CONSERVATION, DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIETAL ISSUES: A FEW ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ST. LUCIA

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Conservation, development and society are intricately linked, and attitudes towards the latter are largely determined by peoples' perceptions (view). Peoples' perceptions are in turn influenced by factors such as observed trends and socio-economic circumstances.

1.   Local Populations and Perceptions of Conservation

The following discusses some issues surrounding the attitudes of local populations towards conservation.

The Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) of St. Lucia makes it clear that "there is no free access to living resources". As such, foreign and local fishing licenses, fisheries regulations and permit systems have been operationalised. In spite of these measures, a **perception** has long existed among the general populace that resources are unlimited and free for all. This belief, which was enunciated by some persons during the broad-based consultations among fisheries stakeholders that led to the development of the FMP, has largely been responsible for the 'Tragedy of the Commons' plaguing natural resource management in St. Lucia, and indeed the world over.

In some cases, a group may opt not to participate in conservation activities even if given the opportunity, if there is a feeling (perception) of inadequacy by the group. In St. Lucia, participatory processes are becoming more common. However, a culture of participation is still developing and some people doubt their ability to contribute meaningfully to a process. For example, during the development of the **National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for St. Lucia**, broad-based consultations were held with stakeholders around the island. Some institutions/individuals who were invited to take an active part in the process, expressed feelings of inadequacy---they felt that they were not competent on the issue. The connections thus had to be made between these individuals/organisations and biodiversity, in order to demonstrate that in essence, everyone has a connection and in effect, a role to play. Of course, the methods used to transmit information and draw people out can determine the perceptions that are formed about their role with regard to a conservation issue.

In other cases, some persons who choose not to participate in forums that discuss conservation activities opt out because there is a perception that their participation will

not make a difference and will not influence the process under consideration. This belief can be seen at various levels among local populations, two of which are mentioned as follows: (1) On the political front, economics often precede environmental (conservation) matters and there is a genuine belief, strengthened through observed trends, that 'politics' will triumph in the end. Thus, employment generation through the construction of hotel X on site Y may well prevail over the fact that site Y is the last pristine area of forest and home to rare species. (2) Often, there are multiple conservation efforts occurring concurrently; however, implementation is problematic due to inadequate resources (financial, human, technical, technological) and lack of coordination. This lack of follow-through encourages a perception of 'all talk and no action' and can discourage future participation in conservation efforts.

Peoples' perception of conservation can also be influenced by **observed trends**. For example, the **Soufriere Marine Management Area** (SMMA) was officially established in 1995 in response to: competition among users of the coastal zone of Soufriere for limited space and resources; degradation of resources; and subsequent loss of economic opportunity. The SMMA has a system of zonation and rules for specific uses within the area, which allow for traditional uses (including nearshore fishing and recreation) to continue alongside the water-based tourism sector. Fishers of Soufriere have sacrificed prime fishing area as marine reserves, for their long-term benefit. However, there are a few well-known offenders who continue to fish illegally, especially persons from outside of the Soufriere community. Management has not dealt effectively with such perpetrators and this generates a sense of disillusion among community members who support the SMMA. Of course, this does not augur well for conservation efforts and if not addressed effectively, can lead to a breakdown of the entire system.

Socio-economic circumstances also influence perceptions about conservation. Community based conservation is an integral part of community development. Ellsworth (2001) describes a sustainable/just community as having stable social, economic and natural environments. Thus, if the social and economic needs of communities have not been met, it figures then, that conservation efforts (environmental) will not generate the full support of local populations. For example, the first year of operation of the **SMMA** seemed to be progressing well, until unforeseen changes in the socio-economic status of community members raised concerns for conservation. One such change involved the closure of the two major employment establishments, causing many people to be suddenly out of work. Fishing became the readily available means for earning an income, and illegal fishing in marine reserves became rampant. In addition, there was resurgence of old conflicts involving competition for use of limited space and resources. Thus, it can be said that the willingness to participate in conservation activities was present, but the ability to participate was impeded due to unforeseen, uncontrollable circumstances.

