SOCIAL FACTORS AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

Land management authorities throughout Australia spend millions of dollars on the technical aspects of fire control, but like many other areas of land management fail to recognise the importance of social and political factors which can influence the implementation of fire management strategies. As important and difficult as the problems associated with the technical side of fire management are, social factors can nevertheless be far more important. It is of little purpose to develop a comprehensive fire management strategy for a particular area of land if the implementation of that strategy is prevented because the managers failed to take notice of social and political constraints.

Land managers usually have a training in science and consequently fail to appreciate the complexity and difficulty of first assessing the social and political factors, and then developing strategies to deal with them.

No-one can deny the legitimacy or importance of the social and political factors in fire management. Public lands are managed usually by State authorities, but on behalf of the public. Failure to recognise that the public has a role to play in determining the uses of the land which are managed on their behalf ignores the basic premise on which management of public lands is based.

Deficiencies in Our Approach to Understanding Social Factors

It must be recognised that the vast majority of the Australian public is not the least bit concerned with the approach that land management authorities take to fire management of natural ecosystems. This does not mean, however, that there is not a place for public involvement in fire management. Rightly or wrongly, a minority group in the community objects strongly to the type of fire management regimes that are currently practised by land management agencies, at least in Western Australia. Why is this so?

Divisions between technical decisions and policy decisions are not clear-cut.

One of the problems between land management and fire management in particular is that decisions regarding the impact of fire on vegetation have value and technical components which are not distinguishable. For example, in the medical profession there is a legitimate area for value judgements to be made by the general public on such questions as whether invitro-fertilisation is an appropriate method of inducing pregnancy. However, nobody in the community

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questions the techniques used by the specialised surgeon in carrying out invitro-fertilisation. In contrast, the fire manager is confronted with people in the community questioning, for example, the technical basis of spring and autumn burning. It is quite appropriate for members of the community to voice their opinion through the planning process, or through their elected members of Parliament, their desire for a particular type of vegetation in a particular area. The difficulty comes when members of the community impose, or attempt to impose, their opinions on the techniques which are used to achieve this objective.

The community has difficulty in interpreting complex scientific data.

Too often land managers ignore the complexity of the problems associated with the implementation of different fire regimes. Scientists working in a specialised area very quickly develop their own vocabulary, which makes it difficult for a non member of that scientific community to understand the rationale for different burning regimes. This problem exists even amongst people who work in associated areas; so how can we expect an ordinary member of the community to develop a rational view of a particular burning regime?

Common to both the community and members of land management agencies is an inability to look at the total picture of any particular land management practice. Consequently, the alternative lifestyle - cabin owner in the southern forest - looks only at the area surrounding his block and bewails the fact that it has to be burnt. Whereas, those who are responsible for the total area have to take cognisance of a master burning plan to protect that particular person as well as other members of the community.

A separation exists between those who are making decisions and the people responsible for implementing them.

One of the difficulties that land managers face, and particularly those associated with fire management, is that members of the community who desire to influence the fire management policies do not have to bear the consequences of that decision. For example, it is relatively easy for members of an advisory committee giving advice on development of a fire regime for a national park to make decisions which they perceive are designed to favour the conservation of flora and fauna without regard to the consequences of that policy on the safety of recreators in the same park.

There is a lack of trust.

One of the principal reasons for divisions between members of the community and those responsible for implementing fire management strategies is an historic lack of trust between the bureaucrats and the community. This polarisation is evident, not only between the State authorities and community groups, but between different groups of farmers and between farmers and increasingly alternative lifestyle people who move into rural areas.

Solutions

There is no magic format for resolution of the problems between the community's opinion of fire management regimes and those who are responsible for managing our public lands and imposing those regimes. There are, however, a few basic approaches which can be used.

Recognition of the importance and inevitability of public involvement

Many fire managers have failed to recognise that it is inevitable that the public will be increasingly involved in determining fire management policies. In the past, it has been possible to carry out whatever burning regime is perceived to be necessary without reference to the public. Those days are gone. It is important that we recognise the public will be involved and develop techniques to handle that public involvement.

Communication

Given the inevitability of public involvement in determining fire management policies, it is important that scientists and fire managers inform the public of the reasons why the type of fire regime is being imposed. Too often we devote ourselves, in the case of scientists, to the production of scientific publications which are read by relatively few, or fail to communicate at all to community groups. Communication is a difficult and complex process because there are many different types of groups that are interested in fire management, varying on the one hand from farmers, and on the other to conservation groups. This means that we must use as many avenues of communication as possible and not be afraid to repeat our message over and over again.

Objectives and policies

It is important that the objectives and policies of the Government are clearly defined. For example, it is the responsibility of government to determine, in the extreme situation, whether in fact life and property has a lower priority than conservation values.

Involving the public

One of the most important management techniques is to ensure that those who are involved in formulating policy have ownership of that policy. This technique ensures that:

(a) The community accepts some responsibility for the types of policies that they require. For example, in the case of a national park, if an advisory committee insists on a burning strategy which does involve some risk to human life, their tendency to take the extreme position will be modified.

(b) The very process of involvement of the public reduces the polarisation which underlies much of the antagonism concerning our burning policies.

Finally, I believe that it is possible to develop burning regimes which accommodate most of the requirements of the general community. However, it is also important for the community to recognise that accommodating the community requirements involves a cost.

Managers, in recognition of this, must give it an appropriate priority and at the same time ensure that the community clearly informs the ultimate arbiters, the Government, that it does cost more but that it does want the additional degree of sophistication brought with it.