

Diverse Interests and Knowledge Bases: the Challenge of Creating New Research Collaborations to Link Knowledge with Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid 1990s, a growing focus on the human dimension of natural resource management (NRM) has prompted the development of new kinds of research collaborations, and the formation of new research communities that are more strongly connected with communities of practice. In some cases those communities of practice are also place-based communities, drawing together the issue of geographic scale with that of local knowledge.

The rationale for these new collaborations has both philosophical and pragmatic underpinnings. It is useful to consider the foundations on which these new alignments are built as they represent a convergence of quite different trajectories of thought. One of these trajectories is the desire for environmental justice or a movement towards deliberative democracy in natural resource management (Dryzek 1993). Proponents of deliberative democracy in environmental planning argue the need for more effective communicative forums that allow conversations to take place between actors from different life worlds (Healey 1997: 263). Knowledge and understanding, and potentially consensus, are developed through collaborative social learning processes. Within such forums, local or practical knowledge is brought together with scientific and technical knowledge on an equal footing with no single form of rationality privileged (Healey 1997: 264).

A different trajectory driving new collaborations comes from new approaches to the governance of natural resources in Australia that emphasise more significant roles for regional communities. For example, integrated catchment management and elements of the Natural Heritage Trust program, especially the new 'Envirofund', require a greater level of community engagement and action than did previous approaches in which these responsibilities largely rested with government agencies (Crowley 2001). 'Communities' in partnership with government funding agencies and informed by



expert advice, are increasingly understood to be the key actors or agents for environmental management. 'Places' and 'regions' are understood to be the key physical location for community environmental practice, labour and knowledge (Jennings and Moore 2000). However, there are ongoing tensions between the rhetoric of community agency and regionalisation, and the desire of central governments to set agendas for NRM in an instrumentalist manner, using community engagement mainly for improving the knowledge base for more effective targeting of NRM goals in government policy.

Regardless of their origins and purpose, the emergence of new research collaborations for natural resource management poses new challenges, central to which is the development of relationships between people operating with different worldviews. The set of papers collected within the theme of 'Diverse Interests and Knowledge Bases' offer some unique and valuable insights into the various dimensions of these relationships that influence the kind of knowledge sharing that takes place. Each paper discusses a specific collaboration that brings together a new set of actors for the purpose of improving natural resource management. They address of different geographic scales and environmental settings and describe different sets of social interactions. A common thread explored in all the papers is the social dynamics at play between natural resource management research and various community or industry sectors with an interest in the outcomes of the research. Most of the authors hope to inform government policy and programs with research that has meaning to community stakeholders. Each of the contributors considers the value of 'integration' as a linking concept to describe and further the objectives of their collaboration, however their assessment of its utility varies.

THE MEANING OF INTEGRATION

The term 'integration' has a number of dictionary definitions. I think the following three key meanings are useful to keep in mind when considering integration in the context of natural resource management:

1. Integration as 'The making up or composition of a whole by adding together or combining separate parts; combination into a whole' (The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 1993) or 'to combine two or more things in order to become more effective' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, accessed 24 June 2004)
2. Integration as 'The process of bringing about or achieving equal membership of a population or social group; removal or absence of discrimination against groups or people on racial or cultural grounds; desegregation.' (The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 1993: 1386). This meaning can also imply social or cultural assimilation: 'to mix with and join society or a group of people, often changing to suit their way of life, habits and customs' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, accessed 24 June 2004).
3. The term vertical integration is used to describe 'A process in business where a company buys another company that supplies it with goods or that buys goods from

it in order to control all the processes of production' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, accessed 24 June 2004). This definition reminds us that formal institutionalised power relationships are important dimensions to engage with.

It is clear that integration means different things to the authors of the following collection of papers. For example, Hodgeson et al (2004), in describing the Western Australia Collaboration, use integration to describe a program of structured interactions and discussions for identifying shared community objectives and strategies for sustainability. The program works through peak non-government community sector organisations and has the goal of informing the development of a sustainability strategy for the state of Western Australia. They take a deliberative democracy approach, arguing the need to mobilise public engagement at the beginning of a policy process rather than the end, as is more usual. Concerned to improve the relationship between public policy and civil society, they draw on Marsh's notion of integration as the 'ability of the formal political system to create and/or distil support for proposed actions in public and interest-group opinion.' (Marsh 2000).

