Mental Models That Block Strategic Plan Implementation

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Bookshelves around the world are laden with written plans. Having spent a brief time in the limelight, each now rests unimplemented and often forgotten. Despite the celebrations of strategic plans in boardrooms, at press conferences, and throughout grant reports, such plans often end up dead on arrival – even before planners complete the planning process. Curiously, organizations continue to churn out strategic plans and accept their demise without question. The causes of such repeated failures lurk deep in the mental models that program managers, executives, planners, and donors hold about the process and products connected with a given organization. Though the problem can easily be discussed in the context of any organization or institution, this article will illuminate such mental models by looking closely at one example: the park systems.

Parks, whether public or private, large or small, are part of society in countries around the globe. And highly dissimilar parks can suffer remarkably similar problems when it comes to planning. "Planning" ranks among the most common park management functions. Yet something haunts that long hallway between the initial intention to create a plan and the plan's implementation. The strategic plan can take any form, for example, general management plan, tourism plan, financial plan, or protection plan. Park managers, of course, embark on the planning process wholly expecting the plan's implementation. No manager would ever spend tens of thousands of dollars and countless hours on a project only to shelve it and watch it gather dust alongside old, unfunded proposals.

Still, during the very act of setting up the planning process, managers often *unwittingly* set up implementation barriers that scuttle the very project they are laboring to create. In the background of their awareness, systemic elements hum along like quiet machines. Yet instead of building plans, they build barriers. If managers were to stop and cast light on these mental machines – models – then they could retool them to diminish the likelihood that certain barriers would halt a plan's implementation.

Few studies have documented the extent of plan implementation failure (Burby, 2003; Lachapelle et al., 2003; Lane, 2003). Any park manager, nevertheless, can name handfuls of unimplemented park plans at his or her own park or those managed by others. When I worked in international conservation and park planning in Mesoamerica in the early 2000s, I regularly told people about the series of public use plans in the Dominican Republic that disappeared from public view after being written. In Guatemala, the Cerro San Gil Reserve's ecotourism plan sat idle. In Mexico, Sian Ka'an and Cerro Grande Manantlan's public use plans were left unimplemented. In Honduras, La Tigra National Park had both an interpretive plan and a management plan that, like falling stars, glowed bright before fading away. Even the venerable Galapagos National Park had an interpretive and environmental education plan on the shelf.

Mental Models Erect Barriers to Plan Implementation

Many implementation barriers grow out of park managers' assumptions or mental models. Without training, it is difficult for anyone to cast light on his or her own deep assumptions. When assumptions remain obscured, the holder tends to repeat the same patterns of behavior over and over (see "Story of a Strategic Park Planning Failure"). But once a manager perceives her own mental model, she soon discovers that her assumptions are just that: assumptions, not truths. Once she strips them of truth status, she can much more easily mold the assumptions and replace them with a new interpretation of reality.

