

Listening to Neglected Voices



American Indian Perspectives on Natural Resource Management

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ABSTRACT

Forestry agencies must ensure that the views of all citizens in our increasingly diverse society are included in decisionmaking. But gaining clear insights into the perspectives of ethnic and minority communities is often difficult. This article summarizes an analysis of news articles about resource management issues written by American Indians and published in Indian newspapers and finds ways in which their attitudes differ from those of many other Americans—particularly in the importance of spiritual values and the validity of traditional knowledge. The news stories also indicate a deep lack of trust in land management agencies. This approach—analyzing perspectives on natural resource management as expressed in a community's own words—can be used to learn about the attitudes of other minority populations. Managers who know how all their constituents think about natural resources will better understand the social context in which decisions need to be made.

Keywords: communication; diversity; Native American; spiritual values; traditional knowledge

The communities served by public forestry agencies are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Demographic trends in the United States point to a steady increase in the proportion of nonwhite populations. Several studies have shown that racial and ethnic communities often differ in their environmental attitudes and values, concern for certain environmental problems, participation rates in outdoor recreation, and levels of environmental activism (e.g., Jostad et al. 1996; Pfister and Ewert 1996; Mohai and Bryant 1998). An impor-

tant challenge for forest management agencies is responding to an increasingly diverse society in ways that ensure that the views of all citizens are included in management and policy.

But gaining clear insights into the environmental perspectives of ethnic and minority communities is often difficult for forest managers, policymakers, and researchers who are not part of these communities. Differences in traditions, social mores, and language create obstacles to communication and understanding, and histories of exploitation often create profound dis-

trust of government institutions and their representatives. Social science methods used to obtain information about the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the dominant culture often are inappropriate and ineffective when used in the context of racial and ethnic communities (McAvoy et al. 2000). For example, mail surveys are widely used in social science research but have usually not been successful with American Indians.

This study provides an example of one approach to overcome these obstacles: analyzing the perspectives of American Indians on natural resource management as expressed in their own words. This article summarizes the findings of a content analysis of news articles about resource management issues written by American Indians and published in Indian newspapers and magazines. Unlike most social science methods for analyzing attitudes and values—such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups—this approach is unobtrusive and not burdensome to community members. The idea is to give forest policymakers and managers a new window into the attitudes, beliefs, and values of a particular minority



community as a first step in building bridges of understanding and communication across diverse worldviews.

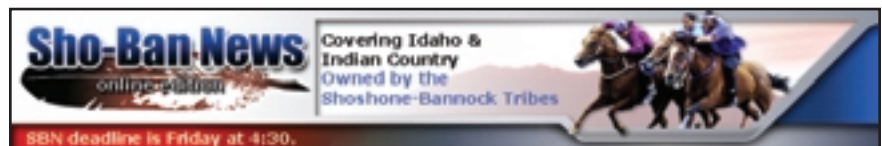
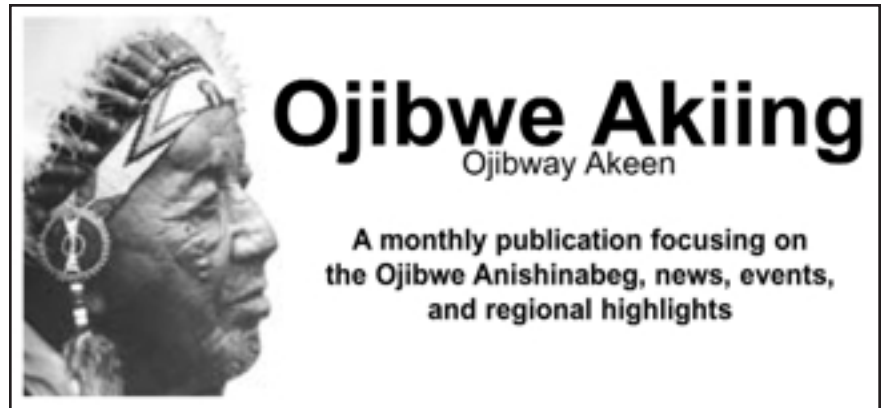
The following section describes the data and methodology used in this study. Major themes that emerged from analysis of the database of American Indian news stories are presented next, followed by a discussion of the implications for forest managers and policymakers.

Data and Methods

The data used in this study were news stories about natural resource management from American Indian news publications. Stories were downloaded from the Ethnic NewsWatch commercial online database (see www.slinfo.com), which includes newspapers, magazines, and journals of the ethnic, minority, and native press. The database currently includes more than 800,000 full-text articles from 240 publications representing a diversity of racial and ethnic communities, including 25 American Indian news publications. These 25 publications represent a cross-section of major American Indian news sources.