At this point, it is clear that a number of factors determine how local populations perceive 'conservation'. Other factors such as **educational, religious and cultural (traditional) backgrounds**, as well as **political affiliation**, also play a role in influencing perceptions

about conservation. The next section uses examples to illustrate how perceptions can influence peoples' attitudes towards conservation and development.

2. Perceptions of Conservation and Development Determine Attitudes

Perceptions of conservation and development, whether based on fact or myth, will determine attitudes regarding these issues. How local populations perceive conservation was dealt with in the previous section. In reference to 'development', many persons equate the term with a proliferation of infrastructure and buildings and view this as progress. For example, the establishment of a new hotel will generate employment, and persons whose socio-economic status is not acceptable to them, will likely view this 'development' positively, regardless of whether the development has negative impacts on the environment. However, in a small island developing state such as St. Lucia, where there is a heavy dependency on limited natural resources by the tourism sector; and where 'development' as described above is commonplace, some would put forward the case that this 'development' cannot be genuinely associated with progress. Supporters of this latter view would say that development with inadequate control eventually destroys the resource base on which it depends.

The following examples seek to further illustrate the points made thus far:

- *Tradition-Oriented Perceptions*

In St. Lucia, a moratorium on the harvest of **sea turtles** has been in effect since March 1, 1996. This was in response to increasing global and local concern for the continued depletion of the sea turtle resource. However, the deep-rooted nature of tradition (culture) is not easily broken and there is a genuine belief, especially among older fishermen, that the resource is inexhaustible. While some fishermen acknowledge that stocks are decreasing, the saying: *"my grandfather caught turtles, my father caught turtles, and I will catch turtles"* still holds in some localities (d'Auvergne and Eckert, 1993). This is one of the reasons contributing towards the continued illegal harvesting of sea turtles.

- *Perceptions Based on Ignorance (Education)*

In one of the five sets of zones in the **SMMA** - marine reserves - no fishing is allowed. Six years after establishment, while progress has been made, fishers have had difficulty in accepting marine reserves for the benefit of fisheries. This has been especially apparent among older fishers, who have expressed the view that there will always be fish; they may go away for a while, but they will always come back. In a recent study conducted in the SMMA (Gell, Roberts and Goodridge, 2001), it was demonstrated that fishers in Soufriere were generally aware of the purpose of the SMMA and of marine reserves. They even accepted that the reserves had led to increases in fish stocks, but few of them believed that more fish in the reserves would lead to more fish outside the reserves. Of course, their perceptions on the function of reserves (do fishermen really benefit?) can determine the degree of support for them.

- *Perceptions Based on Observed Trends, Feelings of Inequity and Ignorance*

Again in the **SMMA**, even with fishers who have come to understand and accept the function of marine reserves, perceptions that they have been marginalised to accommodate "rich, white tourists" cannot be overlooked. The fact that diving and snorkeling are allowed in marine reserves is still a source of unrest among fishers, who feel that they in no way benefit from visitors to the SMMA. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear of cases where fishers have blamed divers for cutting open pots, or yachts for damaging gear at the surface. Some also feel that the presence of divers in reserves is detrimental to coral reef and fish stocks. Likewise, from the standpoint of visitors, the actions just mentioned, especially the intentional release of fish in pots, are indicative of a perception skewed towards conservation, with little regard for the livelihoods of fishers. Fishers' perceptions that tourists get priority over them as well as tourists' 'skewed' perception towards conservation, have likely not enhanced positive relationships between the two groups, that can in turn have negative impacts on conservation and future developmental plans.