When we lower the drawbridge to the traditional park planning mind, we find a variety of assumptions that shape the planning process. We can group them into four general categories: Learning and Consultants, Planning Process, Plan Nature, and Plan Format. This grouping, somewhat arbitrary and overlapping, may aid the reader in setting up his or her own mental model about "mental models that explain park planning implementation barriers."
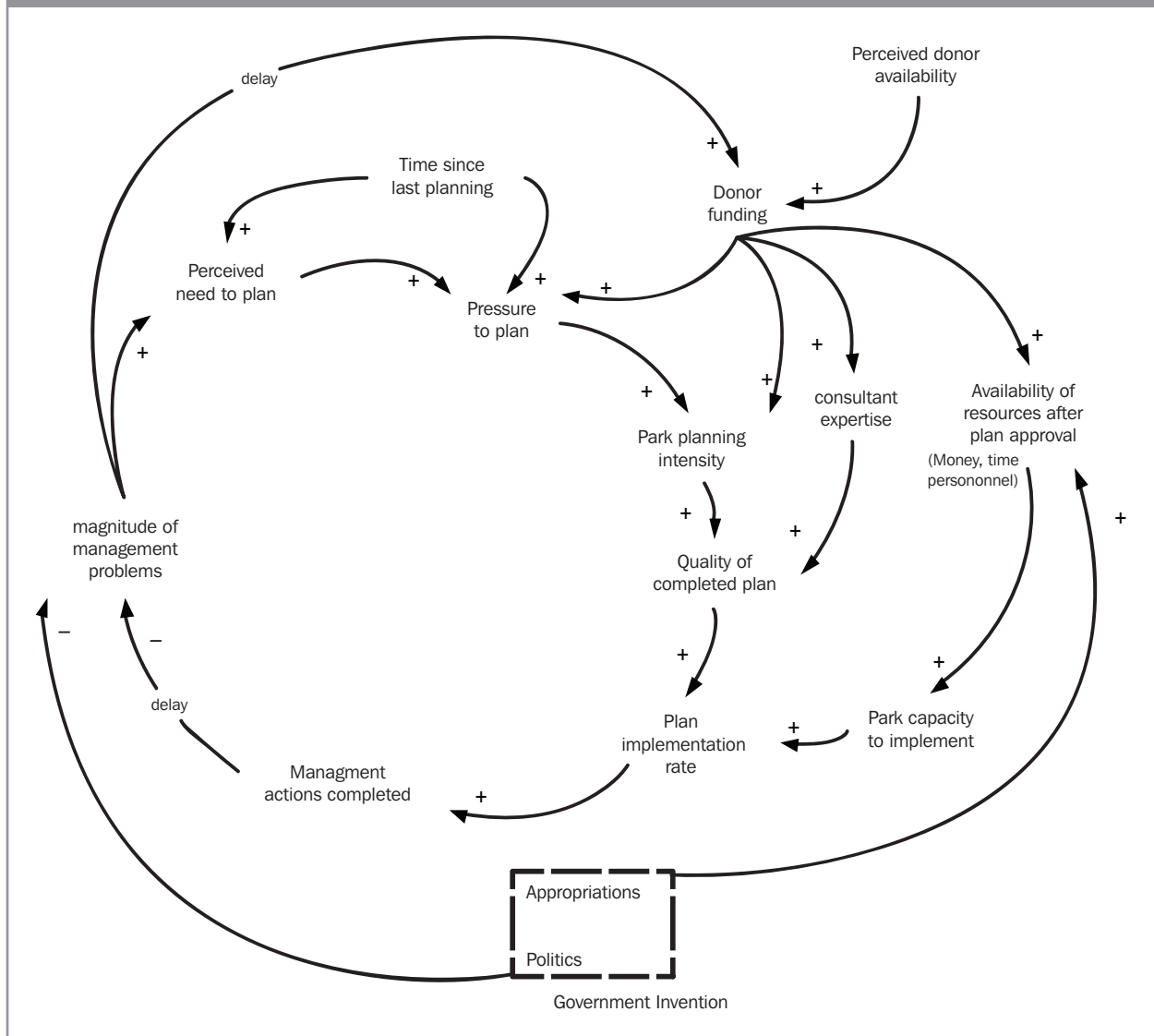
The following causal loop diagram illustrates a generalized traditional park planning model that focuses heavily on management resources and consultant expertise, and not at all on learning. This kind of model does not indicate how strong or influential relationships are, but strength can be inferred by the presence or absence of variables. "Learning," for example, does not appear in this model, not because traditional park managers never think about learning, but because the concept does not play a strong role in their mental model. (The art of effective modeling is to include the fewest elements possible while explaining the system behavior that answers the problem question.) This model answers the following question through the eyes of a traditional park planner: "What is the relationship between strategic park planning and management issues?"

In a systems model, there is no true starting point, but for simplicity, the reader may begin with "Perceived need to plan" at upper left in the diagram. This need increases pressure to plan, which increases the intensity

Story of a Strategic Park Planning Failure

1. Park and donor retain expensive outside consultant to develop a strategic plan.

2. Consultant runs workshops with stakeholders.

3. Consultant compiles the results and analyzes them.

4. Away from the park office, consultant then produces a nicely bound plan replete with appendices. Usually the plan will not have operational elements such as budgets and chronograms indicating which person will do what when. The "plan" may have recommendations instead of commitments (indicating that it is actually a study, not a plan).

5. Consultant delivers finished plan and departs. Contract is over.

6. There is much fanfare and celebration. The park calls together the media. It passes out published and polished copies of the plan.

7. If the park is lucky, the government approves the plan within the year (depends on country). Quite likely it is approved after the implementation should already have begun.

8. The park then cherry-picks for implementation those actions it probably would have taken even without a plan – those actions the managers truly wanted to do.

9. The park did not learn to use the plan during its development and harbors no intentions of learning how to use it now. Learning has little to do with plan implementation. Managers and planners are different people.

10. Within six months, implementation has been delayed one or more times; the plan is going out of date. Because it is nicely bound, with professional page layout and photos, no one can imagine updating it for years to come.

11. Stakeholder attention shifts to new issues that arise on the radar. Park managers lay the plan on the shelf, only momentarily, until they have a chance to kick-start its implementation.

