

# Epilogue

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## Spreading the Ripples

Providing opportunities for a wide array of interested parties to be satisfied by an integrated management decision is the stone that causes the ripples. Where the ripples move depends on the depth and obstructiveness of the water body, in this case the powers that shape how decisions are made. Just because there are ripples does not mean that they reach the shore. Offering participation can mean surprisingly little: those who must be involved are there already. Those who shout loudest make it their business to be there, however inconvenient. Those who may not realise their ultimate interests could well be affected by a decision outcome may only enter when advised or encouraged or enabled to do so. And there will always be many who simply do not want to be part, who cannot know in any reasonable way that their interests are relevant to the decision outcome, yet who may experience costs or suffering by being absent.

In short, stakeholder dialogue is usually a discussion amongst known and informed people to the party. The ones who also count may not be there either because they have sufficient power and influence to bend this outcome in their direction, so can be absent simply because of their virtual presence in the decision setting. They still command power even when not present. Others who are absent are those who are often included by a combination of ignorance, alienation or distraction by other demands on their distracted lives. Stakeholder dialogue may be mirror on social power relations and on the institutional design of decision-making.

Before exploring the scope for reinterpreting stakeholder dialogue, it is necessary to set the context in terms of fresh approaches to national resources management and integrated assessments. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment set the scene for interpreting national resources in the context of ecosystem services. No normal resource resides outside its placenta of ecosystem functioning that makes up the web of life. There is growing realisation that these functions are hugely valuable for human existence and economy, but that they are also seriously endangered by inappropriate and incomplete integrated assessments of reduced natural

resource management. Hence, not only are there potentials for combinations of ecosystems functioning failure, with unknown implications for human livelihood and well-being, let alone ecological viability. There is also no sound scientific basis for conducting the kind of genuinely integrated, integrated assessments that should be able to grapple with such outcomes.

This valuable collection of essays provides a basis for reflecting further on the theory and role of stakeholder dialogue. To begin with the notion of stakeholder may be misleading since key individuals or groups who may be absent do not declare their "stake". We may need to reflect on another set of names for participants. Power participants influence outcomes by virtue of their political bargaining strength or their economic ascendancy. Owners of resources and land have legal property rights that give them a variant of power. They do not need to be present to exert their stake. So they may not enter "dialogue". Illegal and corrupt interests may have huge bargaining power over regulators, non-governmental organisations and politicians. Again, they are neither present nor talking (and certainly not listening), yet they influence the "stake". Politicians influenced by the demands of established lobbies, or specialised entrants, may also not enter any dialogue, for they will have their own agendas. Citizens whose well-being may be influenced by a natural resources decision in say 20 years time, because of associated failure of ecosystem services, will fail to declare or even know of their interests, and hence not declare a "stake" or participate.

So the very notion of stakeholder needs careful attention in both theory and practice. Those who control the agenda need not be present: they are "second dimension" political interests. They are insidious because they infiltrate coalitions, enter into behind the scenes deals and adjust the biases in regulation, patterns of environmental quality or of natural resources sustainability.

The "third dimension" interests may simply not know what their long-term well-being might be, and how it might be affected by a set of natural resources decisions that could well affect their livelihoods and happiness. This is because we are only beginning to realise the wide range of arguments relating to alteration of ecosystem functioning that could result for a change in land use or climate change related factors. For example, the steady toxification of soil due to prolonged intensive agriculture, or because of "rained out" nutrients landing on catchments from air pollution would result in prolonged and indeterminate human health effects in two generations time. We do not know, but there is evidence for soil toxicologists that prolonged deterioration to ecosystems corrupted by toxic

additions, may result in food and water contamination that, as yet, has not been removed.

Meddling with ecosystem services can result in prolonged and pervasive long-term consequences for which communities involved are fully prepared. It is almost impossible to incorporate them in any stakeholder dialogue. They are wrapped in ignorance, and distracted by other demands on their attention to make room for dialogue. Even the heady application of the precautionary principle may not bring them in. Much as the precautionary principle has to recommend it for alerting future consequences via uncertain pathways, when the uncertainty is two generations away at least and the pathways worthy of a braided river, there is no feasible way of alerting their attention and encouraging effective involvement.

All this is telling us that the theory of stakeholder dialogues is skewed in two contrasting directions. On the one hand are the second dimension power absentees who manage the short term in their interests and set in train a huge array of possible damages to critical ecosystem functions. On the other there are the third dimension absentees whose “real future” interests are possibly affected by the steady breakdown of ecosystem services, yet who cannot sensibly get involved at a suitable point on the decision channelling.

The result is a heavily distorted picture of stakeholder dialogue that by no means guarantees either long-term sustainable outcomes or overall human well-being in resistant natural processes. Yet surely such an eminently desirable outcome is at least part of the purpose of stakeholder dialogues.

Hence it will be necessary to rechart the character of “interests inclusion” for future natural resource management and integrated assessments. There is no ready answer to how this can be addressed, but here are some thoughts on possible ways forward.

– *Establish mechanisms for exploring long term consequences for ecosystem functioning arising out of all national resource decision making.*

This could be done by a series of community-scientist-planner meeting arrangements designed to explore the likelihood of certain clusters of outcomes arising from particular natural resources, such as water use, coastal redesign in the face of sea level rise, soil care, and whole landscape sustainable stewardship. In essence, the aim would be to establish a setting for exploring a range of outcomes, and set these against the highest standards of sustaining nature and all identifiable social interests.

– *Imaging scenarios with break points.*

These scenarios of possible ecosystem functioning futures need to be shaped by a range of citizen's groups and science-regulatory interests operating a very free flowing manner. Such "floating" groups would deliberately target schools, young people (future residents) and those who may not immediately perceive their interests. The future images need to be realistic, challenging, fully supported by hypothesis and other conditions, and presented in such a way that the various future states are shared by the participant clusters acting in real "dialogue" of open ended creative learning.

– *Exposing the power relations.*

The scenario groups need to be enabled to become aware of the layers of power that surround all natural resources decisions. This can be achieved by an equivalent set of "stories" of how power and interest coexist in natural resources management, who wields it and why, and what mechanisms are possible to incorporate new power relations into the setting. Such a precedent will rely on direct engagement by politicians and by knowledgeable insiders. Here is where the regulators and donors may play a role. It may be necessary to require the decision pathway to reduce such "power scenarios" as part of the political possibly legal framing of the ultimate decisions. In addition, such "power scenarios" may need to be talked through by special training and awareness raising sessions.

All of this may appear heavy handed. But in the context of possible long term damage to critical ecosystem functions, such a procedure may become a vital compliment of integrated assessment.

– *Sequential monitoring.*

If the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has any meaning, it is that biodiversity is losing out and that ecosystem nurturing of species, habitats and ultimately, humans, is diminishing. These important additions of stakeholder interest and dialogue are necessary if there is to be any serious assurance of functioning national processes in two generations' time. Hence regular monitoring, regular correction of initial decisions, regular dialogue amongst the two sets of scenario groups will be necessary if natural resources management is to be truly sustainable. Frankly there is far too much at stake now to shift the ripples so they actually reach a shore that is recreated by their energies.

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