



Public participation in coastal development applications: A comparison between Australia and China



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ABSTRACT

Globally the rapidly developing coastal zone is the focus of public interest and particularly since the 1970s many countries have advocated and adopted public participation as a key process in coastal development applications. This is acknowledgement of public interest in the decision-making regarding coastal developments. Taking Australia and China as examples, this research compares the practical performance and existing problems of public participation in regard to specific coastal development applications. Two marinas on the most rapidly developing coastal zones of these two countries were selected as study cases. A diversity of coastal stakeholders, including government officials, academics, businessmen, non-government organization staff and local residents, were interviewed in order to capture their detailed opinions on public participation. This comparative research analyzes the major findings and discusses reasons for public participation, approaches and timing of public participation and existing problems of public participation in coastal development applications. The similarities and differences between Australia and China may inspire researchers and managers to have more effective public participation in future coastal developments.

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1. Introduction

The coastal zone is socially significant, because the majority of the world's population lives close to the coastline and this is increasing each year (SoE2011C, 2011; UNEP, 2008). The coastal zone is especially conflict-rich, because it is densely populated, culturally important and is the locus for growth in terms of industry, agriculture, transport, trade and tourism (Reis et al., 2014; Yuan et al., 2014). The zone is most dominantly influenced by human activities through coastal developments for residential, industrial and recreational uses (Harvey and Caton, 2010; UNEP, 2008). Public participation is necessary because the public's expectations about the coastal zone should be known by other coastal stakeholders and especially by decision-makers and developers.

Public participation in government decision-making is a process

of power redistribution that facilitates individuals and groups in taking an active role in making decisions that positively or negatively affect them (Arnstein, 1969; Enserink and Koppenjan, 2007; Reed, 2008). In the decision-making process of a proposed development effective public participation contributes information that is otherwise not available to decision-makers. It provides more complete and comprehensive information, produces more pragmatic decisions through reflective deliberation, and may mitigate negative impacts before they occur (Edwards, 2001; Fischer, 2000; Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Mackinson et al., 2011; Reddel and Woolcock, 2004; Zhao, 2010). Early public participation is also beneficial to developers who can collect public opinions before they invest great time and money in the development design and application, and it promotes mutual understanding for achieving sustainable development lifecycle management (Creighton, 2005; Li et al., 2012a; Varol et al., 2011; Xie et al., 2014; Zhao, 2010). Public participation can also improve the quality and durability of decisions (Beierle, 2002; Fischer, 2000), increase the rate of adoption and diffusion of new decisions among target groups, as well as enhance the capacity to meet local needs and priorities (Fogg, 1981; Martin and Sherington, 1997; McCleave et al., 2003; Reed, 2008;

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Reed et al., 2006).

Public participation in government decision-making originated from western countries in the 1960s (Arnstein, 1969). In the 1970s it was extensively advocated and gradually adopted as a mechanism for improving people's living environment by acknowledging and responding to their needs and priorities (Sanoff, 2000; Xie et al., 2014). Since the 1980s, public participation has become an integral aspect of democracy in Australia, the US and European countries (Sanoff, 2000). Experience in the practice of public participation in these countries is seen as evidence that public participation is an effective mechanism for improving communication among stakeholders, promoting sustainability of developments and enhancing collaborative governance (Enserink and Koppenjan, 2007; Sanoff, 2000; Varol et al., 2011).

China introduced public participation into the decision-making process since the 1980s and it was gradually implemented in the 1990s (Xie et al., 2014). International initiatives and assistance have had a role in the promotion of public participation in China, for example through the environmental impact assessment training program funded by the Asia Development Bank in 1991 (Zhao, 2010). It was not until 2004 that the first public hearing was held in China after public participation was officially introduced into the Chinese legislative system (Ren et al., 2004). The effectiveness of public participation in China remains a critical and debated issue (Li et al., 2012a, 2012b; Shan and Yai, 2011; Yang, 2003). The "mass participation" advocated in China is considered to be different from the international discourse on public participation in government decisions: "the former imposes an obligation on the people to cooperate with and support the government in the implementation of policies, plans or projects, while the latter emphasizes the rights of people to be informed, consulted and heard in the decision-making process" (Li et al., 2012a, p. 48).