For Price (2004) writing about the Sustainable Grazing Systems Program, it is the concerns of NRM researchers that are being integrated with those of graziers. This is achieved through the creation of a new research community with a common language, and a new set of shared values and cultural capital. His ethnographic approach is particularly concerned with the internal workings of the new community, including the role of an executive or elite group and the qualities of those who assume leadership roles. By contrast, Duff et al (2004) describe a less close knit collaboration that encompasses diverse cultural knowledge bases and conflicting interests in the management of tropical savannas, including Indigenous land owners as well as pastoralists and various government agencies. They prefer the term 'collaboration' to 'integration' and argue that a goal of consensus is likely to compromise the notion of pluralism they uphold as a key value for the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre.

SIGNIFICANCE OF A COMMON LANGUAGE

Language plays a key role in each of these collaborations. A shared language is important for communicative purposes, as noted by Nicolson (2004) who emphasises the role of language as the link between the way in which landowners know landscapes and the way that environmental scientists do. Ecker (2004), in her discussion of the development of the BestFarms environmental management system, describes the importance of working with facilitators who are both farmers and landcare coordinators and consequently fluent in the discourse of farmers as well that of natural resource management. Further, these facilitators must also strive to find a common language that allows links to be made between the concerns of producers and those of consumers in the supply chain for farm products in the Blackwood region of Western Australia.

Language has symbolic meaning as well as communicative meaning. It can encapsulate values, modes of thought or rationality. As a consequence, it is difficult to impose a new symbolic language without alienating practitioners. Kahn et al (2004) stress the importance of defining land management goals and objectives in the grasslands of mid north South Australia in terms that farmers relate to. They argue that the language of production and profitability must continue to dominate if farmers are to maintain ownership of management goals. Environmental goals may well be considered incidental until farmers themselves make the link between promotion of perennial grasses and increased productivity. When they do, the authors argue, new practices are then much more likely to be embraced with the long-term commitment that can only come about through community ownership.

POWER AND CONSENSUS

Language is inevitably implicated in power relationships. It plays a central role in the establishment of authority and shared goals or visions. This raises the vexed issue of consensus in integration. Does integration require consensus? If not, how are shared goals to be established? Should different interests and power relations be made explicit and accepted as an ongoing tension within the collaboration or should they be subject to a mediation process?

Theorists offer different prescriptions for this dilemma. The deliberative democracy approach argues the need to create exceptional forums in which power relations are suspended so that actors with differing interests can communicate freely (Habermas 1984). Within such an ideal communicative space, power is embodied in 'the "better argument," in the power of ideas, metaphors, images and stories' (Healey 1993: 244).

John Dryzek has been a key proponent of this approach in Australian environmental policy-making, holding up an image of policy, planning and politics that combines argument, science and participatory democracy (1993: 230). However, critics of deliberative democracy argue that it is impossible to suspend power relationships in the manner proposed. Consensus is most likely to be reached through a compromise that favours the more influential players. They highlight the different modes of rationality that different sets of actors may possess, noting that some forms of rationality will always be given more weight within a deliberative process (Mouffe 1999, Hillier 2002).

In outlining the challenges faced by the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre (TSCRC), Duff et al (2004) provide a particularly poignant example of the problems raised by interest groups with different life worlds and systems of knowledge.

Recognising the unequal power relations between the pastoralists, Aboriginal groups and government agencies involved in the TSCRC, they strongly advocate the need to maintain different views and values. In fact, they consider that landscapes may be better managed with more than one strategic vision, and that there is greater value in maintaining this pluralism than in trying to broker a consensus between interest groups with divergent worldviews. For the TSCRC, the major goal and achievement is a collaboration that involves working in combination, rather than integration with its implication of combining parts into a whole. In this way, it becomes possible to draw on

both Indigenous and western knowledge systems for addressing natural resource management problems. In promoting what might be called an ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe 1999), they argue that ‘many more than just two sets of values and world-views emerge in these settings, and boundaries blur.’ (Duff et al 2004). The tensions of this interface are also a source of creativity with the potential for new knowledge to emerge.

FACILITATORS OR LEADERS?

The role of facilitators or leaders in new research collaborations can also be understood within the frameworks offered above. Within the various collaborations described in the following papers, the role of facilitators and leaders is closely connected with the dynamics of institutional structures. While deliberative democracy approaches assume a model of horizontal integration, the institutional and policy environment that new research collaborations hope to influence operates with more hierarchical structures. The process of influencing government policy or institutions may be best described as a form of vertical integration.

