

Wind farm proposals: Engaging the community early and often

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Abstract:

In the past decade or more, the use of wind as an energy source has expanded rapidly. As technology improves both the size of wind turbines and the scale of wind farms has grown.

For efficiency of their energy generation, wind farms need to occupy exposed sites in the landscape. This growth in visible presence across parts of the landscape has met with strong opposition in some areas.

Wind energy is recognised as one of the more promising sources of electricity generation, capable of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and at the same time being non-polluting. Despite this, planning for wind farm development is not occurring at a political level in ways that allow wind energy to become an effective replacement for fossil fuel based energy.

As people with different values strive to have those values protected, divergent views about the visual, environmental and aesthetic impacts of wind farms have spawned major conflict in many of the communities targeted for wind farm development, and within the environment movement itself.

Clearly, wind farm proponents all have to engage with local communities at some stage in the development process. There is a considerable body of research and experience in conflict resolution and management which indicates that early engagement with all players is important in addressing values-based conflict. However, with considerable tension already existing in the debate, wind farm proponents are often keen to progress some way down the development pathway before engaging with their local communities.

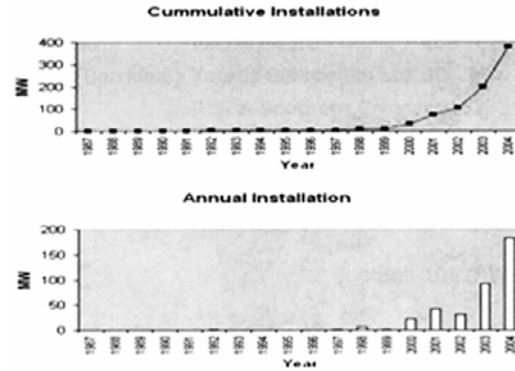
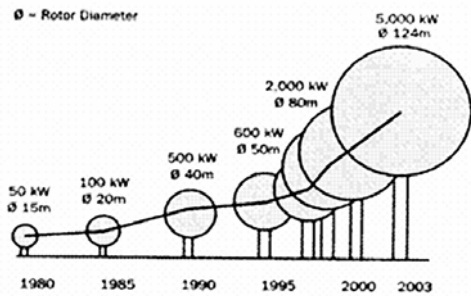
This paper, based on the authors' experience in using a Values Mapping approach to the resolution and management of major conflicts surrounding environmental and natural resource management, explores the significance of early engagement and the steps that are important in defusing hostile resistance, building and re-building trust, and gaining support in communities targeted for wind farm development.

Introduction

Growth in wind farm technology in Australia may not have been nearly as rapid as the industry needs, nor as could be anticipated from experiences in Europe. However, as the following graphs from AUWEA¹ illustrate, both the number of wind farms dotted across the landscape and the capacity of those farms has grown significantly in the past 5 to 6 years. At the beginning of 1999, total installed wind generating capacity was just over 20 megawatts (MW). By the end of 2004 thirty operating wind farms across all States and the Northern Territory provided a generating capacity of around 380MW, the total installed capacity having doubled during the previous year.

Not only has the scale of wind farms grown, but five years ago a rotor spanning 80 metres diameter was quite large, whereas now European countries regularly see 124 metre blades.

¹ AusWEA. www.auswea.com.au



From: EWEA (2002)²

From: AusWEA, www.auswea.com.au

Landscape & Visual impacts

As is widely recognised, the single most important factor in considering the location of a wind farm is the wind speed. Because each doubling of wind speed results in an 8-fold increase in energy available for capture, and thus small changes in wind speed can result in substantial changes in the performance and economy of the installation.

It is for this reason that so much initial research goes into wind forecasting and site analysis, as reflected in the papers presented at this conference.

However, this need for a reliable wind resource places wind farms in exposed and highly visible parts of the landscape, often close to the coastline, but in other cases in elevated, open farmland relatively close to inland population centres.

At the same time, these visually attractive rural landscapes, many in coastal areas, are the focus for much of Australia's 'sea change' and 'tree change' lifestyle shifts from capital cities and other major population centres.

While many people see wind farms as "interesting", "graceful" or "attractive", others see them as a blight on the landscape. In many of the places targeted for wind farm development, this latter view has spawned the formation of Landscape Guardian groups. Based in local communities, but networked across the country, these groups have formed to oppose wind farm establishment in an attempt to protect the natural landscape, aesthetics and amenity of their local areas.

Political responses

As an earlier session of this conference illustrates, State Governments are coming to terms with the policy and planning aspects of wind farm development, but governments have certainly not taken a lead in ensuring there are processes in place address the value conflicts that surround these developments.

