Policy Research using the
Policy Community Approach

BRWA's Approach to Policy Research and Development

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Battle River Watershed Alliance Policy Research and Development

Our approach to policy analysis and advice involves research, analysis, consultation, and synthesis of information to produce policy advice and guidelines for implementation that recognize social, economic and ecological trade-offs in an effort to ensure watershed sustainability.

Policy Community Approach

Changing or creating new policy is often a long, complex process, with many factors influencing the policy-making process. The ability to understand and effectively deal with this process is essential to impact and create policy in a manner favorable to the health and sustainability of watersheds. Individuals and organizations can impact policy to benefit community by being as knowledgeable as possible concerning the key issues associated with the policy they wish to impact. Gaining this knowledge very often requires research to understand and define the key issues the community is addressing as well as to develop constructive ideas to advance a policy action plan.

The manner in which this knowledge is collected and presented can have a large impact on the success of influencing the policy-making process. BRWA uses a Policy Community Approach to examine the interplay of interests and pressures to and from governments and other stakeholders, and layers of negotiation involved in instances of policy making.

The policy community approach is built on the premise that policy is created in decentralized and coordinated interactions between governing bodies and other societal actors. These actors form around an issue area and/or common interest while working together to shape and influence the development of policy. These include: corporate, government, public, scientific community, the media, and all other stakeholders who are involved with the policy issue. This approach examines the interplay of interests and pressures to and from governments and every layer of negotiation involved in the policy making process.

To make policy work, each actor and party provides the information and knowledge they have surrounding the issue. Above all, collaboration is crucial for policy to be effective and applicable. If applied correctly, ideally the policy community approach should inform the whole as to the values and initial ideas and concepts held about an issue.

Policy Research

To begin the policy research process, research is conducted to better understand the actors involved in the decision making process, and their position with respect to the decision being made. The process unfolds through an 11 step process.

First, a media scan is completed to help build a chronology file. A chronology file is a timeline of events, and actors involved in the decision making process. Second, separate actor files are created for each actor identified through the media scan. We next begin researching each actor, attempting to collect official documentation that describes their position with respect to the decision being made. We also attend conferences, workshops, forums or any other avenue that brings multiple parties to a common space where discussions occur regarding the decision being made. Our interest in these forums is to gather additional information and to better understand the dynamics involved in the community.

We then take stock of our findings, identify information gaps and begin a searching for information to fill those data gaps. Once we have exhausted our search, we begin a literature review to understand the science, social science and economic aspects that can influence the decision making process. Finally, we undertake interviews with various actors to more fully understand their position and current thinking regarding the decision being made. This process is outlined below.
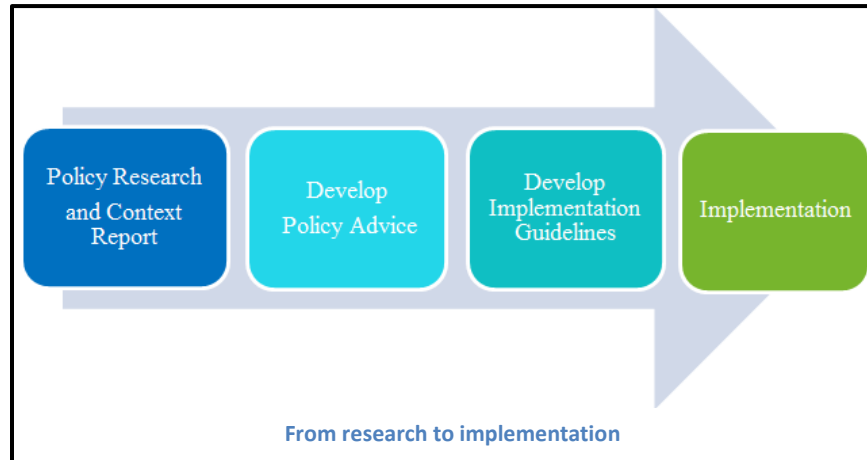
Eleven Steps in Policy Research:
1. Media Scan: identify issues, interest, dates, actors, events, reports, decisions
2. File system (i.e. spreadsheet, database)
   a) Chronological file
   b) Actor file
3. Review government documents
4. Review corporate information
5. Legal
6. International agencies
7. Public, non-governmental organizations, post-secondary institutions, other watershed planning and advisory councils, and non-profit groups.
8. Sandbox (meetings, conferences, forums, etc)
9. Take stock and fill gaps
10. Literature review
11. In-person interviews

