

Natural Resource and Environmental Management Partnerships: Panacea, Placebo or Palliative?

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Abstract: Many of the natural resource and environmental management problems that face Australia, from the coastal zone to arid interior, are complex and long-term, both in their making and resolution. The responsibility for addressing these problems falls on both sides of the public - private dichotomy, often involving different levels of government, industry and community groups and individual citizens. In some instances these parties have sought each other out to work in partnership on a place or problem. Elsewhere, government agencies have facilitated formation of bilateral and multilateral natural resource and environmental management partnerships (e.g. coastcare and landcare groups; catchment, estuary, and coastal management groups), bringing together people of different backgrounds and interests for a similar purpose. In this paper I define terms commonly used in such settings (i.e. partnership, collaboration and cooperation) and argue for caution and careful reflection on the part of government agencies and practitioners intent on facilitating bilateral or multilateral natural resource and environmental management partnerships. Building on the metaphor used in the title, I question the appropriateness of forming partnerships in all circumstances. Basic principles for determining likely success and extent of process discipline needed in facilitating bilateral and multilateral partnerships are summarised. These include: examining the nature and scope of the particular problem; investigating the legitimacy of a partnership approach in that particular context; understanding the level of real commitment and interest of potential participants and the agency facilitating the process; establishing dialogue about the aspirations and expectations that potential participants and the facilitating agency hold about their own and each other's involvement; identifying the different 'meaning systems' of the potential participants and facilitating government agency, and addressing equity issues relating to decision-making and provision and distribution of resources necessary for the partnership to achieve the objectives negotiated by participants.

Key Words: Natural resource management, environmental management, partnership, collaboration, success.

INTRODUCTION

In terms of natural resource and environmental management, partnerships are very much 'in the news'. From the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development to the corporate strategies of business and government agencies, people are 'talking up' the need for participants from industry, community and government to work in partnership to tackle natural resource and environmental management problems and opportunities. Such talk is appealing. The challenges that face us appear almost impossible to resolve through parties working in isolation. These partnerships may be **unilateral**, where people from similar backgrounds work to collaboratively and cooperatively on a shared problem or opportunity, for example, a growers' or fishers' cooperative; **bilateral**, where the partners come from two different backgrounds, for example a rural landcare group where partners, predominantly from a single primary industry group, work with government; or **multilateral**, where the partners come from several different backgrounds, as is the case, for example, with estuary, coastal and catchment management groups. While recognizing their value and importance, in this paper I take a more dispassionate view of the 'partnership phenomenon'. Focusing on bilateral and multilateral partnerships, I define their nature, look at their advantages and

limitations and comment on the place of such partnerships in natural resource and environmental management. I contend that bilateral and multilateral natural resource and environmental management partnerships are neither a panacea, nor a placebo. However, I argue that unless their advantages, limitations and place in natural resource and environmental management are well understood by practitioners, decision-makers, and participants, they may very well serve as a natural resource and environmental management palliative. Participants may be kept free from immediate pain, their senses dulled and preoccupied by the 'business of partnership', while the health of the natural system that brought them to work together continues on its terminal decline, the economic and political pain and side-effects of other, perhaps more efficacious, treatments rendering their application unpalatable.

DISCUSSION

Partnerships, collaboration, cooperation and power

The characteristics of effectively functioning networks have been applied to the study of partnerships by various researchers [e.g. Darlow and Newby, 1997; Roberts, 2000]. These characteristics include recognition of dependency; pooling of resources; exchange of information; development of trust; a mutual orientation; and a commitment over the long haul [Stoker and Young, 1993]. When participants form such partnerships, they may collaborate. Collaboration is defined by Gray [1985, p.912] as: '(1) the pooling of appreciations and/or tangible resources, e.g. information, money, labour etc., (2) by two or more stakeholders, (3) to solve a set of problems *or to realise opportunities (my addition)* which neither can solve individually'.

Partners may also cooperate. The terms collaboration and cooperation are often used interchangeably. They are not the same. Wondolleck and Yaffee [2000: xiii] see cooperation as involving 'individuals or groups moving in concert in a situation in which no party has the power to command the behaviour of the others.' Collaboration focuses on mutual gain as a basis for partnership. Partners may cooperate when they collaborate. Cooperation is about the distribution of power within a partnership, with no partner having power or influence over the other(s). Mutual gain then, is not a prerequisite for cooperation in a partnership, although it is for collaboration [Gray, 1985: 912]. While understanding concepts of collaboration and cooperation within partnerships as involving mutual gain and power sharing, there can be a danger in viewing partners solely as 'one-dimensional' actors setting out to maximise gains for themselves. There are social and cultural contexts that come into play. Partnerships may be viewed as 'interactions among different meaning systems' rather than 'interplays among competing interests' [Poncelet, 2001a: 15]. There may be opportunities for the production of new ways of thinking, talking and acting with regard to the environmental challenge at hand [Poncelet, 2001a: 15]. Bilateral and multilateral partnerships involve people of different value and meaning systems coming together in pursuit of a common goal [Adams and Hess, 2001: 20]. Partners may value the common goal for different reasons. Entering into the partnership may lead the partners into a dialogue that allows them to better appreciate each other's values, meaning systems, aspirations and expectations. Pretty and Ward [2001: 218] have developed a typology of group development that can be usefully applied to bilateral and multilateral natural resource and environmental management partnerships, showing how they may change, 'or mature', over time. Of course, these groups are made up of individuals and such changes may also be mirrored at a personal level [Poncelet, 2001b].

