

Moving ahead on social and socio-economic issues crucial for sustainable forest management

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As a social science researcher, I am happy to see *JEM* devoting a special issue to the social and socio-economic aspects of forestry in British Columbia. Together, the papers here provide a snapshot of the many threads of this fast-growing research field. The three discussion papers on the highly relevant strategic issues of criteria and indicators and trade-off modelling cover themes of global and provincial importance. The five extension notes on small forest tenures address a topic of particular relevance to British Columbia.

Practitioners and researchers generally agree that attention to social and socio-economic issues is crucial in achieving sustainable forest management (SFM). Social issues and the social sciences currently occupy a firm position on the SFM agenda as an integral component of various criteria and indicator frameworks and forest certification schemes. A social orientation also fits in well with concepts of ecosystem and adaptive management. Indeed, participatory planning and decision-making processes were initially conceived to deal with social concerns. Over the last 10 years, our understanding of many social and socio-economic issues has progressed significantly with their incorporation into the design of research and monitoring procedures, project evaluations, and participatory decision-making processes.

Serious discussions about the relevance, role, and conduct of the social sciences are now more prevalent. Such debate is healthy as it ultimately pushes the knowledge frontier, and the contributions in this issue are certainly apposite. Below, I add some personal observations to this debate—some of them are conceptual and general, some pertain more specifically to British Columbia.

Frequently, naïve assumptions assert that social and socio-economic information is of the same quality and abundance as ecological and forest information. Unfortunately, relevant basic data is often scarce, and starts with a simple enumeration of forest users, or tracks how people value natural resources other than timber and especially those not traded in markets. Collecting such data requires assured financial support and, even more importantly, decision processes in place that plan ahead to collect social data. Instead, lacking time and money, too many decision processes proceed with “the best available information,” which regrettably leads to serious discrepancies in the relative quality of ecological and social information, and does little to rectify the situation in the long term.

Criteria and indicator frameworks are frequently adopted hastily and uncritically. These frameworks should be developed in the early stages of a decision process, particularly those that might eventually involve monitoring. Instead, these frameworks frequently drive the entire decision process. This “cart before the horse” mentality severely affects the social data collected and subsequent analyses.

Existing social indicator lists are crude and their further refinement is often hampered by time constraints. As such, many indicator lists have received serious criticism. The article by Harshaw, Sheppard, and Lewis (see page 17) is an excellent contribution to this debate, and provides a strong rationale for expanding and adapting sets of indicators to regionally important land uses such as tourism and recreation.

In many cases, participatory decision processes are assumed to implicitly accommodate the relevant values represented by the various stakeholders, which frequently makes more formal value descriptions or trade-off models less attractive. However, by now, many suitable models of social decision support and trade-offs exist that, if implemented correctly, could contribute significantly to these decision-making processes. The Maness article (see page 1) is highly critical of many aspects of trade-off models, but these valuable tools should not be abandoned solely on the basis of such criticism. I would argue that we shall see an increasing need for models based both on preferences and expert opinion. For example, decision makers (i.e., those in participatory processes as well as traditional managers) will demand more objective documentation of data and relationships between data. In addition, new generations of sophisticated ecological models and simulations now ask for equivalent social behavioural inputs, which will lead to opportunities for truly integrated modelling and decision support. It is also important that process managers, decision makers, and scientists in various disciplines collaborate to formulate research questions, allowing sufficient time for this collaboration to take place in the spirit of adaptive management.

A serious debate should occur about whether criteria and indicators frameworks by themselves are sufficient to ensure that the data collected will adequately inform future decision processes, comparisons of land use alternatives, and other more integrated trade-off modelling. Comparisons might usefully be made with the socio-economic and environmental assessment processes (based on more formal models) used by several provincial agencies to assess land use planning and other natural resource management issues (see http://www.al.gov.bc.ca/clad/strategic_land/econ_analysis/seea_methods.html).

Finally, I would like to remind readers that we should not always expect the social science community to speak with one voice. Social science has traditionally encouraged several approaches, some quantitative (such as modelling) and some qualitative (such as stakeholder analysis). These approaches complement each other. It is encouraging that the research community in British Columbia increasingly recognizes the need for these complementary social science approaches in SFM. The FIA Forest Science Program (<http://www.fia-fsp.ca>), with the help of FORREX, has now identified in its long-term sustainability research strategy a diverse array of social science-related research gaps, such as socio-economic indicators, trade-off analysis tools, non-timber market values, and perceptions of stakeholders. I sincerely hope that research funds will be made available for these topics, which are of importance for the future of sustainable forestry in British Columbia.