

The Community Role in Emerging Ecological Policy

Gordon Matzke
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon 97331

Conflicts over the control of resources are an integral part of American history. Although the country has a substantial endowment of natural resources, the competing claims of different peoples suggest the existing resource base is inadequate to meet all potential demands. The discussion of winners and losers in emerging ecological policy poignantly illustrates the fact that conflict over the direction of resource policy in general, and the appropriate focus of resource control in particular, has yet to be resolved.

The papers for this conference collectively suggest that vexing environmental problems, and/or competing resource claims, might be more effectively addressed by moving some degree of management control away from centralized authority and closer toward people and sites impacted by policy decisions. The narrative of American land management experience provides considerable support for "local control" initiatives as two-thirds of the country's public domain passed quickly into individual free-hold tenure soon after it was wrested from Native American tenurial regimes. Insofar as the current issue is limited to lands still within the public domain, locally centered ecological policy initiatives are worthy of substantial discussion to clarify both their utility and desirability.

This discussion is necessary because political forces could seize on sketchy local control notions and broadly prescribe them as policy initiatives. In so doing, they may create "tenurial niches" (Fortmann and Nhira 1992) for selected groups which will be politically difficult to alter, revoke, or limit in the future. Given the way interest groups influence the policy process, tenurial niches will likely be "...icons representing the views of the principal actors in their creation" (Matowanyika 1992). There is no *a priori* reason to assume the ecological outcomes will be beneficial. They could foster entirely new and effective approaches to the management of resources of the public domain, but it is equally possible that they will result in destructive alterations of public domain management regimes, and nothing new at all. Opposite interpretations are possible because there is no clear definition of local initiatives, and rigorous debate of the merits of such approaches is just getting underway.

Although academics may see the need for a cautious approach in the face of massive uncertainties, events may overtake them. "Typically, it is the bold scheme with fuzzy boundaries that captures the political imagination." Such schemes rapidly "enter the realm of political symbolism and romanticism. ...By the time technical considerations are permitted, it may be too late to reshape the [outcome]" (Ascher and Healy 1990, 165). Even if technical expertise is given consideration, it may suffer from a "Pollyanna feasibility" perspective where

political pressures exaggerate the benefits and underestimate the costs (Ascher and Healy 1990, 166). Before this happens to local control initiatives in support of emerging ecological policy, further conceptual development is needed.

An unstated assumption of many local control discussions is that "community" is a pre-existing condition, usually in an identifiable place, which is both recognizable and agreed upon by a substantial part of its membership. Since community-based initiatives cannot deliver all possible ecological outcomes desired by disparate sectors of society, such initiatives are exercises in defining whose voices will be heard and given priority.

Policy operatives in the United States might usefully draw on developments elsewhere in the world for guidance (e.g. McNeely 1995; Murphree 1993; Redford and Mansour 1996; Western and Wright 1994). Experience elsewhere suggests that management centered on the notion of communities must deal with the difficulty of bounding relevant communities for policy-making purposes (Matzke and Mazambani 1993). The bounding problems are compounded in the context of U.S. public-land policy because place-based communities must compete with a well-developed set of network-based communities that may be unwilling to cede priority to local perspectives.

Network-based communities are spatially unbounded social units sustained by information flows between people sharing common experiences, values, interests, or goals. Their perspectives may be as narrow as a cattlemen's association, or as broad as political party, but they could perceive their interests threatened by community-based priorities. With, or without representation on-site in ecological policy discussions, they will be a powerful counter to attempts to institutionalize local influence if they choose to enunciate alternative perspectives with regard to ecological policy.

References

- Ascher, W. and R. Healy. 1990. *Natural Resource Policy Making in Developing Countries*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Fortmann, L. and C. Nhira. 1992. Local Management of Trees and Woodland Resources in Zimbabwe: A Tenurial Niche Approach. CASS Occasional Paper - NRM; 911992
- Matowanyika, J.Z.Z. 1992. Linking Human and Biological Aspects with Respect to Protected Areas: Some Observations on Indigenous Systems in Africa. Paper prepared for the IV Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas, Caracas, Venezuela, Feb. 10-21.

-
- Matzke, G.E. and D. Mazambani. 1993. Resource sharing schemes for state owned land in Zimbabwe: a discussion of conceptual issues needing consideration in the development and planning of co-management regimes. University of Zimbabwe: Centre for Applied Social Science. Occasional Paper Series 54/93.
- McNeely, J.A. (ed.) 1995. *Expanding Partnerships in Conservation*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.
- Murphree, M.W. 1993. Communities as Resource Management Institutions. International Institute for Environment and Development, Gatekeeper Series No. 36.
- Redford, K.H. and J.A. Mansour. 1996. *Traditional Peoples and Biodiversity Conservation in Large Tropical Landscapes*. Arlington, VA: The Nature Conservancy.
- Western, D. and R. Michael Wright (eds.). 1994. *Natural Connections: perspectives in Community-based Conservation*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.