

## **Abstract**

The fieldwork that I conducted with support from the Community Forestry Research Pre-dissertation Fellowship was part of *Little Tennessee Perspectives*, a community-based research initiative designed to engage residents of Macon County, North Carolina in an inclusive, informed, and ongoing public dialogue about the future of their landscape. The project, carried out during 2004 and 2005, tests the premise that community-based conservation and planning campaigns will be more successful if they reflect an appreciation of local ecological *discourses*—ways in which members of a given community talk about the environment and articulate their relationship with it (Fiske 1989, Cantrill and Oravec 1996). Community members, my research partner Carla, and I conducted fifty interviews with Macon residents, from which we created an audio-visual documentary entitled *Macon County Voices*. The documentary and accompanying landscape change information were presented back to the community in a series of public meetings during August 2005. The presentations were followed by facilitated discussions that enabled all meeting attendees to formulate their own visions for the county's future. This participatory process empowered community members to address landscape-scale issues by keeping the conversation grounded in shared values that they and their fellow citizens had identified. While previous public planning initiatives in Macon County succumbed to rancorous debate, this process elicited overwhelmingly positive responses from the community. The meetings have stimulated interest in land-use planning within the county: the planning board and a citizen coalition are currently discussing options for protecting cherished forests, views, floodplains, and farmland.

## **Research Problem and Goal**

The Southern Appalachian landscape of Macon County is ecologically and culturally rich. The county is seventy-four percent forested, with forty-two percent of its land area falling within the Nantahala National Forest (LTLT 2003). The Little Tennessee River, which winds through the center of the county, still harbors its complete suite of native fish species, including three endangered species (LTWA 2003). People, too, have derived sustenance and enjoyment from this landscape for millennia (LTLT 2004).

Both the local landscape and community are being transformed, however, by growth of unprecedented proportions. Macon County's population increased by 33.5 percent between 1990 and 2003 (US Census 2004). Development, mostly low-density residential, is driven by interstate migration of retirees and second-home buyers: 43% of property parcels are now owned by out-of-state residents (Macon County Tax Department 2005). Farmland and forests alike are becoming fragmented and diminished—as of 2002, forest land in the county had declined nine percent from 1990 levels (LTLT 2003).

In the face of such rapid change, land-use planning has become a highly contentious issue. Heated, even violent, controversy has surrounded all planning initiatives. At the same time, Macon citizens of all backgrounds express a profound connection with their rural landscape and a desire to see it protected. *Little Tennessee Perspectives* represents an experiment in transforming these individually-held sentiments into collective action. We tested the hypothesis that a planning process informed by local ecological *discourses* would be more meaningful to participants than prior public processes, and would initiate conversations about the landscape's future that were broadly recognized and supported by community members.

## **Participatory Research Experience**

*Little Tennessee Perspectives* has been, overall, a rewarding experience of participatory research. In order to remain focused on community values and needs, we designed an iterative, participatory research process. Each step was defined through community input, carried out by community members and/or researchers, and returned to the community for feedback. The project was conceived through conversations with concerned Macon citizens who were interested in promoting a more effective planning dialogue in the county. This advisory committee, which guided the refinement of the project goals and approach, included the County Planning Director, as well as representatives of the Planning Board and grassroots conservation and planning organizations.

Ethnographic interviewing was used to gain insight into local ecological discourses. From 2004 through 2005, fifty audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2002) of Macon residents were completed. Some of the interviews were conducted by six interested community members whom we trained; Carla and I conducted others. We selected interviewees through a snowball sampling approach (Bernard 2002), contacting those who were recommended by their peers as having valuable perspectives on the Macon landscape. We made sure that our interviewees varied in age, gender, and location within the county, as well as including both locals and in-migrants.

