

The Methodology of Understanding Land Use in Central West NL

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Background

In 2010 the Grand Falls-Windsor - Baie Verte - Harbour Breton Regional Council identified two priorities for community-based research : community engagement and land use planning. In early 2011 the Council initiated a research partnership with lead researcher, Dr. Kelly Vodden, Memorial University to investigate past experiences with community engagement in the region and innovative approaches that might be undertaken in the future. A multi-year research agenda was envisioned and in 2012 lessons learned about community engagement were employed to initiate a dialogue on land use and land use planning in the region. The provincial municipal association (Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador) joined the project partnership.



Figure 1. Map of Central West Region. Source: Rural Secretariat

Research Objectives

- Undertake an evaluation of current issues surrounding land use planning in the region and, more broadly, within Newfoundland and Labrador
- Use innovative community engagement techniques to engage communities within the region to identify, prioritize and discuss potential solutions for on-going or potential land use issues
- Work to engage groups that are not currently engaged in decision-making processes that affect them and their interests

Methodology

A **multi-prong approach** was employed to gain understanding of land use issues, planning, values, and management. Methods included reviewing regional and provincial land use documents to assemble a scan of land use issues and planning context, interviewing key informants, conducting group engagement sessions (youth and joint mayors councils), compiling case studies from other jurisdictions, and creating a project website that included an online survey and mapping tool.

Key Informant Interviews

We asked representatives from municipal and provincial government, industry, conservation groups and residents a series of questions in a semi-structured interview. This permitted individual interpretation of the questions and engaged a variety of stakeholders in a discussion on land use topics. The interviews helped shape the online survey questions and provided detailed accounts of land planning and management practices, as well as the range of values placed on particular areas and land-based activities. However, making contact with appropriate representatives from industry and government, and drawing generalized conclusions from individual accounts were challenges experienced.

Engagement Sessions

Two types of engagement sessions were carried out. **Joint Mayors Councils** provided access to key local stakeholders and allowed them to discuss the issues with both each other and researchers. Youth engagement sessions were held in collaboration with **Community Youth Network** groups. They involved a discussion of what the youth liked about their community and region and what vision they had for the area. A contest was created that encouraged youth to submit a photo of their favourite place in town with a description of why they liked it to a project Facebook page (see Figure 2).

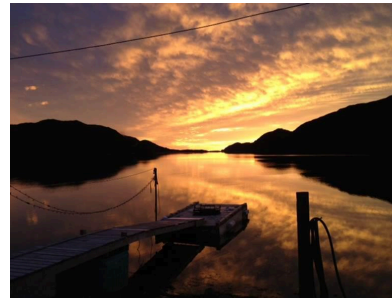


Figure 2. Photo submitted by youth from Harbour Breton with caption : This is a beautiful, peaceful place This is my favorite spot because although it's so close to civilization, it's secluded enough to feel you are in your own world."

Learning from other Jurisdictions

The Geography 3350 – Community and Regional Planning and Development class worked to compile case studies from other jurisdictions for the project. The purpose was to look for innovative ways that other regions have dealt with issues found in the Central West region.

Online Survey and Mapping Tool

Innovative use of a project webpage was a key component of engaging residents in this research. Residents from all over the region were encouraged through email, local contacts and media to browse background content, fill out an online survey, and try out an online mapping tool. The survey was used to gauge residents' feelings toward land management and how they valued different types of land uses. An interactive online mapping tool allowed residents to plot points and discuss why each was important (e.g. areas of conflict or that should be conserved)



Figures 3 & 4. Facebook logo and screenshot of online mapping tool (from www.cwlanduse.ca)

For project results visit
www.cwlanduse.ca

Challenges

The project was successful in engaging stakeholders in various ways and provided valuable information on land use planning and management in the region, however we encountered challenges that should be taken into account for future similar research. Allocating adequate time to receive feedback from all partners and give full consideration to potential implications and recommendations proved difficult due to extensive engagement and a one year project timeframe. Second, promoting the online component of the project to inform residents of its purpose and encourage participation required more effort than anticipated. Use of the online mapping tool was limited.

Conclusions

Community engagement in research is challenging, but also tremendously rewarding. The opportunity to engage residents to contribute to research that directly affects them is crucial in understanding issues and creating effective solutions. Attention to lessons learned from experience can enhance these benefits.