² European Wind Energy Association (2002). Wind Energy: The Facts. Executive Summary, p.3. www.ewea.org/documents/Facts_Summary.pdf

And, as is well known to this audience, the Commonwealth has done little to foster the development of wind as a major contributor to renewable energy replacement of greenhouse-emitting fossil fuel use in energy generation.

Community engagement

AusWEA and the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO) have taken a lead in seeking to ensure that community concerns are addressed, by stressing in their Best Practice Guidelines for Implementation of Wind Energy Projects in Australia³, the importance of wide-ranging dialogue throughout the development process.

The Guidelines state

“Two way dialogue between the developer and stakeholders in the project is essential if universal approval is to be obtained. Stakeholder who should be consistently consulted include the local planning authority, the local community, local interest groups and State government officials.” (p.3)

They go on to identify a need for “a strategy for initial dialogue with local community” and “initial discussions with Native Title claimants” from the Project Feasibility stage onwards through detailed assessment, construction, operations and to eventual decommissioning of the plant.

The diversity of players involved

As the Best Practice Guidelines and other projects also identify, there is a rich diversity of legitimate interests in the development of a wind farm.

In addition to the wind farm proponents, their equipment suppliers and financiers, Local, State and Commonwealth Governments all have various interests in such projects, as do network service providers and electricity retailers.

At a more local level, landholders whose properties might provide ideal sites on which to locate a wind farm hold a key to whether or not a project will progress. For those landholders the financial returns from hosting the wind farm may provide an important boost to income from their agricultural enterprises. However, as increasingly apparent in communities where wind farms have been established or proposed, they are likely to come under considerable pressure from both supporters and opponents in the community.

The individuals who together make up a community in close proximity to a proposed wind farm may have little prior knowledge of these structures or the processes for their approval and development. Views might be quite starkly divided across the community, with vocal members from divergent perspectives fueling division among those who would prefer not to become engaged in the debate, or who might be fearful of the unknown.

Clearly, wind farm proponents all have to engage with this diversity of interests, and in particular local communities, at some stage in the development process. There is a considerable body of research and experience in conflict resolution and management which indicates that early engagement with all players is important in addressing values-based conflict. However, with tension already existing in the debate, wind farm proponents are often keen to progress some way down the development pathway before engaging with local communities.

³ AusWEA and Australian Greenhouse Office (march 2002) Best Practice Guidelines for Implementation of Wind Energy Projects in Australia. www.auswea.com.au

Building consensus: Acknowledging different values & ways of knowing

Adler and his colleagues⁴ at the US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution, have developed a very useful template from which to begin consensus-building in environmental disputes in which scientific and technical information are but one part of the picture. Although Adler et al. highlight the importance of flexibility in the process, it can broadly be described as follows.

- A. Gaining substantive knowledge – of the issues, language and terminology
- B. Undertaking pre-case consultation – key players, group and interests, and resources available to complete the work
- C. Scoping and conflict analysis – using observation, secondary sources and interviews with the parties involved
- D. Designing the process – helping parties to assess financial and time investment needed and the information required
- E. Conducting initial meetings – with clear ground rules, definition of topics involved, and learning about each other's interests
- F. Structuring and managing discussions – managing complex issues discussions and assisting the various parties to contribute equitably, identifying risk and precautions as the process progresses
- G. Assisting experts to clarify scientific and technical inputs – bridging the gaps between different types of knowledge and helping each to understand the other's perspectives
- H. Negotiating and problem solving – exploring best and worst alternatives, and negotiating commitments from the stakeholders, avoiding win/lose trade-offs and seeking shared problem solving
- I. Agreement-making and Implementation.

While Adler's process may seem lengthy and demanding to the wind farm proponent simply wanting to move ahead with a sound business investment intended to achieve good environmental outcomes, the investment made in a process such as this could well be the difference between the project proceeding or not. Such investment will almost certainly mean a more enduring acceptance by the majority in the community and may well contribute to enhanced community strength and resultant goodwill to the proponent in the longer term.

Different values

Social values are a fundamental driver of many of the decisions each of us makes and, as various authors involved in dispute resolution have shown⁵, a clash of values is often at the heart of multi-party public policy disputes.

As Watson⁶ identifies, values "capture the deeper motivations behind human behaviour, tendencies of thought and feeling – unconscious as well as conscious – and the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics related to them". Burton⁷ differentiates between needs ("universal motivations"), values ("those ideas, habits, customs and beliefs that are characteristic of particular social communities") and interests ("transitory desires") and goes on to observe that while interests are negotiable, "needs and values are not for trading".

⁴ Adler P.S., Barrett R.C., Bean M.C., Birkhoff J.E., Ozawa C.P. & Rudin E.B. Managing scientific and technical information in environmental cases. RESOLV Inc, US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution and Western Justice Center Foundation. www.resolve.org/pdfs/envir_wjc.pdf. Accessed 2001.