- *Perceptions Based on Economics and Observed Trends*

In September 2001, an open access system was declared for the **sea urchin** fishery, where harvesting was allowed for four days, due to large numbers of mature individuals. Prior to this approach, harvests had only been open to select fishers via a permit system. In spite of past experiences involving prolonged periods when sea urchins numbers were low or non-existent (the last harvest was in 1995), sea urchin harvesters still targeted the resource illegally before the legal harvest period was declared open and after the harvest period closed. Given current difficult economic times, socio-economic circumstances may have determined the attitude of these persons towards conservation. These circumstances likely influenced individuals' perception of the resource, which seemed to be: "take as much as we can now; tomorrow will take care of itself". It must also be noted that the drawn-out period between the 2001 harvest period and the last harvest period of 1995 was believed to be the effect of storm activity, which may have reinforced peoples' perception and attitude towards taking as much as possible now, in the event that past events (natural occurrences) would be repeated. It is likely too, that the prolonged no-harvest-period led to inadequate 'memory' of the fragility of the resource, which was managed via a strict permit system, and this could well have contributed towards the 'relaxed' attitude of individuals towards the fishery.

- *Perceptions Based on Observed Trends and Education*

In Vieux-Fort, in the south of St. Lucia, the **Aupicon Charcoal Producers Group** has been permitted to selectively harvest mangrove trees for charcoal production, alternating this with replanting. This sustainable practice allows for a good balance between conservation and economic development. The positive attitude of the group has been strengthened through observation (by harvesting in a certain way, livelihoods can be continually accommodated) and education (through the efforts of organisations such as

the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute and the Departments of Fisheries and Forestry).

Knowing that perceptions of 'conservation' and 'development' can influence peoples' attitudes towards these issues, it stands to reason that accurate perceptions and positive attitudes need to be generated among resource users, that will in turn impact positively on conservation and development efforts. This requires dialogue between resource users and managers, with advancement towards participatory and collaborative forms of management.

3.   Existing and Experimental Forms of Dialogue between Managers and Local Populations

Peoples' inaccurate or negative perceptions about conservation and development can indeed be impediments to effective natural resource management. Steps have to be taken to remove such obstacles for the long-term benefit of all. Dialogue must be initiated between resource users and managers and relationships built, so as to encourage more participatory and collaborative forms of management. There are many methods that have been identified for initiating dialogue between managers and local populations and encouraging public participation.   Some of these are indicated in Figure 1.

METHODS USED FOR INTIATING DIALOGUE

▪ Petitions	▪ Exhibitions and displays
▪ Idea Fairs	▪ Advisory groups and task forces
▪ In-school sessions	▪ Demonstrations
▪ Workshops	▪ Special events such as sports and cultural activities
▪ Public meetings	
▪ Questionnaires and surveys	▪ Citizen committees
▪ Site visits	▪ Discussion circles
▪ Focus groups	▪ Tours
▪ Media releases	▪ Television and radio talk shows
▪ Advertisements	▪ Telephone 'hot lines'
▪ Press conferences	▪ Town hall meetings
▪ Websites and list servers	▪ Public inquiries
▪ Open houses	▪ Community liaison staff
▪ Information centres	▪ Volunteering opportunities
▪ Information kits	▪ Briefs and written submissions
▪ Competitions	▪ Role playing or gaming
▪ Conferences and symposia	▪ Direct confrontations
▪ Referenda	▪ Expert panels

Figure 1: Techniques Available for Initiating Dialogue between Resource Managers and Local Populations

Of course, techniques must be adapted to the case under consideration. Some techniques allow for to and fro communication, while others are limiting in their facilitation of feedback. Whichever technique is chosen, some basic principles should be applied for effective public participation and dialogue. These principles are not full-proof methods for success in natural resource management, but they are necessary contributors to it.

The public participation process needs to:

- *Start with a fresh slate:* Facilitators and managers should not come with all the answers. While some guidance must be maintained, the process should drive itself and not have the facilitator or manager driving the process to fulfil preconceived agendas. Stakeholders must be meaningfully involved at every stage of the process.

- *Have a clear mandate and be purpose driven*: People need a reason to participate and they also need to know what is expected of them from the beginning of a process. For example, when agreeing to become part of an advisory committee, the members need to have a similar understanding of the goals and objectives of the group and the demands to be made on them or on the agency they represent.

- *Be open, fair, and inclusive*: This means that no one should be excluded from the process, even if such a person is likely to raise contentious issues. On the other hand, domination of any public participation process by a particular value set to the near exclusion of others is undesirable. Bringing all pertinent issues to the table for consensus or conflict resolution will increase the benefits in the long term.