These interviews became the basis of an audio-visual documentary about community values and the changing landscape: *Macon County Voices*. Using Atlas/ti software, I analyzed the transcribed interviews for emergent themes. We organized the documentary around these themes, combining audio interview excerpts with photographs of the people and landscape to present our interpretation of the community's discourses on the environment, community, and change. Guided by interviewees' concerns, Carla gathered and analyzed data on key land-use and demographic changes in the county. We refined the documentary and data presentation through input from five focus groups.

We presented the documentary and trend data back to community audiences during August 2005 both to get feedback on our analyses and to stimulate a public discussion. At four of these meetings, a deliberative democracy-style facilitated discussion followed the presentation (Smith 2003). In order to avoid the grandstanding that has typically characterized public meetings in Macon County, we divided the attendees into small discussion groups, each of which was facilitated by a trained community member. These groups each came up with their own visions for the county's future, which were then shared with the larger group and compiled. In this way, we ensured that all attendees were able to contribute ideas. Reactions to the meetings were captured with evaluation forms.

## **Preliminary Findings**

Results from the public meetings suggest that our discursively-informed public process effectively engaged Macon residents in thinking together about the future of their landscape. The meetings were attended by 250 people, 170 of whom participated in the four facilitated discussions. Small group participants came up with 127 "visions for the future" of the county. Ninety-five percent of these visions called upon the community to actively engage in some kind

of planning. This is a striking contrast from previous public meetings, in which the dominant sentiments voiced have typically opposed planning measures.

Eighty-one of the discussion participants (47.6%) completed written evaluations. Of these respondents:

- 45% were born in Macon County
- 40% were women
- 22% reported that they rarely attend public meetings

A popular assumption in Macon County is that public meetings are only attended by outsiders, not locals. The proportion of native and non-native Maconians at our meetings, however, is reflective of the county population as a whole (48% of whom are natives). Attendance by residents who have rarely attended public meetings in the past indicates that new voices were attracted into the civic dialogue by our process, though even broader inclusiveness should certainly be pursued.

In evaluating the meetings,

- 99% of respondents agreed that the process was an effective way of helping people to talk about the changing landscape
- 99% agreed that the presentation was informative and relevant to local issues
- 89% agreed that the voices in the documentary were representative of viewpoints in Macon County (though the documentary included viewpoints with which most viewers strongly agreed and viewpoints with which they strongly disagreed)
- 100% agreed that the small group discussion enabled everyone to participate
- 97% agreed that their opinions were valued
- 99% reported that they were *more supportive of a having a public discussion on planning in the county as a result of having attended the meeting.*

Suggestions included shortening the overall meeting agenda and having more information available about steps other communities have taken to deal with related issues. Responses did not exhibit statistically-significant variation depending on a respondent's local/outsider status, her gender, how frequently she attended public meetings, or which of our meetings she attended.

These results support the inference that a broad range of Macon County residents are interested in developing collective approaches to managing their landscape, but that many of them have previously been deterred from voicing their concerns or participating in a public process because of the way in which those processes have been conducted and discursively framed. When planning is presented in a different, participatory way, then community discussions with positive, shared outcomes are possible.

The outcome of the public meetings partially confirms our hypothesis that a discursively-informed planning process can effectively initiate planning conversations in which community members feel represented. It remains to be seen, however, whether the narratives that emerged from the interviews and meetings prove resonant among Macon residents as a whole, rather than simply being artifacts of this particular participatory process. Some community members chose to participate in *Little Tennessee Perspectives*; others did not—why? Did the project provide our community partners and other participants with discursive resources that can help them engage the non-participants in the civic dialogue? Answers to these questions will emerge as community members and public officials work toward policy reforms in the county. I will also address these issues as I complete my dissertation research, by comparatively evaluating two community-based conservation projects in which I have been involved: *Little Tennessee*

*Perspectives* and *Perspectives on Land*, which took place in rural communities of North Carolina's Piedmont region.

### **Benefits to the Community (and Beyond)**

*Little Tennessee Perspectives* was conceived in response to a mandate from concerned Macon County citizens to initiate a more participatory, affirmative planning conversation there. According to our community partners and other community members, we have effectively begun this conversation, though it still has a long way to go. Project participants are now planning a public follow-up meeting for spring 2006, where they will explore planning tools that can be used to enact the visions articulated at the August meetings.

