

**INSTITUTIONALIZED COMMUNITY-BASED NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT:
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BLM RESOURCE ADVISORY COUNCILS**

CLIENT: TBD
Possibly Elena Gonzales, Department of Interior, Office of Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution
Possibly Ellen Brody, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

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PURPOSE OF STUDY: The purpose of this Master’s project is to conduct an investigation into what happens when collaborative natural resource management initiatives are institutionalized by Federal agencies. Group members will examine the Bureau of Land Management’s Resource Advisory Councils and identify challenges faced, lessons learned and pros and cons of participation from the perspective of RAC members, agency officials and affected public land user groups.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM: Federal agencies often struggle when trying to balance the conflicting demands placed on public resources. One way agencies have addressed this problem is through the creation of advisory councils. While these councils take various forms, their underlying purpose is to provide agencies with stakeholder input and an “on the ground” perspective.

In 1995, in response to this issue, then Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt established the Bureau of Land Management Resource Advisory Councils (RACs). His hope was that these collaborative groups could build consensus on contentious issues confronting the BLM. The RACs are citizen-based groups made up of representatives of environmental and conservation interests, commodity interests, and governmental and academic interests that advise the BLM on natural resource management issues from a local and regional perspective.

There are currently 24 RACs throughout the West, and despite 10 years of experience there has never been a systematic assessment of how they are faring. While there is a uniform RAC framework, the functioning and accomplishments of individual RACs in fact vary tremendously. The time is ripe to examine the range of experiences of the RACs and to assess the ‘lessons learned’ from these experiences. This assessment would benefit both the BLM, and also other

agencies at the federal, state and local level that would benefit from an understanding of what constitutes effective “advisory council” processes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What has been the experience of the BLM RACs? Can institutionalized community-based processes provide an effective avenue for federal agencies to manage conflicts?
- How do these efforts meet the needs of federal agencies and local communities?
- What are some of the lessons learned by the participants in the 10 year BLM RAC experience?
- What is the variation in *structure* and *functioning* of the 24 RACs? In the *types of issues* that they tackle? In the *types of projects* that they take on?
- What have been the *accomplishments* of the RACs, and how and why do accomplishments vary?
- What *challenges* have been encountered by the RACs? (during their establishment? in their management? by individual participants? by the agency?)
- What are the current perceptions of and attitudes towards RACs?
- How do BLM RACs and NOAA Sanctuary Advisory Councils (SACs) differ in terms of purpose, effectiveness, legal structure and participant satisfaction?

PRODUCTS OF THE RESEARCH: In addition to the requisite “Black Book,” this Master’s project will produce a variety of documents and materials. First, group members will develop a **report**, which will discuss, in depth, the selected case studies. In addition to a detailed synopsis of each RAC (or possibly SAC), this report will discuss such issues as challenges faced, lessons learned, and the pros and cons of partaking in such a collaborative effort (from a variety of perspectives). This report will also take a step back from the case studies and draw some larger conclusions about the institutionalization of collaborative processes.

Second, group members may synthesize elements of the above-mentioned report into a **guidance document** for agencies, which they can use to improve already-established collaborative endeavors and/or initiate efforts.

Third, depending on the final size and specialties of the group, this Master’s project may produce a **legal article** assessing the implications of the differences in legal structuring of the RACs and SACs. This article would be written with the hopes of being published in an environmentally-focused law journal.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE:

Research Methods: Research methodology for this project will include a literature review of both institutionalized and non-institutionalized collaborative processes and resource advisory committees. This review will serve as a foundation for understanding the challenges and accomplishments that face RACs (and possibly SACs), while highlighting their effectiveness or ineffectiveness on a case-by-case basis.

Group members will identify a yet-to-be determined number of case studies that are representative of the ten-year RAC experience. Group members will then conduct interviews with RAC (and possibly SAC) members (both current and past), BLM (and possibly NOAA) managers and officials and DOI officials. These case studies will be used for a comparative analysis.

In addition, group members may develop and distribute surveys to get a sense of how the RACs (and possibly SACs) are perceived in a broader context. Recipients of the survey could include a variety of affected public land user groups, as well as other stakeholders.

Location: The research for this Master's project will take place in several parts of the country. Group members will conduct much of the necessary literature review in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Additional research may be conducted from various locations over the summer, depending on where group members travel.

Development of any surveys will also probably take place in Ann Arbor. Depending on which case studies the group selects, group members will need to travel to several western communities to conduct on-site interviews. If group members decide to include the SACs and write a legal article, it will probably take place in Ann Arbor.

Participants and Audience: Because this project has yet to finalize its client, it is not entirely clear who will be the main participants in the project. Professor Wondolleck is optimistic, however, that Elena Gonzales and/or Ellen Brody will be interested in signing onto the project. If this is the case, then Ms. Gonzales and Ms. Brody will be the group's primary federal agency participants. They may also be able to introduce us to other key agency officials, including people from the BLM. Members of the chosen RACs (and possibly SACs) will also participate in the project through the on-site interviews. In addition, the group's survey recipients will become participants in the project.

Interested audiences for our Master's project may include:

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Department of Interior | <input type="checkbox"/> Other federal and state agencies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bureau of Land Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Public land user groups (private citizens, industry, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration | <input type="checkbox"/> Non-profit organizations |

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures: As previously discussed, this project will probably include the following data collection procedures: (1) comprehensive literature reviews, (2) surveys, and (3) on-site interviews (with a structured question set).

Treatment of Data: Group members will use the information gathered through the literature reviews, surveys, and on-site interviews to explore such issues as the challenges faced in connection with the collaborative processes, the pros and cons of participation, and lessons learned. Group members will meet often to share experiences and develop, together, a richer understanding of the issues that impact the RAC (and possibly SAC) process. Through this