12. The plan remains on the shelf. The park claims it does not have the money, time, or personnel to implement it.

13. Dust falls. The plan sinks into a pile of documents like just another layer of sedimentary rock.

14. Several years pass. Stakeholder confidence in planning erodes.

15. A new donor comes along and decides the park needs a strategic plan. It dangles money. The park bites.

16. The story begins anew.

Figure 1: Mental Model of a Traditional Park Planner

or scale of the planning effort (once it launches). The greater the effort is, the better the plan's quality. The better the plan, the faster the park should implement it (implementation rate). The faster the implementation, the more actions the park will complete, which will reduce the magnitude of its management problems (biodiversity threats, political wrangles, budgetary shortfalls, etc.). If such problems are mitigated, there will be less perceived need to mount another planning campaign, and donors will likely spend their money in other places where greater urgency looms.

When donors contribute more money anyway, it increases planning intensity (for example, the number of planning workshops and participants rises), improves the quality of consultant the park can hire (quality according to the consultant's CV), and fills coffers necessary to implement the plan. The consultant's expertise has a major impact on the quality of the plan. The park's ability to implement it depends most of all on the money, personnel, and time (all reducible to money) available. Despite the relationship between park and donor, government has a

heavy influence, both through its appropriations for the park and through the politicking and bureaucracy (especially the plan approval process) that cause problems for the park. Of course, for a private park that receives no governmental funding, the managers may substitute *donors* for *government appropriations*.

Just as "learning" does not appear in the model, "barriers" too are reduced above. A manager might point only to a lack of resources. All other barriers are unexpected, assumed not to exist.

This blindness to park barriers plays a major role in implementation failure. Until barriers become visible, a cadre of professionals cannot evolve to help parks deal with them. Thus, in early stages of recognizing barriers, assistance proves rare. This phenomenon happens in many fields. For example, until doctors began to regard mental illness as a treatable disease of the mind, rather than possession by witchcraft, a patient could hope for scant succor. In the case of park planning barriers, one program did evolve to diagnose and treat them. That was the Rare Center for Tropical Conservation's Public Use Planning Program.

A Program to Address Obstacles

In 1999, Honduras's Pico Bonito National Park had money for a public use plan. It asked a partner organization, the Rare Center for Tropical Conservation (hereafter "Rare"), to locate a park planning consultant. After searching Latin America for successful plans and methodologies and discovering precious few of either, Rare offered to develop a planning methodology on the condition that Pico Bonito, not Rare staff, write the plan. Rare's president issued a mandate to his staff that this program should avoid the implementation problems often encountered in traditional planning. Accomplishing that mandate required that the program identify and classify those barriers.

Six months later, the park publicly presented the prototype public-use plan, written by its own board of directors. It was the first in Honduras and the first in Rare's history. A year and a half later, with improved methodology, the park and Rare used its updated methodology and developed the second prototype. In 2001, Rare and UNESCO launched the World Heritage Partnership, under whose funding the planning program expanded to other sites in

E.F. Schumacher on Development in *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*

"Development does not start with goods; it starts with people and their education, organization, and discipline. Without these three, all resources remain latent, untapped, potential. There are prosperous societies with but the scantiest basis of natural wealth… and we have had plenty of opportunities to observe the primacy of the invisible factors after the war. Every country, no matter how devastated, which had a high level of education, organization, and discipline, produced an 'economic miracle.' In fact, these were miracles only for people whose attention is focused on the tip of the iceberg. The tip had been smashed to pieces, but the base, which is education, organization, and discipline, was still there.

"Here, then, lies the central problem of development. If the primary causes of poverty are deficiencies in these three respects, then the alleviation of poverty depends primarily on the removal of these deficiencies. Here lies the reason why development cannot be an act of creation, why it cannot be ordered, bought, comprehensively planned; why it requires a process of evolution. Education does not 'jump;' it is a gradual process of great subtlety. Organization does not 'jump;' it must gradually evolve to fit changing circumstances. And much the same goes for discipline. All three must evolve step by step, and the foremost task of development policy must be to speed this evolution . . ." (p. 169)

Mesoamerica and Indonesia. Since that time, Komodo and Ujung Kulon National Parks in Indonesia have completed the first official drafts of their public use plans; the program also contributed the public use section of Guatemala's Tikal National Park Master Plan.