According to the existing literature, most research focuses on public participation in individual countries, such as Australia and China (De Freitas et al., 2013; Fogg, 1981; Martens, 2006; Shan and Yai, 2011; Trenouth et al., 2012) and holds a tight focus on the evaluation of public participation in construction projects (Li et al., 2012a; Xie et al., 2014). It is worthwhile to compare the public participation in Australia and China to discover their similarities and differences that might drive mutual learning and inspiration. This research used Australia and China to compare their public participation arrangements in the application for coastal developments. In order to provide a distinct focus, two marinas were selected as research cases. Both marinas were under assessment and determination when this research was conducted. They are both located on the coastal zones of cities with large and growing populations that have raised expectations about social, environmental and economic outcomes of development. A series of interviews were conducted with a diversity of coastal stakeholders to discover: (i) the reasons for public participation; (ii) the approaches and timing of public participation in practice; and (iii) the existing problems in public participation in the application process of coastal developments. This research will demonstrate that China is not far behind when compared to Australia's public participation and that the comparison identifies some opportunities, expressed as recommendations for enhancing public participation in both countries.

2. Methods

This research took a problem-based approach and specific case studies. It gathered experience and responses from multiple coastal stakeholders and used on-site case inspections. In order to capture the detailed opinions of coastal stakeholders, semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who were directly involved

in the participatory process of coastal development applications. These semi-structured interviews allowed richer interactions between researchers and respondents, so subtler and deeper questions could be asked following the immediate responses of the respondents. The researchers collected topical data but avoided being pre-determined or neglecting emerging issues (Kitchin and Tate, 2000; Limb and Dwyer, 2001). The discussion in the semi-structured interviews covered three essential topics:

- Why is public participation important for coastal development applications?
- How and when do the public have chances to participate?
- What problems exist in the public participation in coastal development applications?

A group of 52 respondents were sampled purposively (26 respectively from Australia and China) and interviewed with consent. All the respondents have professional backgrounds or personal experience in coastal development applications and their opinions about public participation may reflect the view of experts. Additionally, the diversity of their backgrounds provides different perspectives to inspect the nature of public participation in coastal development applications. Table 1 summarizes the profile of the respondents and shows respondents including government officials, academics, businessmen, non-governmental organization (NGO) managers or members, and local residents.

All the interviews were recorded using digital audio recorders and later transcribed literally. Similar to the coding methods suggested by Hahn (2008), the author made a three-level coding system to provide a logical and consistent organization of the semi-structured interviews. Coding is a widely-used method in analyzing data from interviews and involves subdividing the data and assigning the raw data into categories (Basit, 2003; Cederborg et al., 2000; Joo, 2011; Weinfeld et al., 2000). It is not a linear process with standardized or step-by-step instructions, but involves multiple readings and critical thinking as well as allocation of tentative codes during data analysis. Computer assisted qualitative data analysis using Nvivo was carefully considered but was not used because respondents did not use specific words and instead had a great variety of expressions that would have confounded the computer analysis without adding greater insight.

To provide deeper insight into public participation in coastal development applications, two coastal developments were selected: Rose Bay Marina in Sydney, Australia and Celebration City Marina in Qingdao, China (Fig. 1). These two case-study marinas both have berths and moorings in coastal waters and maintenance facilities on attached lands. Interviews and on-site case inspections were conducted mainly in mid 2012 in Australia and early 2013 in China. Both marinas were newly proposed developments which were going through stages of consent, assessment and determination when this research was conducted. At that time the application documents were most available, the public awareness was expected to be high, and the contentions and tensions between the public, the marina developers and other coastal stakeholders, were most clear. Researchers collected and analyzed data in 2012–2014, so the views of the respondents mainly reflect the situation of public participation at that moment. Afterwards the issues and news related to the two study areas were tracked and contact with the respondents involved in the interviews was maintained, so updated information relevant to the research was included.

3. Results and discussion

This research makes three important contributions: (i) clarifying the reasons for public participation in coastal development

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