The search command used to identify stories was as follows: “(natural resource) w/10 manag!,” where the exclamation point meant that any trailing letters were permitted (e.g., managing, comanagement) and the term “w/10” meant that the words “natural resource” had to be found within 10 words of “manag!” Using this search command, 383 stories from American Indian news sources were found, and the full text from all stories was downloaded for analysis. These stories were originally published from March 27, 1991, through October 9, 2002.

The “open coding” method of qualitative content analysis was used to identify major themes in the text, an



approach that is well suited to capture rich themes and uncover unanticipated issues. Briefly, this method involves a process of repeated and careful reading of the text, developing an outline of recurring themes, and cross-referencing each theme back to the original text. Only themes that were expressed repeatedly across different articles and news sources were included. See Strauss and Corbin (1998) for details on the open coding method.

Major Themes

Several distinct themes emerged from our database of American Indian news stories. These themes were in sharp contrast to issues and themes typically emphasized in mainstream discussions of natural resource management (e.g., papers in Bengston 2000). Major themes included the importance of traditional knowledge,

spiritual values, environmental justice and racism, and ecosystem management. Additional important themes included the link between tribal sovereignty and management of natural resources, the importance of subsistence uses, and economic benefits and values. Each of these themes is briefly discussed and illustrated with quotations from the American Indian news stories.

Traditional knowledge. The importance of traditional or indigenous knowledge about natural resources, reflecting a different epistemological perspective or “way of knowing,” was frequently discussed in Indian news articles. Scientific knowledge and expertise are also discussed and valued as a valid source of knowledge. But the emphasis on traditional ecological knowledge and its importance for natural resource management is striking,

as in the following example, in which a tribal biologist discussed a plant identification project:

"Botanists are still trying to figure out the possible medicinal properties of some of the native plants, but the tribal members already know because their people had been using them for thousands of years. And they were tremendous ecosystem managers," he said. "Because they relied on natural resources for their lives, they knew more about the process than scientists do today." (Hone 1994, p. 2)

A related theme is the importance of integrating traditional knowledge with scientific and technical knowledge. These two sources of knowledge are viewed as complementary, not conflicting. For example, in the context of a discussion about Native youth who were pursuing resource management careers, the question was asked,

Who better to integrate the best that western science and village elders have to offer than our own people, taking care of our own lands?" (*Tundra Times* 1995, p. 2)

Spiritual values. Spiritual values of forests have been defined in many ways. Adamowicz et al. (1998) note that spiritual or sacred values help identify what natural objects, management practices, and places are revered or considered taboo. Such values are sacrosanct and nonnegotiable. The importance of spiritual values of nature was a dominant theme expressed in our database. As illustrated in the following example, lack of trust of government agencies to protect sacred sites and values was also often expressed:

[Navajo Nation President Peterson Zah] said it was ironic that during the Persian Gulf War the US government was careful not to destroy religious sites of its enemy Iraq, but has not protected the religious sites of its own indigenous people. (*Fort Apache Scout* 1994, p. 1)

In addition to frequent discussion of spiritual values of nature, stories in our database often emphasized that these values are integrated with and inseparable from other values, such as subsistence and commercial uses of

natural resources. For example, the following quotation is taken from a story about the rejection by the Minnesota House of Representatives of a compromise bill to settle the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe's treaty rights for fishing and hunting:

Spring spearing is not a sport for the Indian people. It is a spiritual act. It is as sacred to the Indian people as Easter is to Christians. (Spector 1993, p. 45)

Environmental justice and racism. Environmental justice and racism were prominent themes in our database of Indian news stories. In the context of this discussion, a deep-seated lack of trust between Indians and organizations that are part of the dominant culture is often a central part of the discourse, as in the following example:

Because of political power, undesirable facilities are more often placed in native communities or economically depressed areas. Why would a group trust anybody who would expose them to involuntary risk? (*Sho-Ban News* 1996, p. 1)

Discussions of issues related to environmental justice frequently refer to instances of economic injustice in which Indian resources have been stolen or purchased for unfair compensation. Past and present inequities are often mentioned:

[The Bureau of Indian Affairs'] mandate was to get the land back into production, and it's never happened. It's sad. There's sad, sad stories. Some of the best virgin old growth in the world came off the reservation, and the land owners—my grandmother, Dave's grandmother—were given pennies. (*Indian Country Today* 1994, p. 5)