The Public Use Planning Program, as it was now called, soon coupled its search for barriers with the work of renowned economist E.F. Schumacher, who wrote in his book *Small Is Beautiful* that real building of capacity depends on the development of education, organization, and discipline (see box). Rare integrated this observation into its program philosophy, its basis for combating implementation barriers. The entire approach then boiled down to one message that all park managers had to understand: *Strategic park planning will not yield benefits for conservation unless parks learn the skills necessary to create and implement their own strategic plans.*

The implications of this message precipitate a radical new way of conducting park planning. The approach converts unseen barriers into regular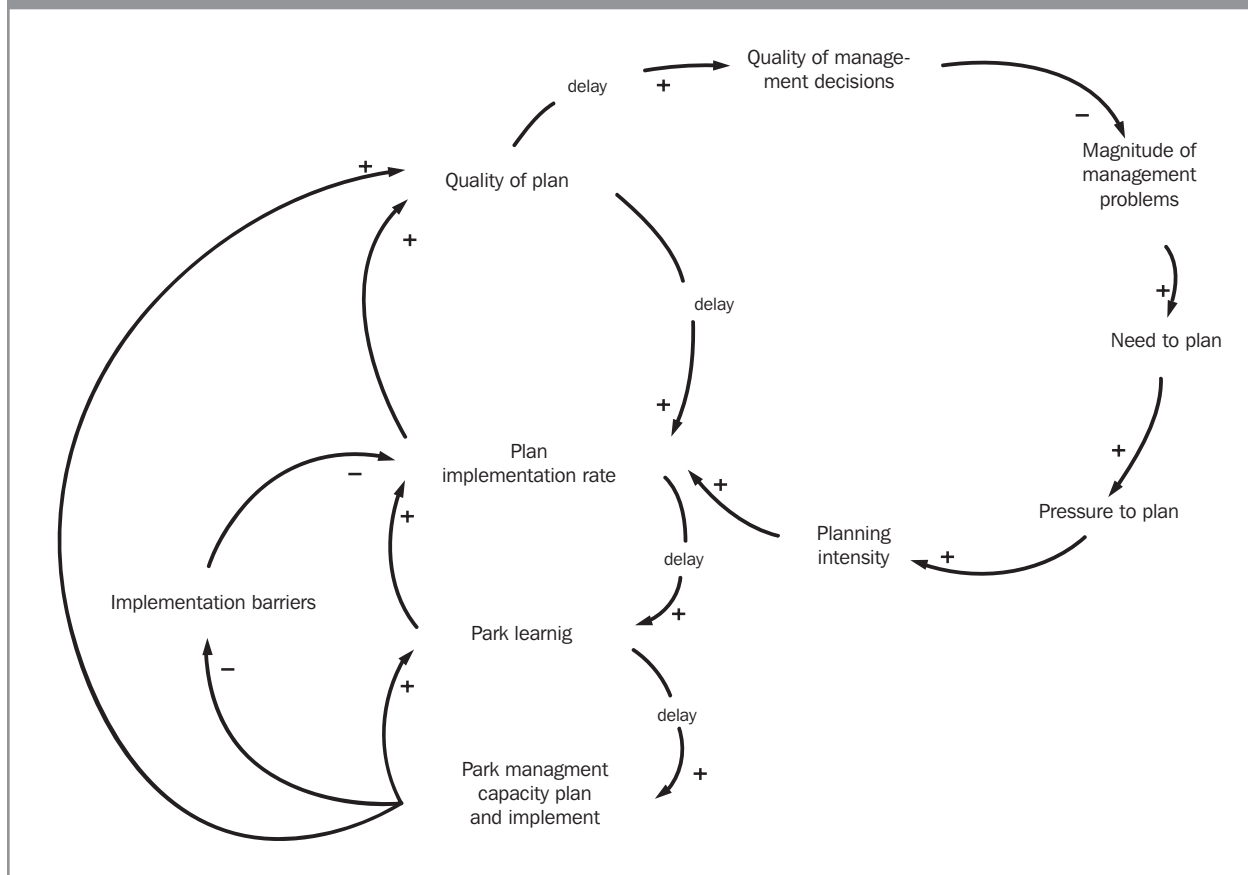 challenges faced throughout any strategic planning process. It does this by understanding the mental model park managers use to inadvertently erect those barriers. Without any conscious intention of doing so, Rare embarked on a de facto systems thinking approach to circumvent strategic park planning barriers rooted deep in the mind.

