks)
- and now John Day, OR (Grant County)

If there are any tougher communities in the U.S., bring them on!

John Day is one community where we will definitely follow up...perhaps with efforts much like Elko.

Great job all!

I saw democracy at work, with the possibility of USGS science being a full partner in collaboration with those seeking solutions to vexing societal problems.