

Comment on “Winners and Losers: Emerging Ecological Policy”

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The question of the day's conference emerged as this: How do we modify conflicts over environmental issues, without compromising progress towards ecological goals? The general answer seemed to be “let's all sit down and talk,” justified by some contrasting, enlightening, but still quite preliminary theory.

Professor Merchant's vision of this roundtable conversation appeared to presuppose the adoption of what she calls “partnership ethics”—a broadening of the utilitarian calculus to include nonhuman entities—by all parties. I agree that ultimately, ecological sustainability cannot be achieved via appeals to narrow self-interest; thus ecological policy should foster the spread of the partnership kind of ethic. But Merchant's policy plans put the cart before the horse: if we all already had a biocentric ethic, and were willing to put our vestigial egocentric ethical agendas on the table, we wouldn't need to meet for “weeks or months” to resolve ecological problems.

Professor Lee's remarks were directed at this critical issue of ethical transition. He outlined a research agenda focusing on the question: under what conditions do people act in what he called an “ecologically rational” fashion—that is, essentially, with a partnership ethic? If we knew the answer to this question, then policy could help design institutions that fostered this kind of response.

Lee suggested a couple of options that he felt would promote ecological rationality on the part of community members. Yet as he recognizes, the case for these options is tentative, at best. First, reduce the claims of large landowners, including government landowners. Presumably this would lower the alienation felt by local citizens and empower them to take a greater ownership stake in their local environment. However, elsewhere Lee notes that “bottom-up community planning” often favors parochial extractive interests.

On the other side, Lee also warns against “state fostered communitarianism,” quoting Lasch to the effect that the republic of virtue brings with it the reign of terror. And yet, another policy recommendation he offers is to “reconnect production with consumption.” If this were done, as Daly and Cobb (1989) suggest, via trade restrictions, it is hard to imagine more sweeping state action taken in the interests of promoting community.

While Lee focuses on the need for an ethical transition, Hess ignores it, taking a self-consciously pragmatic approach to public lands management. He makes a sophisticated argument for more use of market-like regulatory tools. One can

quibble with the details; for example, how does one move from prescriptive to outcome-based regulation when outcomes are very hard to measure? Recent experience has shown that the transition to, and the benefits from, market-based regulation, while real, are typically less than we originally hoped for.

Professor Randall also points out the fundamental limits of market solutions, through his discussion of the isolation paradox (Smith's original exposition of the public good problem). Randall also provided a hint of a theoretical justification for sitting down and talking—the structure of a repeated game can actually create its own community. By binding the players to one another via formal commitment, they come to recognize and address one another's concerns, if only out of enlightened self-interest. Taking this a step further, if one player brings to the table a partnership ethic, and another an egocentric ethic, it behooves the egocentric player to educate themselves about partnership beliefs. In this way, cultural beliefs change.

But returning to markets, the thematic issue at hand is this: will greater reliance on markets inspire or undercut the “partnership ethic” or “ecological rationality” that must underlie fundamental social changes needed for long term sustainability?

One of Hess's innovative suggestions, which he hints at in his paper, and expanded on in his talk, is to create management authorities run by members of the “friends of the xyz forest,” with membership for sale, and the proceeds going to fund ecological protection efforts. Such a management authority would be buffered from political influence (but not—another quibble—from economic capture). Hess's worthy goal is to create some flexibility in a politically charged and unwieldy system. But I fear that, when ecological protection is reduced from a moral crusade to a management proxy vote, then the game will be lost.

Moral crusades are messy, and undoubtedly engender winners and losers. But my reading of American history in particular is that moral crusades, from abolition to civil rights to today's movement for intergenerational rights, change consciousness. Changes in consciousness lead to concrete results through the political system. I would thus differ with Hess in his characterization of the current prescriptive system based on scientific management as without accomplishments (consider wilderness set asides, for example) or beyond reform.

Here, Keiter's presentation is useful. Detailing the swing in the courts and the Congress from the environmental activism of the 70's to the backlash of the 80's, we find today more than

a hint of a counter-backlash in the air. Witness the popularity of President Clinton's recent decision to declare a National Monument in Utah. My reading is that environmental victories of the past have advanced the spread of the partnership ethic, making substantive rollback impossible, and further progress likely, if not immediate. Strengthening, not weakening the moral center of the environmental movement is critical, and thus I find Hess's call for depoliticizing by marketizing environmental decision-making counterproductive. This is not to say that I am opposed to greater use of market incentives; only that they be recognized simply as useful residents in the regulatory tool box.

Keiter's conclusion is that in the near future, agencies will be taking the lead, promoting regional collaborative ecosystem management. His recommendation is that Congress validate this approach through legislation. I agree. As all of the speakers noted, people are in fact sitting down and talking all across

the country. And as Randall argued, committed talking leads to outcomes where the losers feel a bit better. But there will always be losers in environmental debates, and they must have a reason to come to the table and stay. Since 1970, that reason has been federal environmental regulation or the threat of it.

Our original question was this: How do we modify conflicts over environmental issues, without compromising progress towards ecological goals? The answer might be that too much modification of conflict will be self-defeating. Ultimately, ecological sustainability will depend on profound ethical change. Ecological policy built around pragmatic compromise might undercut, rather than promote this change.

Reference

Daly, H. and J. Cobb. 1989. For the *Common Good*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.