

WHITE PAPER



Computerized Policy Analysis Tools

eBriefings.ca White Paper #07-16-006

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December 2007

QUEST is a computer-based deliberation support tool that is designed to facilitate discussion and deliberation about regional sustainability among a variety of participants. Despite the predominant orientation and purpose of the tool, public outreach material for the Georgia Basin Futures Project (of which Georgia Basin – QUEST is a central element) describes the tool’s policy analysis capacity as lending “itself well to integrated analysis and policy evaluation applications.”

While this “policy analysis and planning” orientation is a tangential objective of the tool, and project leaders have always taken pains to remind audiences that QUEST should not be seen as a replacement for serious policy analysis and planning exercises, there has occasionally been a tendency for some users and audiences to focus on the perceived potential value of the tool as an aid in governance, to imagine conducting policy analysis with the aid of such a tool. Alternatively, some observers and project participants have occasionally expressed concerns that there is the potential that some naïve users may attempt to use QUEST as a policy oracle without being aware of the tool’s limitations in those respects.

The “QUEST experiences” that are described in this paper have all originated from my appreciation and sharing of the concern that users might grant authority to the tool’s pronouncements because of its ease of use, the attractiveness of its interface and their understanding that the results were based on underlying computational models. Further, would it be these particular characteristics of the tool – the interface and the existence of an underlying model – that would act as the central elements in the persuasiveness of QUEST, rather than a carefully considered evaluation of the results?

The purpose of this note is to simply describe, based on my own observations and the comments of participants made in those forums, the experience from three university classroom-based workshops in which graduate students used the QUEST computer program, in order to evaluate whether the fear of “authority-granting” is justified.

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