

2010 EEN Forum Notes

Session Name: Response to Ecosystem Change – Case Examples of Measuring Species Recovery and Governance Response to Ecosystem Change

Speakers: H. Bruce Rinker, *North Cross School*
Glenn Page, *SustainaMetrix*

Session Date / Time: Monday, June 7, 2010 / 2:45PM – 3:45PM

Notetaker: Meaghan Malloy

Main Themes:

- Response systems should be designed for participatory citizens and governments so that they can internally carry out the plan with external guidance and support
- Complexity must be included in a response system in order to accurately reflect the world
- There must be shared methods, language and tools between those who work in the field in order to improve collaboration and knowledge transfer
- One must look to the past and future to successfully design, implement and evaluate response systems
- The Recovery Credit System (RCS) was able to engage landowners, increase competitiveness and create a market mechanism for trading credits
- RCS positively contributed to the military's goals and the Warbler's ecosystem

Detailed Notes:

Glenn Page

- Scientists have found evidence to support the idea of a new period in Earth's history. More specifically, they believe we are in the anthropogenic period, in which Earth's ecosystems are mainly influenced and significantly impacted by humans.
- The issue will be how we choose to respond to this highly unique situation, taking into account that we operate in many interdependent and complex systems.
- Purpose of a response system
 - Create shared language, methods and tools to measure and better understand ecosystem change
 - Facilitate better communication between practitioners and different site leaders
 - Improve knowledge transfer
 - Improve the quality of the design, implementation and evaluation of programs
- Process of a response system:
 - Issue identification
 - Program preparation
 - Formal funding and adoption
 - Implementation
 - Evaluation

- A response system should encompass several different ideas:
 - Improve the quality of environmental evaluations to help improve designs, plans, and implementation of programs and/or policies
 - Learn from our past and future programs' mistakes and failures
 - Create a more systematic way of thinking about ecological systems and their problems so that you can understand the dynamics of the system at every level
 - Stress global communication and collaboration to help respond to ecosystem change
 - Focus on mixed methods, inherent complexity and long-term changes
- Specific goals of a response system:
 - Analyze long-term changes in condition and use of ecosystems
 - Analyze governance structures and processes
 - Create leadership required to build community and political will
 - Strengthen facilitation, mediation, stakeholder engagement, collaboration, evaluation and public education
 - Stress a strategic design and/or improvement of stewardship initiatives
 - Design and implement monitoring and evaluation support of adaptive learning and acting
- A complete response system should look back and forward:
 - Looking Back
 - Timeline of key issues
 - Trends in key variables
 - Governance by era
 - Case studies of governance, processes and outcomes
 - Looking Forward
 - Trend projection and climate change
 - Selection of issues, goals and objectives
 - Selection of partners
 - Selection of variables to be monitored
 - Should also look at the existing government's strengths and weaknesses
- Orders of outcomes of response system
 - 1st – Enable conditions for implementation of a “Plan of Action”
 - Specific goals for target environment and societal outcomes
 - Supportive and informed constituencies and responsible government agencies
 - Required implementation capacity present within the necessary institutions
 - Commitments to provide necessary authorities with resources for implementation
 - 2nd – Implementation through behavioral change
 - 3rd – Goals for some selected environmental and associated societal conditions
 - 4th – Sustainable development

H. Bruce Rinker

- The Recovery Credit System (RCS) is an environmental mitigation tool used to offset known impacts to existing ecosystems
 - Creates a credit bank for a federal agency to benefit threatened and endangered species on non-federal lands
 - Credits are determined by weighting criteria of certain conservation units
 - Permanent habitat loss is offset by permanent credits
 - Compliance, monitoring and accounting are required through the life of the credit contracts
 - Offers incentive for a federal agency to reach out to private landowners to help conserve imperiled wildlife
 - Provides a net benefit for the species in question
- Proof of Concept
 - Process to verify that the core ideas of the specific project are functional and feasible
 - Helps to establish validity, technical issues and overall direction
 - Provides feedback for management
 - Not a scientific proof
- Goals of the third party evaluation of RCS
 - Provide an objective and thorough evaluation for both process and intended impact of the RCS on the Golden-cheeked Warbler's ecosystem around Fort Hood, Texas
 - Assess RCS's utility
- Data sources
 - Peer review panel to assess model features and species conservation
 - Successful and unsuccessful bids
 - Program documents
 - Sites
 - Landowners
 - Program operators
 - Military personnel
- Levels of Analysis
 - RCS model
 - RCS as applied to the Warbler
 - Proof of Concept at Fort Hood
- Results
 - RCS was able to create a market mechanism for trading credits, to engage landowners and to increase competitiveness
 - RCS positively contributed to the military's goals for expansion and the Warbler's ecosystem
- Potential changes to RCS
 - Establishing metrics and baselines for recovery and agency results at the onset
 - Placing greater emphasis on materially enhancing habitat and/or addressing additional recovery measures
 - Thinking actively about lengthening the credit contracts

- Creating a formal communication plan with all the stakeholders to ensure consensus and collaboration
- Criticisms of Proof of Concept
 - No comparison points for the pilot project at Fort Hood
 - Currently focuses only on short-term benefits because credit contracts are not permanent
 - Low availability of comprehensive information about enrolled sites, such as habitat information or a list of candidate species

Session Name: Navigating Evaluative Complexity in the Age of Obama

Speaker: Eleanor Chelimsky, U.S. GAO, Former Assistant Comptroller General for Program Evaluation and Methodology

Session Date / Time: Tuesday, June 8, 2010 / 9:00AM – 9:45AM

Notetaker: Meaghan Malloy

Main Themes:

- Evaluators can combat complexity by making a checklist of key external factors that they will include in their evaluation design and process
- Complexity must be implemented in the planning stage before the method and design becomes too rigid. If it can not be, set resources aside to combat them later.
- Frame the evaluation question so that it can be used to help determine the methodology of the evaluation
- Adaptation, credibility, and defensible methodology are essential for producing successful and useful evaluations
- Now is the time to improve evaluation designs and methods, as environmental legislation is a priority of the Obama administration

Detailed Themes:

- An evaluation can be divided into two parts early on:
 - General subject
 - Specific evaluation question and its design
- Reviewed four kinds of external factors associated with the general subject and created checklist items for each external factor
 - History of the field in question
 - Evolution of the subject
 - History of prior interventions associated with the subject

- Underlying theories of the interventions and the controversies associated with them
 - Past and current technological and scientific information associated with the subject
 - Federal, state and local partnerships associated with the subject
 - Status of current thinking about the subject
 - Present-day political environment
 - Known federal branch positions dealing with the subject
 - General political climate and the degree of partisanship
 - Both political parties' stances on the subject
 - Public opinion of the subject and the idea of a government intervention
 - Interviews with stakeholders, experts or others who would be particularly relevant to the subject
 - Subject-area peripheries
 - Explicit or implicit interactions between the subject and other fields of knowledge, focusing on potential policy conflicts
 - Relevant data sets
 - Relevant bureaucratic obstacles and/or interactions
 - Related areas of expertise
 - Relevant overlap of government systems or agencies
 - Lessons of past evaluation experiences
 - Past designs and subject questions
 - Past comparisons made and data collected
 - Past program challenges
 - Strengths and weaknesses of past methodology
 - Use of past findings and whether or not they were controversial
- Additional checklist items referring to the specific evaluation question:
 - Authenticity of the evaluation question
 - The purpose of the evaluation question
 - Specificity of the evaluation question
 - Obvious obstacles to the evaluation
 - Legislative and/or Executive branches' intended use of the evaluation