

Building Stakeholder Trust Mechanisms for Collaborative Governance in Chinese National Parks

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Abstract: On October 13, 2021, the first phase of the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) adopted the Kunming Declaration which embodies the environmental protection principles of protecting first, preventing first, comprehensive treatment, public participation, and assuming responsibility for damage. This study explores the collaborative governance framework for stakeholders in the indigenous communities of Chinese national parks. Drawing upon stakeholder theory and trust theory, it investigates the dynamic process of trust establishment, maintenance, and influence, and embeds these mechanisms and objectives within the governance of Chinese national parks. This research proposes measures to optimize the collaborative governance environment in national park communities, providing an analytical framework for their sustainable development. It fosters cooperation among multiple stakeholders, thereby expanding the value and direction of collaborative governance within Chinese national park communities.

Keywords: National Parks; Communities; Stakeholders; Trust Mechanisms; Collaborative Governance

1. Introduction

In January 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission, along with 10 other departments, approved the Pilot Plan for the Construction of the National Park System (hereinafter referred to as the "Plan"). The plan primarily targets five areas: enhancing ecological protection, implementing unified and standardized management, clarifying

resource

ownership, innovating business management, and fostering community development. In October 2017, the Chinese central government officially approved the establishment of a national space development and protection system in a report. The conference called for strengthening support policies for major functional areas and establishing a nature reserve system with national parks as the core component. The establishment of the national park system is a significant indication of innovation in regional governance in China. The construction of national parks spans a wide range of areas and involves complex interests, and has become a focal point of academic discussion [1].

Currently, issues raised by residents from indigenous communities within national parks revolve around their representation in the reform and governance of the national park system, potential infringements on their rights, the risk of abuse of governmental and institutional power, livelihood security, and threats to their primary sources of income [2]. On the other hand, how to balance the fundamental characteristics of national park communities, promote tourism development, cultural preservation, and collective interests, is a challenge faced by national park managers. In the face of the rising awareness of community residents' rights [1], they also endeavor to harmonize the demands of community residents with those of other stakeholders.

Current research on Chinese national parks mainly focuses on environmental protection, ecological governance, heritage protection, institutional construction, and learning by doing [3]. Few studies have delved into the intricate and multifaceted stakeholder

dynamics in the process of national park system reform. Therefore, this study aims to construct an explanatory framework for stakeholder trust governance in Chinese national parks, promote collaborative governance of national parks, and offer recommendations for national park governance.

However, conflicts frequently occur with indigenous community residents during the process of formulating and implementing national park policies. These conflicts usually arise from forced alterations made to local land and natural resources for park protection, differences in land ownership, disparities in the economic benefits of park tourism, and their distribution among local community residents. These contradictions have led to conflicts in China's national parks, posing obstacles to the coordinated governance of national parks and the construction of national park legislation policies [2]. To address these challenges, it is necessary to establish a joint management mechanism to facilitate the spatial development and conservation of nature reserves and national parks, ensuring the interests of local communities. The key to solving the above problems lies in establishing a trust based policy environment among all stakeholders. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is to explore how trust mechanisms influence the establishment of collaborative governance systems among stakeholders in national parks. The research of this paper is based on three concepts: stakeholders, trust, and collaborative governance. The authors propose that in the governance of indigenous communities within national parks, trust mechanisms are crucial for establishing collaborative management among diverse stakeholders. This is the primary objective of this study. The following outlines the concept and analytical framework developed by the authors in this study.

2. Stakeholder Concept and National Park Stakeholder Concept Framework

2.1 Concept of Stakeholders

Since the concept of stakeholder theory was first proposed in 1963, stakeholder theory has been developed rapidly and widely recognized. According to Freeman and

Phillips, stakeholder theory has had a profound impact not only in ethics, corporate strategy, economics, and organizational theory, but also in fields such as law and political economy [4].

According to the conceptual framework proposed by Freeman, the concept of stakeholders can be divided into broad sense and narrow sense: the broad sense of stakeholders refers to "any individual or group that affects the realization of corporate goals, or can be affected by the process of corporate goals." [5]; The narrow concept is based on the standpoint of the enterprise to define stakeholders as "groups and individuals that the enterprise must rely on in order to survive". When it comes to the governance of indigenous communities in national parks, those individuals and groups that affect the realization of the goals of coordinated development between communities and national parks can be described as stakeholders in a broad sense. The groups and individuals on which the development of indigenous communities in national parks depend can be called stakeholders in a narrow sense.

2.2 Stakeholder Framework in National Park Governance

In the process of national park indigenous community governance, multiple stakeholders are involved. The authors assert that the stakeholders involved in the indigenous communities of China's national parks include: local governments, the National Park Administration, franchises and other enterprises, community residents, and NGOs.

Among them, the local government and the National Park Service, as representatives of public interests, fulfill the role of ecosystem protection and the responsibility of supervision. As natural resources owned by the whole people, national parks are owned by the central government or by provincial governments; local governments where national parks are located are responsible for local comprehensive coordination and supervision; the National Park Administration directly exercises its management responsibilities. The central and local governments coordinate management, and each department at each level performs

its duties.

