Engage Stakeholders

Engage multiple stakeholders and interest groups in wetland management and restoration project decisionmaking

Effective and appropriate stakeholder engagement is a commonly recommended best practice for many sectors, and is no less important for adapting wetland restoration and conservation to climatic changes and effects. There are multiple reasons for its importance for climate-related wetland work. Different stakeholders and interest groups often have differing or even conflicting goals and objectives that can lead to challenges in making wetland management and restoration decisions. Some view wetlands as essential habitat, while others view wetlands as obstacles to agricultural, urban or other development. Given the politicized nature of discussions around climate change and the breadth of information and misinformation that permeates the media, bringing climate change into the mix can exacerbate or elevate these differences. Appropriate engagement of stakeholders can increase overall support and decrease the likelihood that projects will be sidetracked by unaddressed conflict. Funders should include stakeholder engagement as a criterion in grant requirements.

Stakeholder engagement vs. outreach

Engagement is a two-way information flow involving getting information from stakeholders and incorporating that information into the project. In contrast, outreach is more limited to delivering information to stakeholders and does not entail the same level of stakeholder involvement.

Goals for stakeholder engagement can vary significantly among projects. They may include gathering information that can inform project work, such as sociopolitical context or cultural values that can refine project scope and focus; bringing additional skills, funding or other resources to the project; and conducting outreach to build support for the project and/or climate adaptation, in general. Practices for engagement vary depending on goals. Stakeholder engagement processes range from detailed engagement in all project tasks from planning to monitoring, review and audit; or it might focus on engagement at specific intervals during project implementation. Common engagement activities include regular conference calls and meetings or field trips to develop or periodically review documents or field-level activities. Designing these activities with a specific focus on involving stakeholders is critical. Using interactive tools such as maps, instant polling technology, small group activities and interactive GIS applications can increase the likelihood of meaningful engagement. The approach must be tailored to the audience and budget.

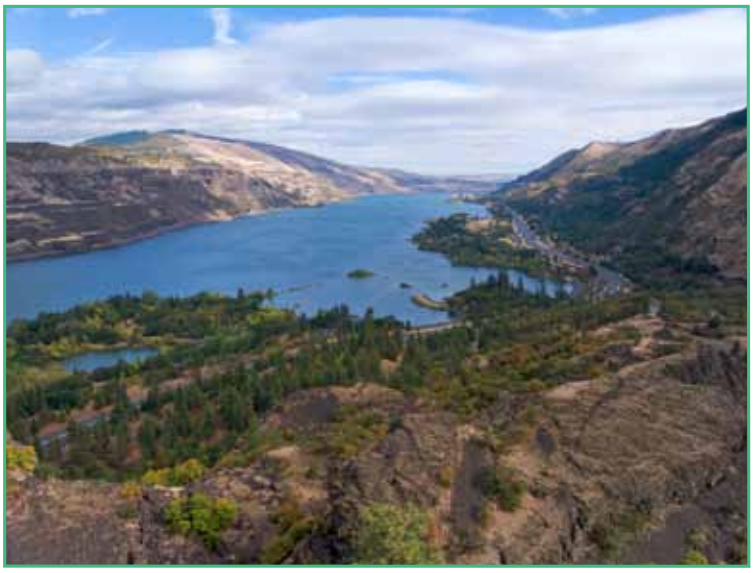
The key to success is engaging the right people at the right time in the right ways. Goals and objectives for stakeholder engagement must be clear, articulating who needs to be involved and why (i.e., the type of organization being represented and the skills and abilities they are expected to bring to the project). The project managers must make a compelling case for why the stakeholders should be involved, what will be expected of them, and what they can expect to get out of the project. With people's busy schedules, it is important not to underestimate the need to clearly articulate the benefits stakeholders will get from engaging in the project. In some cases, a project should be designed to provide funding for travel or to

otherwise compensate stakeholders for their engagement in the project. This is especially important to do for key stakeholders whose involvement is critical to project success but who are reluctant about being involved. Project managers with good group facilitation skills will ensure that there is an appropriate balance among types of stakeholders and level of engagement so that, overall, the engagement process achieves the goals identified.

If a decision or planning process is likely to be contentious, sufficient and skilled support in facilitation, consensus decisionmaking and collaborative problem solving must be provided. The need for such skills should be factored into project planning and budgeting. In some cases, these sorts of expertise may be more important than expertise in climate science. In all cases, stakeholder input must be captured in such a way that it can be reviewed and referenced throughout the project process.