A New Planning Model

In the following loop diagram, managers have made barriers and learning explicit considerations in their mental model of park planning. Begin with "quality of plan" at upper left. As the plan's quality goes up, the park can implement it faster (better plans are easier to implement). Over time, as the park managers implement more of the plan, they will find more ways to improve it (experimentation, feedback). That is, they will learn faster, which increases implementation. Over time, as the park learns, it will also institutionalize its lessons into park management capacity (operating manuals, culture of organizational learning, personnel capable of learning, people applying planning lessons to other management

Quality of manage-
ment decisions

delay +

−

Magnitude of
management
problems

Quality of plan

+

+

+

Need to plan

delay

+

+

Pressure to plan

Plan
implementation rate

delay

+

+

+

Planning
intensity

delay

+

Implementation barriers

−

+

Park learnig

+

−

delay

+

Park managment
capacity plan
and implement

+

functions, rules mandating the identification and application of lessons, etc.).

Increased park capacity helps parks to identify previously unknown barriers and avoid them. Additionally, greater capacity leads to higher-quality plans. Presumably, higher-quality plans will lead to higher-quality management decisions, reducing the magnitude of problems, which will then reduce the need and pressure to begin new planning efforts. In this model, managers are continuously planning as part of normal management processes (management and planning are integrated, not separate, functions), so they do not need large new infusions of money and consultants (hence these resources do not appear in the model). Also note the multiple delays in this model, which underscore that building capacity takes a long time and does not happen during the contract duration of a traditional consultant.

Despite the ubiquity with which mental models can lead people, industries, and cultures toward counterproductive behavior, this deep causation often goes unseen, precipitating repeated failures, even though those failures are startlingly obvious to those with different assumptions. This is the case for park planning when managers assume that their next effort will rise to success above the discarded plans that litter the landscape. The following table identifies some of the major assumptions, their consequent implementation barriers, and actions that managers can take to circumvent or mitigate the barrier. Many assumptions derive from the traditional park planning model above; others are unrelated.

Though this was written specifically to address park planning, managers and planning stakeholders from many domains will recognize many of these assumptions and barriers.

Table 1: Assumptions, Barriers, and Responses		
Parks Assume…	**Planning Barrier**	**Exemplary Response Strategies**
Learning & Consultants		
Given the appropriate resources, parks already have all the management capacity necessary to implement a strategic plan.

Implementation failure comes from a lack of resources and other exogenous factors (not a lack in their own capacity). | **Parks do not have the management capacity to create and implement a strategic plan.**

The ability to create and implement a strategic plans is not innate. Strategic plans are sophisticated tools that, like any other sophisticated tool, require training and experience to use effectively. | Facilitators should make significant efforts before planning to identify the capacity levels of the park so it does not proceed overconfident and blind to its own limitations.

While many capacities are technical, such as the use of a monitoring system, other higher-level capacities refer to learning, discipline, and organization that are more difficult to articulate. For example, only an organization with discipline can say "no" to an offer of money for developments outside its strategic priorities. |
| The locus of knowledge should be with the consultants.

Learning is not a component of organizational performance.

Technical assistance of a consultant need only be short term, because parks need no help to implement the plan. | **Parks do not learn how to create and implement the strategic plan.**

Learning is not an explicit objective of the planning or implementation process. | Facilitators should build learning tools into the process, such as systematic discovery, documentation, and application of lessons learned; periodic evaluations; explicit trainings, etc.

Donors should pay for medium-term (four to six years) technical assistance to help parks learn to use their strategic plans. |
| The consultant has all the answers and skills.

If something goes wrong, it is the consultant's fault. | **Parks task consultants with doing most of the planning work, thus robbing parks of opportunities to learn and create their own management capacity.** | Parks should hire facilitators experienced in participation and organizational learning.

The terms of reference for the facilitator should limit facilitation to organizing and running meetings. The bulk of analysis and writing should be carried out by stakeholders (under the facilitator's guidance). |
| Expert knowledge, even if it originates outside the community, is critical to success. | **Outside planning consultants can reduce stakeholder ownership, leading to lower levels of implementation.**

A side effect of using traditional planning consultants is that stakeholders do little, if any, of the work. The plan then does not represent their labor and probably not their ideas. | There is a balance between acquiring skilled facilitators and choosing facilitators who have the trust of stakeholders and understand them. Skilled outsiders using participatory methodologies can make stakeholders feel ownership of the document, but the more "outside" facilitators are, the more challenging the task will be. |
| Experts making recommendations will yield better results than stakeholders making commitments. | **Outside consultants make recommendations that are not implemented.**

Parks confuse *studies* and *plans*. Documents with recommendations are studies. True strategic plans do not make recommendations, they record commitments. | Facilitators need to clarify whether they are facilitating a study or a plan. If it is a plan, then they need to make clear that stakeholders are agreeing to binding commitments, not recommendations. |

