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# A Look Inside the Dynamics of Trust: A Guide for Managers

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# A Look Inside the Dynamics of Trust: A Guide for Managers

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**Abstract**—In the United States, federal public land managers are tasked with serving as stewards of land, but also as stewards of the relationships that people have with the land. By assessing the public's trust in the actions of land managers, insight can be gained into how good of a job managers are doing. This paper outlines a number of factors that influence the public's trust in managing agencies, and provides suggestions for monitoring the level of trust. The authors suggest that any efforts to increase the public's trust require the general attentiveness of land managers.

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To view interactions that occur between agencies managing public wildlands and the public as simple transactions is, we believe, an insufficient approach to meeting the legislative mandate that makes federal agencies stewards of public resources. In addition to serving as stewards of public land, agencies also serve as stewards of the relationships that people have with those lands (Watson and Borrie, 2006). Through their actions as managers, agencies simultaneously impact an area's ecological, economic, and social values, impacting how people are able to relate to the land. Negative impacts on these values lead to a weakening relationship stakeholders have with the land, while a positive action strengthens the ties they have to the land. Thus, the strength of the relationship between the agency and the public can be used to monitor the degree to which those values are impacted.

People value public land for a variety of reasons (Borrie and others 2002), and managers, therefore, need to consider the wide range of relationships people have with it when making management decisions. Considering those relationships, agencies need to understand the variation in the public's commitment to the land, their sense of social responsibility and public values, and their level of trust in agencies making stewardship decisions (Watson and Borrie, 2006). While it is impossible to know which of those three, if any, is more

important than the others, the remainder of this paper is limited in scope to the lattermost of the attitudes, trust.

## Why Is Trust Important? \_\_\_\_\_

Officials, managers, researchers, and the public have begun to recognize how important it is for agencies to maintain a high degree of public trust in their management. In the U.S., federal agencies from the Department of Energy to the Forest Service recognize the importance of maintaining this public trust (Devlin 2001; SEAB 1993), with Forest Service officials commenting that they “really want the [agency] to be a highly valued, highly respected, trustworthy organization” (Devlin 2001), and referring to specific legislation as an “opportunity to build trust” (Devlin 2003). These agencies realize the essential roles that trust plays in their everyday operation.

Because of the checks and balances of the American governance system, numerous opportunities and methods exist for members of the public to delay or block federal projects. However, when the public fully trusts stewardship agencies, there is a decreased likelihood of their opposition to projects, and they grant managers more leeway in their actions and decisions, making it easier for managers to do their job. Trust serves as an indicator of whether or not managers are effective as stewards of the land and the relationships people have with it. The public grants rights of operation to all government agencies, and without trust, they operate with weakened mandate and support (Watson and Borrie, 2006). Thus, it is important for agency representatives at all levels to put effort into building and maintaining the public's trust in their management.

## Building and Maintaining Trust \_\_\_\_\_

For wildland managers who seek to increase the level of trust the public has in their stewardship, there are no simple, easy solutions that can be rapidly implemented. The public's trust is fragile and must be allowed to develop slowly (Levi 1998). If the public perceives a few significant mistakes in the management of their lands, trust that was built over the course of months, years, or decades can be eroded almost instantaneously. Trust is based on the public's perceptions of managers, as well as their actions and the manner in which they relate to the public (Liljeblad 2005, 2006). Behaviors that impact any of these influences have the potential to significantly alter the public's level of trust in stewardship agencies. Considering the implications that management has on people's relationships with land needs to

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be common, and should come as second nature—something that isn't thought about, but done instinctively.

## What to Consider When Seeking to Build Trust

When attempting to build trust for land stewardship agencies by the public, there are a number of conditions that are essential for managers to concern themselves with. The more conditions managers are able to meet, the more the public will likely trust them as stewards. While it may still be possible for managers to retain the public's trust without meeting a few of the criteria listed below, it behooves managers to attempt to meet all of them (Liljebld 2005).

- Agencies need to have and maintain a high degree of mutual understanding with the public, being certain that the public agrees on the objectives, process, and outcomes of management activities (Johnson 1999; SEAB 1993), as well as on standards of information used (SEAB 1993).
- It is important that managers ensure their interactions with the public are conducted with a high degree of integrity, honesty, morality, and good character (SEAB 1993; Shepard and Sherman 1998).
- The public must perceive managers to be sufficiently competent to understand the scientific and organizational challenges facing land management (SEAB 1993; Shepard and Sherman 1998).
- Stakeholders need to have a sense of ownership in natural resource decisionmaking, with a collective sense of involvement in the development, outcome, and impacts of management decisions (Lachapelle and McCool 2005). Managers need to allow for more equal roles with the public in defining terms of the relationship among parties (Levi 1998; SEAB 1993).
- Agency managers must be worthy of the public's pride, suggesting members of the public have a reasonably high level of regard and respect for them (Citrin and Muste 1999; SEAB 1993).
- Managers need to be attentive and responsive to the impacts that their interactions have on the public, ensuring to the best extent that they are not unduly burdened or impacted by management decisions (Citrin and Muste 1999; SEAB 1993).
- Managers also need to understand the implications that their actions have on the longevity of their relationship with the public (SEAB 1993), and be aware of the impacts that interactions with outside parties or influences can have on that relationship (Peters and others 1997).
- Managers need to ensure they behave in a reliable manner, consistently doing what they agreed to do or are expected to do (SEAB 1993; Shepard and Sherman 1998), to ensure to the best extent possible that they have a track record as effective land stewards (Citrin and Muste 1999; Kramer 1999; SEAB 1993).

If agencies are able to effectively meet these conditions, in both the eyes of managers and of stakeholders, then there is a reasonably good chance that they have managed to increase the public's trust in their stewardship. It is crucial

that managers do not simply use the identified conditions of trust as a checklist. How the public perceives each is important, and can seriously impact *how much* the public trusts managers and *what* they trust them to do. If, for example, managers believe they are responding to the impacts their actions have on the stakeholders, but are unaware that the stakeholders do not consider management response to be adequate, trust will likely not be gained.

To be most effective, trust needs to be continually monitored in order to ensure that managers are aware of the impact their actions have on stakeholders. Formal assessments of public trust levels can be conducted (see for example, Liljebld 2005). Measures often allow managers to compare empirical assessments of the strength of their relationship with the public to some baseline trust level—or to establish a baseline. These formal measures, however, should not be the only type of evaluation conducted. It is important that managers frequently assess the public's trust informally. A number of informal assessments could be used but most simply, it involves reflecting on one's actions as an agency representative and asking, "Am I being an effective steward of the land, *and* of the relationships that the public has with those lands? If so, how? If not, why?" By considering the influences of public trust, managers can rapidly, easily, and economically shed insight into their effectiveness as stewards.

## Conclusion

Because agencies have an obligation to maintain the relationships people have with land, it is important that managers pay attention to how their actions influence that relationship. Monitoring the public's trust in their actions, both formally and informally is one way of assessing how good of a job agencies are doing at attending to those relationships. This paper has presented a number of criteria that influence trust for managers to consider when making management decisions. However, simply considering the criteria is not enough to affect the public's trust in stewardship agencies. To increase trust, they need to be integrated holistically into the actions of managers, through their general mindfulness and consideration of how their decisions impact people's relationship with the land.

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