

Evaluating levels of perceived inclusivity and trust among stakeholders in Alaska

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Abstract

The success of conservation initiatives often depends on the inclusion of diverse stakeholder interests in the decision-making process. Yet, there is a paucity of empirical knowledge concerning the factors that explain why stakeholders do—or do not—believe they are meaningfully represented by governmental agencies. Our study provides insight into the relationship between trust and perceived inclusivity for public land management agencies and local stakeholders. Here we focus on the U.S. state of Alaska, where almost two-thirds of the land area is managed by the federal government. We used structural equation modeling to test whether four dimensions of trust (i.e., dispositional trust, trust in the federal government, shared values, and moral competency) and information sources that respondents used to learn about protected area management positively influenced perceived inclusivity. We found that residents in Alaska had limited dispositional trust, did not trust federal land management agencies, did not believe agencies shared their values pertaining to protected area management, and saw low levels of moral competency among federal employees. Moral competency, or the belief that agencies adhere to a moral code, was the primary driver of perceived inclusivity among survey respondents, indicating that agencies should focus on solving problems through deliberation and discussion around moral principles rather than by force. Information sources that were used as communication channels for professional, community-based, or environmental advocacy exchanges also influenced feelings of representation, and consequently, involvement of stakeholders in resource management decisions. These results provide a roadmap for how land management agencies can improve public relations and work toward a model of inclusive conservation around protected areas.