Franchising and other enterprises, as representatives of market participants, should develop in line with the positioning and protection needs of national parks, and undertake corresponding social responsibilities. For enterprises that do not damage the ecological system and conform to the positioning plan of the national park, they should compensate for the consumption of ecological products on the basis of following the market operation rules.

As stakeholders, community residents and NGOs should have their interests and opinions incorporated into the policy process. On the one hand, reduce the impact on the life and production of indigenous community residents, while improving their employment opportunities and income levels; on the other hand, we must incorporate NGOs into the construction of the national park system, and give full play to their professional, supervisory and voluntary advantages. And play a guiding, communicating and coordinating role among the various subjects. The above-mentioned stakeholders jointly participate in the construction of national parks through the establishment of a collaborative governance network, and finally form a sustainable national park system. As shown in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1. National Park Stakeholder Collaborative Governance Network

3. Concept and Framework of Trust Mechanism

3.1 Concept of Trust Mechanism

The trust mechanism refers to the relationship between various stakeholders and elements in the organizational environment, as well as the relationship lubrication mechanism between

the various subjects or elements that affect the mutual trust relationship [6]. It can be considered that the trust mechanism refers to the functional mechanism of trust. Among national park stakeholders, the trust mechanism is mainly reflected in the role of increasing the possibility of transactions and reducing transaction costs. During this process, the reform of the national park system has been carried out smoothly. Klijnet pointed out that trust, respect and reciprocity are the premise and foundation of governance: (1) trust can reduce transaction costs and risks; (2) increase the enthusiasm of stakeholders for resource investment; (3) reduce uncertainty Sexual opportunistic behavior stimulates innovative actions [7].

3.2 Trust Mechanism Framework in National Park Governance

When it comes to establishing trust in governance, it can be divided into two main categories: trust generated by governance performance results and trust stemming from the policy-making process. In terms of governance performance, scholars such as Bouckaert argue that governments can gain public trust through effective governance [8]. Christensen and Lægreid also believe that governments can earn public support or trust in policies by demonstrating competence through administrative structures, policy rules, and civil servant systems [9]. Some macro-level external conditions, such as sustaining economic growth and maintaining low unemployment rates, further contribute to bolstering government performance. Wright suggested in his research that fostering economic growth and creating economic opportunities would enhance public trust in governance policies.

Li discussed the insights of other scholars, including Volcker, pointing out that one reason for public distrust in governance policies is the overall low performance evaluation of such policies [10]. He posits that result-oriented trust is rooted in public satisfaction and trust in governance policies, based on the benefits they derive from government services and policies.

The opinions of these scholars suggest that trust in governance mainly hinges on two factors. The first is trust built on governance outcomes, emphasizing government policy

evaluation, effectiveness, moral standards, relative deprivation, and life satisfaction, thereby establishing public trust in governance policies based on performance. The second factor involves core values in the policy development process, including reliability, responsiveness, openness, participation, integrity, fairness, interaction, and collaboration [11]. Stakeholders assess governance policies against these values to determine whether they are trustworthy and whether they are motivated to engage in collaborative governance of national parks.

The role of trust in public governance is evident from multiple sources. In this study, creating a trust system serves as the bridge between stakeholders in the national park community and acts as a vital factor in promoting collaborative governance. The theoretical framework for the trust mechanism in this paper is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

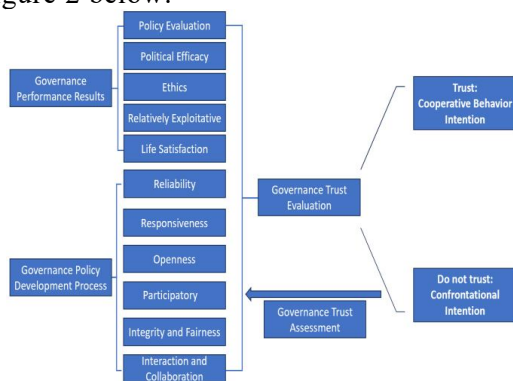


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework of Trust Mechanism

4. Conceptual Framework of Collaborative Governance

4.1 Concept of Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance is a kind of collective behavior. To some extent, the collaborative governance process is the process of formulating action rules recognized by various actors. In the process of collaborative governance, trust and cooperation are the basis of good governance [12]. The importance of this rule is like the order parameter in synergy. This rule determines the quality of governance results and also affects the formation of a balanced governance structure. In this process, government organizations may not be in a dominant position, but as the final decision

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maker of rules, the intention of government organizations largely affects the formulation of rules [13]. In the process of formulating rules, competition and collaboration among various organizations is the key to the final formation of rules.

