

MANAGING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ITERATIVE PROCESS DESIGN AND FACILITATION: A UNIQUE ROLE FOR SOCIAL LEARNING RESEARCH

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Addressing complex environmental problems demands approaches that transcend multiple disciplines and span various scales of inquiry. Much research and practice to date explores ways to make the problem-solving space inclusive and transparent in order to develop solutions that are more holistic and relevant to stakeholders. Emergent from these studies and experiences are innovations in methods, strategies, and processes to guide successful integration of stakeholder input into environmental problem solving. We contribute to this evolving body of literature and argue for combining social learning research with adaptive process design and management. We suggest a new practice of continuous monitoring, documentation, and collaborative reflection for fine-tuning stakeholder engagement and facilitation. Such adjustments encourage deeper communication and balanced participation to elicit input and build dialog across a diversity of project team members. The Floridan Aquifer Collaborative Engagement for Sustainability (FACETS) project brings together teams of bio-physical and social scientists from across the southeastern US with stakeholders representing farming, forestry, local government, and conservation in a participatory modeling process. Together, project participants develop and examine future pathways and tradeoffs associated with ensuring economically sustainable agriculture and silviculture in North Florida and South Georgia while also protecting water quantity and quality of the Floridan Aquifer. This paper discusses the theoretical framework and methods of the social science and process management team (composed of anthropologists and professional facilitators). We highlight the opportunities and challenges associated with creating, managing, and maintaining an engaged group of stakeholders and scientists navigating a participatory modeling process.