

FOSCR's Experience on the Resource Advisory Committee to the Coronado National Forest: A Committee That Works

Last Tuesday, a government committee achieved what seems to be about impossible these days: it worked.

We were not a homogeneous bunch by any standard. Three “user groups” from five counties grappled with the difficult task of distributing too little grant money to too many proposed projects on the Coronado National Forest (CNF). Some were mostly concerned with preserving historical structures, while others worried about habitat or maintaining their livelihood or getting more trails on the ground.

No one talked about it, but I'm pretty sure we were not of one political mind either. I would guess we ran the gamut between Tea Party and Green Party. But we were appointed to use these funds for the future benefit of all—so, theoretically at least, our personal politics didn't matter.

Amazingly enough, they didn't. Nor did it matter which user group we belonged to, or which county we came from. In a one-day meeting, we prioritized the projects we thought were best for the Forest. We jockeyed funding between counties until our top priorities got the funding they needed. There was some negotiation, but astoundingly little real disagreement. It was an extremely cordial meeting—even, at times, actually fun.

At the end of the day, I think we all felt we'd done a good job for the CNF and our communities with the resources available. And I left with a great feeling of respect and admiration for our group, the process as well as the result.

I wish that group was running Congress these days.

Humans are a tribal species; we tend to identify “us” and “them” using the most random criteria (how we dress, for example, or what sports team we root for). Certainly the clan bond helped us in the distant past, or we wouldn't be here today. But our society has changed enormously, and this tribal thing is no longer so useful. In fact, it seems to be our undoing in these troubled times.

Just look at the Congressional members who declare that their sole reason for existence is to get someone else (or “them”) out of office. So even if that marked person was on the brink of actually saving the country, these members would move heaven and earth to stop that action, because it might mean that person would get re-elected. This sort of attitude has gone way beyond strategic, to become frankly destructive. It has stopped our federal government in its tracks, exactly at the time when we need, more than ever, to pull together as a nation.

If we can only expand our view, we will see that we are truly all in this together. As the old saying goes, “we can hang together or hang separately. ” Perhaps Congress should check out how the public interest is being served on the local

level, to see how it can happen. If our CNF committee can do it, they can do it—if they can put aside their little “us” to encompass us all.