⁵ Elix J. (2003). Intractable environmental conflict in Australia. *Rural Society* 13(1), 87-94.

⁶ Watson B. What are Social Values. <http://erg.environics.net/> Accessed Jan 2005.

⁷ Burton J.(1990). *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention*. MacMillan, Basingstoke.

Because of the fundamental role played by individual values in conflict over wind farm siting and development, Community Solutions believes that the value held by those who are stakeholders in the process need to be made transparent and understood by others early in the process.

Different ways of knowing

The location and development of a wind farm is a classic case in which people from very divergent background and life experiences each bring to the process different values and different types of knowledge. Adler and his colleagues draw attention to the need to bring to the table in addition to scientific and technical knowledge, 'traditional' knowledge, 'cultural' knowledge, 'local' knowledge and 'remembered' knowledge. Brown⁸ in her work on linking knowledge cultures to the environment and health, describes as different ways of knowing 'local', 'local community', 'specialised', and 'organisational/strategic' knowledge and she describes these as all being necessary in order to achieve 'holistic' knowledge.

Values Mapping – a useful consensus-building tool

Values Mapping is a technique initially developed in business marketing to assist a company to define its own direction and to position itself in the marketplace. McCracken⁹ in her work on the role of values in business success, stresses the extent to which shared values help establish a share culture and create shared expectations, both within the company and as it relates to its customers.

Community Solutions has adapted this business approach to Values Mapping and combined it with Adler's consensus-building template, to provide a facilitated tool for enabling dialogue and consensus-building between stakeholders from different sectors.

Used in a diversity of different projects in which consensus-building between different sectors is required for environmental or resource management outcomes, the Values Mapping process seeks to

- Make transparent the range of values held by the various stakeholders in the project
- Improve communication between the various stakeholders, avoiding entrenched positions that might arise because of differing use of language and the values that attach to it
- Change participants' perceptions of the available alternatives and the transactional costs of them, avoiding 'win-lose' trade-offs and restoring some balance into the discussion
- Change individual perceptions of self within the community, and the personal values that attach to that perception.

As highlighted by Adler and his colleagues, flexibility is a key to the success of a Values Mapping process directed to consensus-building around a complex project such as the development of a wind farm. However, the steps involved generally include:

- Researching and understanding the issues – the history of the areas, language and values attached to it
- Identifying, contacting and gaining participation from key players from all relevant sectors
- Phone or face-to-face interviews, surveys and/or other mechanisms for identifying the issues & values attached to them
- Encouraging participation – gaining buy-in to the process

⁸ Brown V.A. (2004). Knowing: Linking the knowledge cultures of sustainability and health. In: V.A. Brown, J. Grootjans, J. Ritchie, M. Townsend G. Verrinder. Sustainability and Health: Supporting global integrity in public health. Griffith University Press, Nathan Qld.

⁹ McCracken J. (1999). Values Strategies help to unite business goals. Austin Business Journal. www.thoughtspaceinc.com/pubs/vale.html Accessed 2003).

- A site visit including
 - Small sectoral focus groups – understanding issues, reaffirming values
 - Site visits with key sectoral representatives – understanding the scientific and technical aspects & cultures involved on ground, fostering informal dialogue between key players
 - A Values Mapping Mapping workshop facilitate by a skilled facilitator able to adopt various strategies for consensus-building and agreement

Both in Adler's process and in the Values Mapping process described here, the effort invested in the initial stages of the process is critical to success. While there may be benefits in a member of the proponent team who has sound active listening skills and is able to build empathy and trust managing this stage of the process, there are also benefits in engaging a skilled outsider for this important (and often time-consuming) aspect of the work.

Glavovic and his colleagues¹⁰ have researched and written about the “consummate environmental mediator” as someone who is both ethical and effective and have described six qualities necessary to fulfil that role:

1. Advocacy for sustainable development
2. Environmental literacy, that is familiarity with the language and substance of environmental science and public policy
3. Significant life experiences
4. Commitment, integrity and trustworthiness
5. The ability to adopt different dispute resolution styles and behaviours
6. Superb planning and organizational capacity.

Where the issues involved in gaining approval for and developing a wind farm include major challenges, as many will, the resources invested in gaining this outside expertise will be resources well spent.

One important key to success in a process such as this is to engage with all key stakeholders early in the project, before positions become entrenched, suspicion develops and trust is damaged, then to continue to work with them to build trust, shared understanding and agreement on a way forward.

¹⁰ Glavovic B., Dukes .F. & Lynott J. (1997). Training and educating environmental mediators: lessons from experience in the United States. *Mediation Quarterly*, Summer 1997, p.279.