A brief perusal of public participation literature confirms the view of Wondolleck and Yaffee [2000: xiii] that the concepts of power and partnership are related. Arnstein [1969] and Pretty [1994], in their respective typologies of public participation, identify that negotiation and redistribution of power are fundamental to the formation of partnerships. When participants form partnerships, they negotiate their power relationships. Sharing decision-making and responsibility for decisions, as well as the resources to allow partners to participate appropriately in the business of the partnership, is fundamental to this process.

Understanding the nature and scope of the problem or opportunity

Some natural resource and environmental management problems and opportunities may be more amenable to the formation of partnerships than others. Dukes and Firehock [2000: 59] have identified a suite of factors that help to determine the need for 'caution, consultation and process discipline' in relation to partnership building and collaboration on natural resource and environmental management problems or opportunities. Some problems may be almost impossible to resolve relying solely on partnership-based activity. Characteristically, such problems have a large scope; a large constituency; are related to public lands and resources; are likely to have a long-term impact; involve mainly policy or regulatory solutions; may set a precedent for other settings; require the partners to assume greater authority than they possessed previously; involve a partnership / collaborative process that is mandated by government; have large power disparities between the participants; have fundamental values at stake; have been preceded by extensive conflict; and/or rely on bargaining and agreement seeking [Dukes and Firehock, 2000: 59]. In such circumstances a high level of process discipline will be necessary and a context-appropriate mix of regulatory, economic, educational approaches should also be considered.

As well as carefully scoping the nature of the problem or opportunity to assess its suitability for this approach, it is equally important to have a good understanding of the legislative, social, economic, political and cultural contexts within which it is situated, and the processes that may be used to establish and facilitate the partnership. Wondolleck and Yaffee [2000: 259] have developed three criteria to help in this process relating to legitimacy, fairness and wisdom. These criteria and the arguments they present to support them, are briefly discussed below.

Legitimacy

There may be laws and regulations already in existence relating to the problem or opportunity in question. The development of a bilateral or multilateral partnership (eg a landcare, coastcare, estuary management or catchment management group) should not be seen as a means of circumventing these laws, or of the responsible agencies avoiding their duty to implement them. The process should also not override any existing participation opportunities for parties uninterested or unable to participate in the proposed partnership. Some natural resource and environmental management partnerships may have a limited life. For example, multilateral natural resource and environmental management partnerships such as estuary and catchment management committees may be reorganised, change their composition or even cease to exist when there is a change in relevant State government policy. Such partnerships need to develop a clear understanding of where the responsibilities of the various partners lie in relation to actions or decisions undertaken under the name of the 'partnership.'

Fairness

All parties who may be affected by the business of the partnership should be involved in its collaborations. If a representation model is to be used, it is important that representatives are credible and that they communicate effectively with the group they purport to represent. Such communication activities may require resources and support to be provided by other interested parties, so that less well-resourced groups can be equitably represented at the partnership table. Decision making processes should be open, accountable and transparent, encouraging consensus rather than capitulation.

Wisdom

The process should encourage partners to focus on what needs to be solved and not on other issues. Biophysical and social scientific information relevant to the problem or opportunity should be readily shared with partners and presented in ways that are comprehensible to all involved. The process used, and any decisions reached, should be consistent with current scientific understanding on the matters at hand, identifying areas of scientific uncertainty and highlighting ways that progress towards stated partnership goals can be monitored and evaluated.

CONCLUSION

The sustainable management of the environment and the natural resources that comprise it is an ongoing and challenging task that falls both within and between the spheres of interest, expertise, knowledge and authority of all levels of government and community and industry. The trick is to have the wisdom to recognize and accept the nature and scope of the task and to plan, manage, monitor and evaluate progress and adapt management regimes accordingly. Such wisdom may enlighten, emancipate and empower those who have traditionally wielded authority on such matters to know when the abilities necessary to manage the challenge are shared or held by other parties and when and where they must share power and responsibility to work in true partnership with them. They must also resist the temptation to abrogate their responsibility by trying to involve others in such work for reasons of improved public relations, political expediency or perceived cost saving when the ability, authority and responsibility for the task fall predominantly within their realm. Poor natural resource and environmental management partnership practices breed mistrust and cynicism. Enough is known about the basic principles of good partnership practice. To thoughtfully apply these principles and to reflect and learn from this process can yield success, yet involves a degree of risk, and so requires considerable commitment and courage on the part of practitioners, and governments – not to mention the participants!

Partnerships are no panacea, and while the Hippocratic Oath may render intentionally administering poison out of the question, many of our ‘patients’ now know the taste of the sugar-coated pill and recognize and resent the way that public participation partnership palliatives have temporarily dulled their senses, while the health of their surroundings has continued to decline, unacknowledged.

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