The project has also catalyzed greater citizen involvement in local government. All of the concerns and ideas articulated by meeting participants were delivered to the County Commissioners at a public hearing. At that hearing, many participants turned out and called upon the Commissioners to act upon the landscape-scale planning visions that had arisen from our public process. The chair of the County Planning Board has enthusiastically endorsed our work, and the board is now beginning to consider landscape-scale planning measures that respond to citizen concerns expressed in our meetings. The ongoing effect of increased citizen participation will be determined as the county government begins to consider planning measures.

All project materials are available and in circulation in Macon County, including the documentary, landscape change data, and meeting results. A project report was mailed to all participants. The project has also been covered extensively in the local media: more than 17 newspaper articles in at least six newspapers, plus several radio spots, have been devoted to the project. The editor of the local newspaper wrote me to say that "[e]veryone here in Macon County appreciates what you and Carla have done." Macon citizens from across the ideological spectrum have expressed similar appreciation for the project.

Community leaders throughout Western North Carolina have indicated interest in *Little Tennessee Perspectives* as a model for addressing inflammatory planning issues. Groups in Buncombe, Cherokee, Clay, Jackson, Swain, and Yancey counties have approached us about doing similar work in their communities. The Western NC Alliance, an Asheville non-profit, is considering supporting such initiatives throughout the region.

The *Little Tennessee Perspectives* method has the potential to facilitate community-based land-use decision-making throughout the state. This has been illustrated by the *Perspectives on Land* project, which employed a similar documentary approach in four Charlotte-area communities. More than 300 people participated in that public process, which was the subject of a museum exhibit at the Levine Museum of the New South during 2004-05. In Rowan County, a citizens' network that emerged from that project recently provided critical support for the protection of 2800 acres of treasured farmland. Finally, there is interest in pursuing a similar project on the coast through UNC's Albemarle Ecological Field Station.

*Little Tennessee Perspectives* has demonstrably impacted the land-use planning process in Macon County. It has helped to empower community members to contribute to protecting what they cherish about their forested, mountain landscape. We are interested in working with community leaders throughout our state to further refine the approach used in this project. Project participants in Macon County are looking to help other communities draw upon their local discursive resources in order to have a strong voice in the future of their communities and local environments.

## **Lessons Learned**

Through working on *Little Tennessee Perspectives*, the community partners, Carla, and I have learned lessons that will help us improve upon future participatory processes. We have identified areas for improvement before, during, and after the project.

Beforehand, it would have been a good idea to gather more systematic baseline data on the state of the community discourse on planning and community members' attitudes toward the planning process. This would have enabled us to gauge the project's effect more easily.

During the project, we should have made greater efforts to involve an ever-wider range of community members. We were successful at achieving greater inclusiveness in some ways, but we need to develop more creative strategies for reaching different populations. Doing so would require further challenging the social circles of community partners and researchers alike. Our meeting facilitation strategies also warrant some strengthening: some of the community members who facilitated discussions were under-prepared for managing disputes. Also, while the meetings designed by our project team all included facilitated discussions, other meetings that were hosted by local civic groups did not. As a result, discussion at these meetings occasionally reverted to rancorous grandstanding.

Our community partners have expressed regret at not having more concrete "next steps" in place for public meeting participants following the completion of the process. They wanted to allow initiatives to emerge organically from the participatory process, but in retrospect a more structured follow-up plan would have given participants a productive channel for their accumulated energy. The community partners are currently working on developing structured ways to continue the public conversation.

Most participants in *Little Tennessee Perspectives* have indicated that they found participating in the project rewarding. Nonetheless, the process can and should be continually improved, both in Macon County and elsewhere. In my dissertation, I will endeavor to refine criteria for designing and evaluating a discursive approach to community-based conservation and planning.

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