Policy Development

Once the initial research has been done, the information is used to develop a policy context report, highlighting actors and their positions with respect to the topic. This information ranges from polices on the international scale, to local policies. The purpose of this report is to demonstrate what other people are doing and how they manage certain issues, and how to foster ideas for local application regarding similar issues.
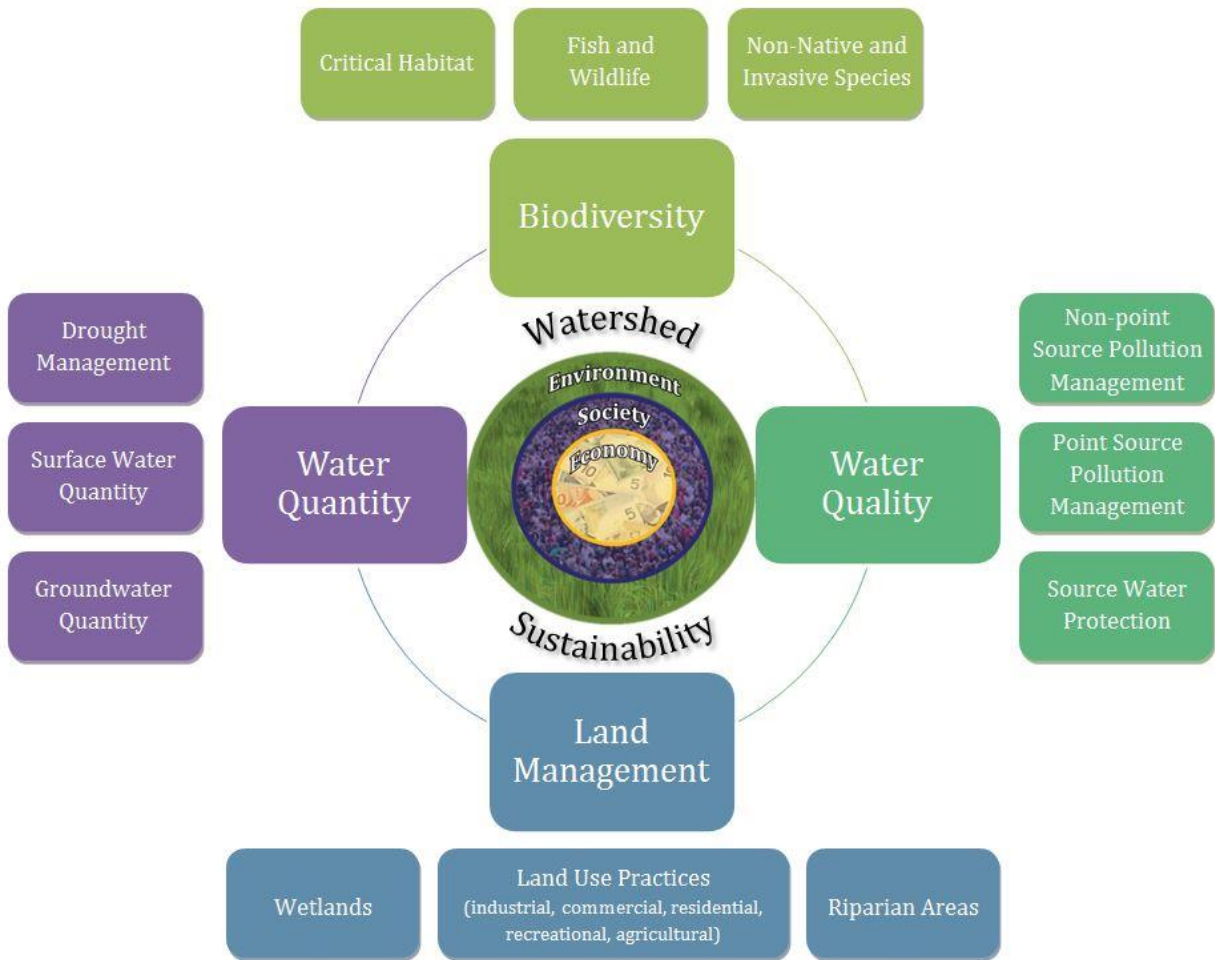
The policy context report provides a foundation for engagement with stakeholders, and begins the development of a policy advice document. The purpose of the policy advice document is to establish agreement on the general direction or 'intent' of management activities in the planning area. We then begin developing guidelines for implementation that are meant to provide the public with an implementation 'menu' that provides a variety of implementation options that the public may wish to try. We leverage science and field research from around the world to develop guidelines for implementation that align with the policy advice.

From research to implementation

Policy Implementation

Sharing the advice with the public will help to precipitate implementation guidelines, designed to provide practical means of implementation to those who wish to apply the advice. Within the guidelines, there should be opportunities for various stakeholders to implement, from individuals to governing bodies to industry.

We work with stakeholders to implement what they decide, and support them where possible. We recognize that not everything stakeholders try is going to prove affective, but by learning we can adapt approaches in the future to achieve our agreed upon policy direction. Our approach to adaptive management is considered to be an active approach that runs concurrent 'experiments' to implementation that maximizes learning opportunities for the BRWA and the stakeholders in the future. Our intention is to renew each module of the Watershed Plan on a 10 year bases from the point of completion for each component. State of the Watershed Reporting will also occur on a 10 year basis, with the next report scheduled for release in 2021.

Key Components of Watershed Management Planning in the Battle River and Sounding Creek Watersheds