The Western Australian Collaboration is based on a facilitation model in keeping with deliberative democracy ideals. However, to engage with ‘civil society’ effectively, it must work through existing institutions. In this case, peak non-government organisations provide the channel for engaging with various community sectors. In this regard it is quite innovative and unlike consultative processes conducted through government agencies. In the South Australian grasslands paper, the role of extension officers as facilitators is critical. Here, the intricacies of interpersonal relationships are particularly important. Extension officers form relationships with key farmers who are innovators and early adopters of new approaches. These farmers command the respect of others in the farming community and play an ‘ambassador’ role in promoting new regimes of farm practice. The Sustainable Grazing Systems Program relies more strongly on a leadership model with a key role played by an elite group. The personal qualities of leadership and the values of the elite group give shape to the collaboration. While less democratic in this sense, this model is perhaps more effective for linking research findings directly back to communities of practice through institutional structures such as the Meat Research Corporation and the Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation.

IDEAS OF ‘COMMUNITY’

Because much of the rhetoric around the concept of integration in natural resource management invokes ideas of ‘community’, there is some value in reflecting on the various forms of community that are implicated in the following set of papers. They include:

- research communities

- communities of interest (or of common interest)
- communities of practice (eg. farmers)
- place-based communities
- Indigenous communities
- knowledge communities (a broader concept than 'research communities' in that it acknowledges that different kinds of groups may share a common knowledge base)
- learning communities (a term that links the notion of a community network with the agency of learning)

Some papers deal specifically with a new community formation for the purpose of natural resource management. Price offers the best example of this with his description of the formation of a new research community in the context of the Sustainable Grazing Systems Program. He draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1984) to describe the shared disposition that emerges as a defining feature of the new research community. Other papers describe approaches to engaging with a broader public sector labelled 'civil society' in the case of the WA Collaboration, or simply local or farming communities in the Tasmanian study.

While the idea of community is often invoked to mean social inclusion, for some years scholars have argued that processes of exclusion may define communities just as readily as those of inclusion (Bryson and Mowbray 1981, Mouffe 1999). Some of the communities described in the papers are clearly exclusive, for example, the paper by Khan et al (2004) refers specifically to male farmers in the grasslands of the mid north of South Australia. Exclusivity may be an inevitable aspect of some collaborations that involve communities of practice and place-based communities, however there is a need to recognise diversity in the context of multiple sets of exclusive groups as well as through the more inclusive ideas of community as 'civil society'. Important to the issue of diversity, is the need to consider how population dynamics are changing within these various community groupings and within rural and regional Australia more generally.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DESIGN OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS WITH DIVERSE COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Out of these papers come some important understandings for natural resource management research in community settings. The different papers, with their different scales and different sets of actors, describe a wide range of relationships. However, issues of trust, respect, power, influence and institutional structures play an integral role and provide rich subject matter worthy of further analysis. The significance of interpersonal relationships at a local geographical scale is particularly clear. Meaningful communication and the development of trust, respect and a common language occur most effectively at an interpersonal scale rather than the scale of large institutions such as government agencies.

Certain qualities are clearly desirable for research collaborations that involve communities of practice. Some of those qualities are to do with the capacity for active social learning or adaptive learning. The form of communication that takes place among participants is critical to this. While maintaining a space for pluralism is important, in some cases there it is also important to develop a collective strategic vision and set of shared values.

When thinking about designing research programs with community input and participation, a key lesson from these papers is that different approaches and institutional structures are needed for different geographic scales. The WA Collaboration has a whole of Western Australia scale. That is a scale at which much policy development happens because key government institutions are required to address concerns across the whole of a state. While many NRM issues cannot be meaningfully studied on that scale, the learning derived through new research collaborations nevertheless needs to inform this larger scale of policy development. While geographic scales are clearly important, the time frames for these new collaborative processes are also very important. A careful examination of some of these collaborations where NRM researchers engage effectively with community stakeholders and practitioners shows that the necessary relationships may take some time to develop. Time frames are important to the development of trust and mutual respect and to the ability to work through some of the relationships of power and influence that may confound these processes. There may well be appropriate time frames for these sorts of research programs. Lastly, it is critical that we seek to close the loop between research findings that are meaningful to communities of practice and government policy about natural resource management and sustainability. The findings from the studies collected here must be taken into a policy domain, and that no doubt is going to throw up more challenges.

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