Ecosystem or holistic management. Ecosystem management was adopted by many state and federal forest agencies in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is a relatively new approach to natural resource management for these agencies. But a similarly holistic, ecosystem-based approach has long been used by American Indians to manage the land and resources they traditionally depended on

for their survival. This theme was often expressed, as in this excerpt:

Many tribes are focused on promoting healthy ecosystems...Tribes have been managing ecosystems for thousands of years. We see our neighbors being overwhelmed by endless debates over the merits and method of ecosystem management. We know what needs to be done, and we can do it. (*Fort Apache Scout* 1997, p. 3)

Additional themes. A wide range of additional but less frequently discussed themes also emerged from our analysis. For example, the link between tribal management of natural resources and tribal sovereignty was consistently expressed with great conviction. The autonomy and very survival of Indian nations are viewed as inextricably linked to the control and management of natural resources. Another theme was the importance of subsistence uses of forests (e.g., gathering food and firewood). Subsistence uses and products were frequently mentioned as vital economic and cultural resources. This discussion often also included explanations of the spiritual and religious dimensions of subsistence resources.

Finally, appreciation of the economic benefits and values of natural resource management was a consistent theme in the Indian news stories we analyzed. This discussion often focused on conventional economic benefits, such as the jobs and income generated by timber and other commodities. But it sometimes included a fundamentally different set of priorities for commercial economic activities. For example, the following quotation is taken from a discussion of economic development strategies for tribes:

[An Indian economic development expert] said the most important thing for them to remember is that they're part of a spiritual biosphere made up of spirituality, language, tradition, air and water, and they must never do anything in their economic design to corrode it. (Hone 1993, p. 1)

Discussion

Many of the central themes and perspectives discussed in American Indian news stories about natural re-

source management are ignored or rarely mentioned in the mainstream public discourse. For example, spiritual values—the most prominent environmental values expressed in our database—are rarely addressed in the mainstream discussion of natural resources or by forestry professionals (Xu and Bengston 1997). Deeply held environmental values are typically kept separate from the professional activities and decisions of natural resource professionals, and government policies are typically based on utilitarian economic values with little or no consideration of spiritual environmental values. Forest managers who may be uncomfortable dealing with spiritual environmental values must learn to elicit and incorporate these deeper values in decisionmaking and to not discount them because they are unfamiliar. Standard economic valuation techniques are unlikely to be able to adequately take account of these values (Adamowicz et al. 1998).

The importance ascribed to traditional ecological knowledge as a legitimate and vital knowledge source is another example of the sharp contrast between American Indian perspectives and those of the dominant culture. Managers trained in scientific forest management—and implicitly in the primacy of scientific ways of knowing—need to expand their epistemological perspectives and be open to other sources of knowledge.

The prominence of expressions of concern about environmental justice and racism in the Native press points to the importance of building trust between resource management agencies and Indian communities. This will not be an easy task, given the deep-rooted lack of trust that was evident in our analysis. Long-term and ongoing commitment to the goal of building trust, communication, and cooperation will be required. An example of the product of such an effort is the Memorandum of Understanding between the Lake Superior Chippewa Indians and the

USDA Forest Service (Voigt Intertribal Task Force and USDA Forest Service 1999).

Concluding Comments

Natural resource managers and policymakers need a clearer understanding of the perspectives of underserved communities in order to manage public lands in ways that are responsive to all stakeholders. The research approach and data source described in this article offer a useful tool for building understanding between forest managers and stakeholders that can be applied to other underserved or underrepresented communities. The results can be used to inform forest managers about the unique perspectives of diverse stakeholders, helping managers and policymakers better understand the social context in which decisions need to be made and resulting in forest policies that more closely reflect the true diversity of society.

For managers who do not have access to commercial databases such as Ethnic NewsWatch, an alternative is to search the websites of local ethnic and minority newspapers. Virtually every state has a newspaper association with a website containing links to local newspapers (see the National Newspaper Association website for complete listings: www.nna.org). If local minority newspapers are unavailable online,

managers can access them the old-fashioned way, through subscriptions.

Content analysis of ethnic and minority news sources can provide a window into the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, but this is only a first step toward improving communication and building understanding. Cooperative approaches that involve development of trusting relationships between forestry professionals and stakeholder communities are essential.

It is also important to remember that there is significant variability among and within ethnic and minority communities. McAvoy et al. (2000, p. 484) note, “American Indian nations vary considerably both culturally and in situation, as do the individual communities within each nation.” Therefore, generalizations about the perspectives of particular groups and communities should be viewed cautiously.

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