Table 1: Assumptions, Barriers, and Responses (continued)		
Parks Assume…	**Planning Barrier**	**Exemplary Response Strategies**
Planning Process		
Expert, scientifically derived knowledge is more important to the planning process than personal experience and values. Thus, expert planners are more important than subjective, quarrelsome, untrained stakeholders. The plan is ultimately both property and responsibility of the park management authority, rather than a collective work of park stakeholders. Park managers must maintain control over the plan in order for it to be properly implemented.	**Parks do not adequately involve stakeholders in the planning process. As a result, stakeholders impede or actively sabotage the process.** Burby's 2003 study indicates that the more stakeholders are involved in the planning process, the more likely a state government plan is to be implemented. This assumes true and well-facilitated participation.	Facilitators should have experience in participatory methodologies and stakeholder analysis. Facilitators should explain that having people who share values and work together ultimately increases the chances of implementation and longevity of solutions. Facilitators should forge a shared vision of a plan as a collective work for which the park authority is just one stakeholder.
Parks can and will transform strategies defined in the plan into operations. The time between the completion of a strategic plan and the start of operational planning does not diminish motivation, knowledge, or momentum created by the planning process. Once the vision is clear, implementation comes easily.	**Parks are unable to transform strategies into operational mechanisms for implementation.** Strategic plans are often created in a different time and place than the subsequent operational plans (budgets, implementation plans, logistics).	Facilitators should build operational planning into strategic planning, not leave it separated from strategic planning in time and place. Hence, a strategic plan should budget time and money for a three-year or five-year term.
Parks will deal with the approval process when they get to it. Approval processes are immutable.	**Strategic plans get bogged down in the approval process and then are never implemented.** Lane (2003) reports that 80 percent of protected-area directors interviewed in Honduras stated that the plan approval process hinders their ability to implement plans.	Facilitators should include, as a pre-planning step, research of the approval process. Parks need to know exactly how it works and how to develop a plan that will move more quickly through the process.
Research is a necessary part of strategic planning. Scientific research yields data of much higher quality than does participatory research based on people's knowledge. Strategic plans must contain databases and inventories even though those who would use the plan already have access to that information.	**Research during planning takes so long that stakeholders lose interest.**	If research is unavoidable, the research component should be separated from the planning. Parks should consider using participatory research when possible rather than field research. That is, in a workshop, have participants name tourist attractions (one day) instead of field inventory (days to weeks).

Parks Assume…	Planning Barrier	Exemplary Response Strategies
Table 1: Assumptions, Barriers, and Responses (continued)		
Planning Process (continued)		
The standard planning process is sufficient to generate a plan focused on park priority concerns and needs.	**Parks do not adequately define planning process goals at the outset, which can lead the plan astray.** This barrier is discussed in Lachapelle et al. (2003).	Facilitators should help parks tailor the planning process to meet their specific needs. This tailoring then becomes formalized in goals for the planning process.
All major issues will arise through an expert-driven process. No special steps are necessary to deal with park's major conflicts.	**Inflexible methodologies increase the chance that the strategic plan does not reveal and deal with the park's major issues.** This barrier is discussed in Lachapelle et al. (2003).	Facilitators should have experience in adapting methodology on the fly to address major issues. Facilitators should also have skill in bringing conflicts out into the open where they can be discussed and resolved.
Planning can occur simultaneously with whatever other urgent issues arise.	**Parks can lose attention and commitment as new programs and problems distract them from planning.** Traditionally, the planning field regards park **readiness** as an ability to concentrate on and invest significant energy in planning. When the park grapples with other major problems, whether budgetary, management-related, or administrative, it is not ready to commit to planning.	Donors should determine a park's readiness before beginning to plan. Planning requires complete attention. If other issues are emerging on a park's radar, it may be best to postpone planning.
Nature of Plan		
Credibility in one area (e.g., longtime park planning advocacy) qualifies a consultant to facilitate a quality strategic planning process.	**A plan's poor technical quality derails implementation.**	Parks should research and choose a methodology and facilitator that have demonstrated success in strategic planning.
Plans require nothing more than sufficient resources to implement. Resource deficiencies are root causes for non-implementation. Parks should plan for everything they want in the park, regardless of resource availability.	**Parks do not implement the plan, and they blame insufficient resources.** *Resources* usually refers to money, time, and personnel.	Facilitators should measure the likely resources available and take them into account during planning. If the plan has an operational component (budget, implementation plan), then the park often has a much more reasonable projection of what can be achieved with given resources. Donor should include funds for implementation, not just planning.