Case Example | Community-Based Adaptation in the Columbia Basin

In 2008, the Columbia Basin Trust, a group formed to enhance social, economic and environmental wellbeing in the Canadian portion of the Columbia River Basin, established its Communities Adapting to Climate Change Initiative (CACCI). That same year, Elkford, British Columbia, a community dependent on coal mining and logging, was revising its official community plan and agreed to be one of the pilot communities. The CACCI team discussed regional climate change impacts with council and district staff, and the group identified six areas on which to focus community engagement based on their knowledge of what mattered to the community. These were wildfires, flooding/landslides, snow, water availability, ecosystem change and diseases/pests.



Columbia River, Washington State, United States

The project team then developed a three-pronged approach for community engagement. The first involved a formal community meeting at which they set up 15 stations around the room, each focused on a different topic or climate impact. They even had a station addressing the question of whether climate change is real, since they knew many community members were doubtful. This format allowed attendees to spend time on topics that mattered to them and to engage in back-and-forth dialog with experts rather than simply sitting and listening to presentations.

The second engagement approach was for members of the project's community advisory committee to host less formal "coffee table" sessions where CACCI staff spoke about adaptation, the community plan, and attendees' ideas and opinions.

The third approach involved project consultants setting up booths in public places such as the Post Office or the mall. This involved the least commitment on the part of stakeholders, and allowed project staff to reach and interact with people who might not have the time or motivation to attend special events.

Based on input from stakeholder engagement, the project team narrowed the original six priority topics down to three (wildfires, flooding/stormwater management, and water supply) on which they focused for the more formal vulnerability assessment and adaptation planning activities that ultimately informed Elkford's revised community plan.

Challenges and Benefits

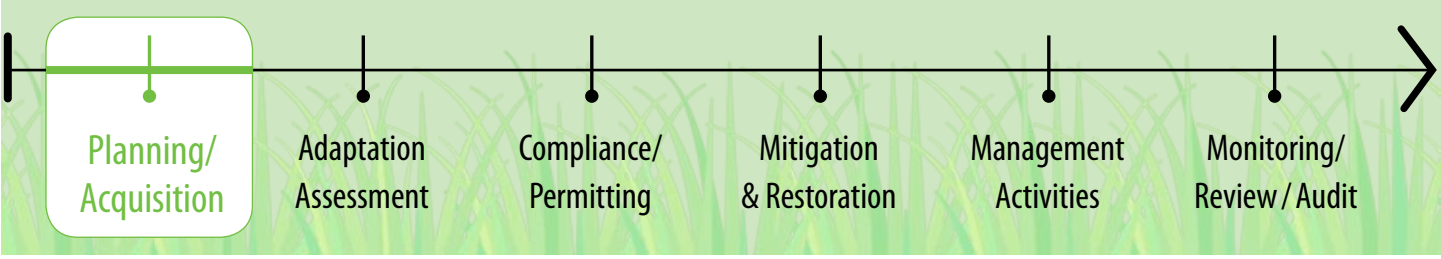
Good engagement can create a sense of trust and community that builds social and political support for the project and thereby enables long-term success. It can bring in time, skills, funding and information that may not otherwise have been available, and can help to identify and avoid pitfalls. It sends a message that stakeholders are important to the project, adds local expertise, and facilitates the ability to link the project with existing efforts.

However, pulling stakeholders together and engaging them in a meaningful way requires a large time investment, even when done through conference calls, webinars, virtual focus groups or other remote engagement methods. For contentious projects, just creating enough trust to bring different stakeholder groups into the same room can take significant time and energy and require dedicated resources for facilitation or collaborative decisionmaking. The consequences of not investing appropriate time and attention to stakeholder engagement should not be ignored, however: poorly executed engagement can undermine a project's success even if the technical work is well done.

Who should implement the practice?

Any organization implementing a wetland adaptation project should implement some level of stakeholder engagement.

When should this practice happen?



Tools and Resources

Columbia Basin Trust Adapting to Climate Change | The Communities Adapting to Climate Change section has links to detailed case studies from each CACCI community, as well as adaptation reports, videos and resources. | **www.cbt.org/Initiatives/Climate_Change/?Adapting_to_Climate_Change**

EcoAdapt's Great Lakes Climate Adaptation Toolkit | Includes tips for communicating about climate change as well as several case studies featuring strong stakeholder engagement components (including the Elkford story). | **ecoadapt.org/programs/awareness-to-action/freshwater-future-great-lakes-toolkit**

NOAA's Stakeholder Engagement Strategies for Participatory Mapping | Highlights how to target stakeholder engagement for particular needs. | **www.csc.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/_/pdf/participatory-mapping.pdf**

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: Introduction to Stakeholder Participation | This guidance document covers best practices for planning, implementing and evaluating stakeholder engagement. | **www.csc.noaa.gov/digitalcoast/publications/stakeholder**

Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making | This book from the National Academy Press provides a detailed look at the challenges, benefits, practice and context of public participation in environmental decisions. | **books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12434**

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