In a sense, the birth of collaborative governance theory stems from there-examination of governance theory. The relevant theories and analytical methods of synergetics provide the knowledge base and methodological inspiration for this inspection. Here, this article borrows the term "Synergetic Governance" to indicate there-examination of governance theory in this article. Because the core feature of governance theory is "synergy" (competition and collaboration) [14], the term "synergy governance" can just reflect the complex core characteristics of the governance of indigenous communities in national parks. In a word, collaborative governance is the process of seeking an effective governance structure. Although the competition among various organizations in the indigenous communities of national parks is also emphasized in this process, more emphasis is placed on the collaboration among various organizational actors to achieve the effect that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

4.2 Collaborative Governance Framework Based on Trust Mechanism among Stakeholders of National Parks

This research expects to use the trust mechanism as a bridge to help the aboriginal communities of national parks to establish collaborative governance, so as to build a new social public affairs management model with the regional government as the main body and the participation of multiple stakeholders. This collaborative governance model requires cooperation to be the basis and effective form of joint participation, and the foundation of cooperation is based on trust in market principles, public interests, and value recognition [15]. To effectively manage public affairs with non-governmental organizations, public institutions and private institutions, and to maximize public interests, it is necessary to find an entry point for seeking common ground while reserving differences through the evaluation of mutual

trust by all parties, so as to further improve and strengthen trust.

Therefore, the theoretical framework of collaborative governance should integrate the above-mentioned national park indigenous community stakeholders and trust mechanism into a governance environment, and use trust evaluation to form a governance dynamic of evaluation, establishment, promotion, evaluation, influence and feedback. The dynamic collaborative governance process thus formed is conducive to expanding the collaborative governance ideas of indigenous communities in national parks in China. The theoretical framework of collaborative governance based on the trust mechanism in this paper is shown in Figure 3 below:

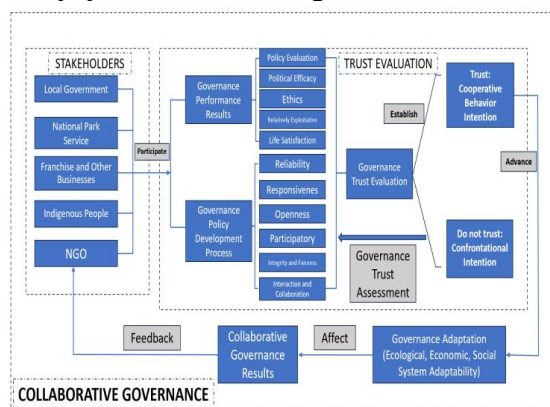


Figure 3. Theoretical Framework of Collaborative Governance Based on Trust Mechanism

According to collaborative governance theory and stakeholder theory, all stakeholders that affect the development of national parks should participate in governance. When all parties in the cooperative relationship give up short-term opportunistic behavior in order to achieve common long-term goals, a win-win situation is formed, all parties benefit from the cooperative relationship, so the cooperative relationship can affect the behavior of stakeholders, and also directly affects the governance and development of the national park community [16]. In the traditional nature reserve management model, due to the multi-level entrustment of public property rights, many problems are caused by low management efficiency and poor resource protection. The interests of all stakeholders cannot be effectively protected, and the cooperative relationship cannot be maintained for along time, let alone achieve

synergy goals of governance. It can be seen that the collaborative governance model of stakeholders based on trust is an inevitable choice for China's national park system reform.

5. Conclusion

Currently, the indistinct nature of national park policies fosters various interpretations of the same phenomenon or problem, representing competing views and essentially creating a dispute over values or conflicting understandings of national park governance issues. These differences and conflicts exist in various conflicts within the primitive communities of national parks. These conflicts may lead to a breakdown of trust among stakeholders, ultimately affecting the achievement of national park collaborative governance goals.

The theory of collaborative governance analyzes the trust relationship between stakeholders in the original communities of national parks from the perspective of trust mechanisms, because stakeholders can establish effective communication under the premise of trust mechanisms and jointly promote the development of collaborative governance in national parks. The benefits, costs, and changes in life satisfaction brought about by the collaborative governance of national parks can be seen as the returns obtained by the participation of various stakeholders in the original community. The perception or evaluation of these returns is an important factor that affects the establishment of trust or maintenance of collaborative governance relationships between each other. The purpose of this study is to contribute to creating a widely accepted collaborative governance environment for national parks. This environment will not only effectively protect national parks, but also encourage local governments within indigenous communities to adopt collaborative governance models. By ensuring that the original communities of national parks are widely accepted by various national park policies, this study aims to utilize the subjective initiative of community stakeholders to promote a bottom-up approach to national park protection. This approach can stimulate the endogenous motivations of various stakeholders in these

national park communities, while fully respecting their autonomy in participating in the management of national park protection policies. Only by establishing a trust mechanism can the potential, intrinsic motivation, and capability of collaborative governance in national park communities be fully utilized. By enhancing the collaborative governance capacity of the community, the main participation of the community in the construction of national parks can be achieved. This, in turn, can address the legislative value and implementation challenges related to the protection and development of national parks, which will contribute to the further establishment of collaborative governance in national parks and provide guidance for the specific construction of previously unclear policies on collaborative governance in national parks.

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