Table 1: Assumptions, Barriers, and Responses (continued)		
Parks Assume…	**Planning Barrier**	**Exemplary Response Strategies**
Nature of Plan (continued)		
A strategic plan should be updated only when it is redone or when its long-term planning horizon (three, five, or 10 years) expires.	**The plan is not updated, and, once out of date, no longer addresses current challenges. Then it is not implemented.** Governments often mandate that a plan can be updated only upon expiration of its formal term.	Facilitators should build in discrete "update moments" during the implementation plan, more frequent in the first year or two than later on.
Strategic plans will solve all major problems.	**Parks have high expectations for plans. When their expectations are not met, they lose confidence in the plan. The result is non-implementation.**	Facilitators need to emphasize that plans will grow and change as the park learns. Problems will always crop up, and even solved problems often do not stay solved. Planning goals should be realistic and attainable, not pipe dreams.
Format of Plan		
A plan must be large and filled with methodological, cartographical, technical, and inventorial information, and appendices and charts, to earn respectability. Visual communication is less important for the plan's implementation. A polished, published, and bound volume can still be a "living document."	**The plan is not user friendly, which discourages staff and stakeholders from participating in the document's use, leaving only very few people who know and understand its content.**	Facilitators need to agree with parks in advance about a format that promotes visual communication and high-quality writing.
Political Context		
A strategic planning process is not the place for conflict resolution.	**Power struggles among stakeholders essentially paralyze and scuttle planning or else water it down so much that it no longer can effect change.** Lachapelle et al. (2003) discuss the barrier of power in terms of the organization itself wanting to control the process.	One of the best responses to power struggles is to have a forum where both sides speak their position and reach a conclusion. This should involve the facilitator. Facilitators should also identify conflicts very early on through interviews or any site assessment that might accompany the process.
The park authority is responsible for implementing the plan.	**When governments change, existing plans can be tossed. Sometimes the planners (and their bosses) are also tossed. When personnel leave, so does institutional memory.** Lane (2003) reports that 87 percent of interviewed protected-area directors in Honduras stated that government changes hinder their ability to implement plans.	If nothing else can be said about government change, its timing and consequences are predictable. Donor and park should not start a planning process within a couple of years of an expected change of park director or key staff.

Table 1: Assumptions, Barriers, and Responses (continued)		
Parks Assume…	**Planning Barrier**	**Exemplary Response Strategies**
Physical Barriers		
"It can't happen to us."	**Plans can be physically lost because of computer crashes, office fires, theft, or negligence.**	Facilitators should back up plans both on and off site.
"It can't happen to us."	**Disasters, either political or natural, can interfere or stop the planning or implementation process. These could include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, rebellions, violence, employee strikes, severe budget cuts, or the death of the park director.**	Parks should not begin planning when facing imminent disaster.

A Question of Assumptions

That there are so many assumptions (and the above table is by no means exhaustive) prompts the question "Why so many?" *Coincidence* as an explanation would be shortsighted. An alternative explanation is that these assumptions rest on still deeper assumptions in the system – commonly rooted ways of viewing the world. In fact, we can trace the above planning assumptions back hundreds of years. Consider the lineage of assumptions tying today's planning to several fundamental assumptions originating 300 to 400 years ago.

In the 17th century, Sir Isaac Newton described the interaction of objects in a manner that still underpins modern perceptions of reality. He said that the interaction of any two objects could be described through motion. If one knows an object's material, velocity, and angle of approach, one can predict how it will interact with other objects. From this perspective, the world and its problems are as stable, linear, and predictable as two billiard balls caroming into each other. Earlier in the same century, Rene Descartes had argued that if one breaks any object or problem down into constituent parts and studies those parts, one can understand the whole. In essence, Descartes implied that even highly complex problems can be understood through reductionism. Together, these thinkers built a mental model that

assumes the world to be stable, linear, predictable, and understandable.

Thus, if problems can be studied and understood, then solutions are limited only by resources, whether time, personnel, or money (all reducible to money anyway) – not by any inherent difficulties in understanding the world or by the need to learn.

And if the only significant limitation is resources, then planning is basically a bureaucratic requirement necessary to obtain resources. Meanwhile, time needed for planning competes with time needed by directors to actually manage and solve problems. The outcome is that planning and managing have become two entirely distinct processes within park administrations. Managers tend to delegate planning to lower-level staff and outside consultants, participating only when necessary, and preserving time for really critical matters in the park.

