The terms “sustainable development” and “collaborative management” are all too common in the natural resource literature. However, the literature is not as replete with practical approaches to implement these abstract concepts. Realizing Community Futures: A Practical Guide to Harnessing Natural Resources is one of those rare examples where authors successfully describe a process that can realistically address complicated social/ecological dilemmas. Obviously, one book can’t do it all, and this book does not provide all the needed details to work through many of the complex problems associated with rural community decisionmaking. However, it provides a good introduction that should motivate government policy makers, nongovernment organizations, community leaders, and natural resource professionals, community leaders, and natural resource
managers to work through a logical process that involves stakeholders, scientists, community residents, and the environment itself. Through the use of descriptive case studies, the authors, Jerry Vanclay, Ravi Prabhu, and Fergus Sinclair, use their wealth of practical and research experiences to describe a process that helps to “bring the buzzwords into being.”

I found the subtitle, A Practical Guide to Harnessing Natural Resources, to be slightly misleading. “Harnessing natural resources” implies strong utilitarian values will override planning, and controlling nature will be the focus of the book. In contrast, the book focuses more on how to best incorporate local people’s needs and values into natural resource decisionmaking through visioning, scenario building, and modeling. Their process allows local residents to plan their own futures using strong collaborative tactics and technical computer models. Although not explicitly stated by the authors, they build upon some of the latest thinking related to decisionmaking in complex systems. In fact, many of their ideas come from Gunderson and Holling’s (2002) edited volume Panarchy, which was one of the first texts to broach the subject of complexity and change at a diversity of scales in relation to natural resources management. Realizing Community Futures makes this information accessible to community and natural resource planners and provides them a roadmap to implement some of these new ideas.

The case studies describe broomgrass collectors in Zimbabwe, one man’s attempt to bring rivers back to life in India, and stakeholders working to manage multiple resources in Zimbabwe’s Mafungautsi Forest. The authors use these stories to discuss difficult concepts and strategies involved in adaptive collaborative management. The book starts off strong in the human dimensions: providing introductory information on working with diverse interests and solving potential conflicts. The authors are deliberate in their approach to introduce techniques and concepts associated with collaboration, negotiation, and conflict management in practical and succinct terms. As a social scientist, I was pleased that the authors addressed many of the concepts I see highlighted in the literature regarding community development, but I was often wanting more detail or further evidence (through research) that their concepts might actually work in other locations. However, the authors’ ability to be succinct and hit on a variety of complex topics is what makes this text strong and, likely, appealing to most readers.

The case studies are introduced as difficult-to-manage social and ecological problems, and the authors use the case studies to highlight specific strategies associated with adaptive collaborative management. The book focuses on “visions,” and provides a variety of practical approaches to creating, articulating, and implementing activities to realize shared visions. Specifically, in the book’s early chapters, the authors stress the importance of structured learning and participatory modeling into the planning processes. Both are topics worthy of their own texts, but the authors introduce these topics well.

Chapter Three addresses how to create a shared vision. The authors’ strategy is to draw the reader in with descriptive discussions of their case studies, and then to provide the “nuts and bolts” of a visioning process. They discuss the specific roles people would play in the process (e.g., facilitator, modeler, and others), and the “building blocks of visions” (e.g., desirable futures, strategies, actors, indicators, and others). Building shared visions is an immense topic, and the authors discuss it effectively and efficiently.

The latter half of the book continues to introduce and explain important concepts and techniques the authors have used to bring visions to reality. Much of the discussion is based on using the “Simile” computer program to provide a realistic model of a community’s vision. By showing how the computer modeling process was used in the three case studies, the authors explain how shared visions become “explicit” and “substantial” to allow residents to fully explore their options and see the implications of their decisions. For the reader to understand how to move through this process, a discussion of how to integrate variables, such as availability and flow of resources, into the Simile software is necessary, which means the writing becomes more technical. The book often refers to its website and a trial version of the software is available. However, using the software requires more time and effort than a person just beginning to be familiar to this process might be willing to put forth.

In conclusion, the authors say much in a relative short space (162 pages). Not only do they introduce conceptual ideas and theories associated with adaptive collaborative management, but they also describe specific techniques related to shared learning and participatory management, scenario building, and computer modeling. Again, the value in this book is the introduction of a process (and many components of that process) that builds on our current state of knowledge of community and resource planning. Although I believe this book would be useful in college classrooms as a supplement to larger texts on community planning and natural resource decisionmaking, it is likely most valuable as a practical guide for natural resource and community planners in the field who are working with rural communities. However, readers must understand that this book is only a guide. It is up to the reader to augment the information provided in this book with other literature and practical experience before actually moving forward with the process. But, if community and natural resource decisionmakers do follow this process, I feel more confident that residents of rural areas in a variety of locations will have a greater chance of “realizing their community futures.”