Into the chasm between thinking (planning) and doing (managing), plans have fallen, partially or entirely unimplemented. This emphasis on resources over learning, doing over thinking, has resulted in a wide variety of interrelated barriers. For example, managers place great importance on the form and format of the plan necessary for winning approval and money, rather than its usefulness. They outsource planning and rely on expertise both to save time and, again, to impress prospective donors. They do not concern themselves with mechanisms that

link strategies to tactical implementation; thus, plans are left behind when managers go to the field. Many other assumptions and barriers can similarly be tied to these common roots descending all the way back to the Enlightenment.

An Assumption to Metamorphose the Planning Process

What alternative paradigm might there be to this reductionist foundation of planning? Modern systems thinking sees the world not as a group of separate parts related in linear cause-and-effect chains, but as a complex system with multiple feedbacks and delays. This world is complex, ever-changing, unpredictable, impossible to fully understand, and messy. But it follows the "rules" of systems dynamics.

To survive in such a world, organizations must continually learn to keep up with the changing context and to find high-leverage solutions to dynamic, complex problems. Seen this way, planning becomes an integral part of changing the world or tackling problems that challenge park managers.

In a holistic world, because learning is integral to solving problems, managers would not separate planning and managing. They would adopt adaptive management, an approach originally designed to manage complex ecosystems, whereby practitioners *plan, do, receive feedback, and improve their approach* in continuous iteration. There would be no need for one-time major planning campaigns run by outsiders that produce polished and published

Figure 3: Mental Model of a Traditional Park Planner

plans. Park staffs would create true "living documents" that they would update every quarter or so in accordance with changing conditions, goals, and context. As they tried one approach and learned, they would document their learning in writing and adjust their strategies. The notion of a one-document plan, immutable in time and space, would yield to dispersed learning and documentation, always changing and always guiding management action.
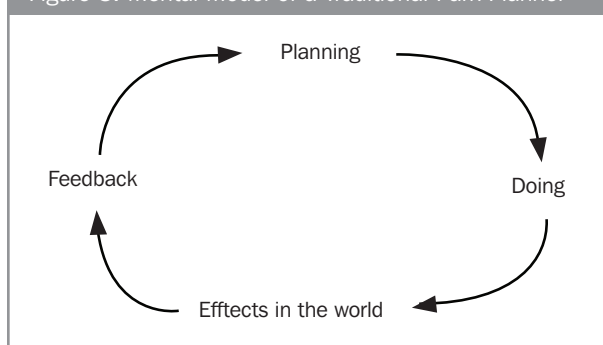
Planning as Integral to Continuous Learning

Managers, donors, and even consultants can all work together to change mental models of planning. Doing so, however, requires a new holistic mental model that places planning firmly at the center of learning and capacity building, rather than on the periphery. In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge offers five core disciplines necessary for effective change:

1. **Personal mastery** includes integrating reason and intuition, continually seeing more of our connectedness to the world, compassion, and commitment to the whole.
2. Managing **mental models** involves identifying, clarifying, and changing one's mental model and its component assumptions.
3. Building a **shared vision** motivates participants toward a common future.
4. **Team learning** consists of three essential criteria: the need to think insightfully about complex issues; the need for innovative, coordinated action; having roles for team members on other teams.
5. **Systems thinking** allows managers to understand reality enough to create strategies to reach their shared visions.

Thus, the most important capacity a park can develop is learning. Through learning, it can examine and modify its mental models, test hypotheses, and continuously adapt and improve. Once the mind closes, assumptions grow hard and immobile, and a changing context will pass them by. Unfortunately,

those park managers who already "know" how to solve their problems – if only they could command greater resources – are unlikely to ever read this article.

You can give a park a strategic plan and the managers will shine for a day (when the media show up), or you can help managers learn how to learn, and their park will shine for life.

This conclusion refers specifically to park planning; however, it echoes throughout the world of planning where plan promoters assume the world to be stable, linear, predictable, and understandable and where system structures reward the creation of plans as artwork rather than management tools. These structures – whether in parks or in corporations – won't change until light shines down on the mental models that imbue those structures with power. Once the assumptions are illuminated and seen for what they are and what they do, a new age of planning can rise from the stacks of unimplemented plans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Kohl worked with Rare for nearly seven years developing park manager and inter-pretive guide capacity-building programs. He left to become an independent consultant and freelance writer, spending time with Fermata, Inc., a sustainable tourism planning company in the U.S. and collaborating with Unesco's World Heritage Center to develop the systems thinking approach initially explored at Rare. Kohl presented a version of this article at a World Heritage Center-sponsored seminar in Spain on tourism planning for World Heritage archaeological sites in February 2006. More information on his work and writings can be found at **www.jonkohl.com**.

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