- *Be professionally designed and facilitated*: The participants themselves must play a role in shaping the nature (timing, frequency, and agenda) of the process. However, the facilitators of public participation processes need to be appropriately trained. They must also be able to identify with issues at the local level; be able to 'reach' the people (in St. Lucia, for example, through being able to speak 'Creole'); while at the same time, maintaining a level of neutrality.

- *Be informal, but structured*: Some structure is necessary to maintain a degree of order and control over the process, but excessive formality can alienate certain groups and undermine the success of the public participation process.

- *Encourage voluntary involvement*: The process needs to be designed so that it facilitates consensus-building, rather than encouraging litigation or other confrontational options.

- *Be designed for positive-outlook problem solving*: People are naturally self-oriented. Processes need to be designed such that they encourage collective thinking and decision-making.

- *Use a variety of techniques*: This is linked to the need for the process to be professionally facilitated. Varied and innovative methods must be used to reach as

wide a range of participants as is possible, while encouraging respect for diverse interests. For example, linguistic non-competence should not be used as an excuse for exclusion.

- *Have a clear influence on decision-making*: If participants feel that their input will have no bearing on the decision-making process, their willingness to participate will be limited. To ensure that participants are made to feel that their views are at least heard, if not reflected in decision-making, every effort must be made to express appreciation for participants' input, document what people say, provide justification for non-adoption of recommendations, and make such records available to all participants.

- *Ensure that representation works*: Misrepresentation of a particular group or viewpoint can be detrimental to the public participation process. Participants must be a genuine representation of a true range of interests and values. In some cases, this means providing for several representations for a particular interest group.

- *Make allowance for sufficient time and technical resources and provide equal opportunity to access information and financial resources*: Time is costly and, as such, delays are undesirable. However, the process needs to be flexible to allow enough time and opportunity for the resolution of conflicts, understanding of complex issues, and strengthening the capacity of weaker groups to allow them to participate effectively.   As much as possible, resources must also be made available to allow participants to formulate sound opinions.

- *Keep decision-makers and the general public informed throughout the process:* In order to promote transparency and accountability and increase the ability of the public and management authorities to make sound decisions, decision-makers and the general public must be kept constantly informed of developments. Information must be made available in a timely and reliable manner and in the appropriate format.

- *Have reasonable and realistic expectations*: Public participation processes do not often produce miracles! There must be realistic expectations, given time and resource constraints and the complexity of issues under consideration.

- *Focus on the future, not the past*: The physical settings (locations) selected for public participation processes are often used as venues to argue about "the way it used to be". Participants must be encouraged to be optimistic and look for innovative ways and opportunities to make the best of the future for their collective well-being.

- *Have a commitment to implementation, monitoring and reporting*: Very often, public participation endeavours are superficial processes conducted with the sole purpose of preventing 'backlash' or meeting a legal or other requirement. There is a need to sustain continued public trust, confidence, and capacity during project completion and over substantial periods of time.

None of these principles are necessarily new. We simply fail to practice them in regular management of natural resources because they are time-consuming and expensive in the short-term. However, more and more, it is becoming clear that we cannot succeed at natural resource management without meaningful public participation and ongoing dialogue. In this regard, Ellsworth's (2001) concept of community justice needs to be reiterated. He refers to "justice stewardship" as: *"...the engagement of citizens in developing and implementing valid, timely, and impartial solutions to problems and the stewardship of mutual responsibility and accountability for social, economic, and environmental well being"*. Traditional forms of citizen engagement fall short of the needs of those attempting to work together for the resolution of complex problems, often leading to a "disgruntled citizen" and non-sustainability. To find workable solutions to complex issues, it is essential that the focus be expanded, so as to include all the factors that contribute to the problem and all the interests that contribute to the solutions. This requires **collaborative approaches to management**, with this end stage being an evolutionary process that adjusts and matures over time (Figure 2).

Continuum of Citizen Engagement
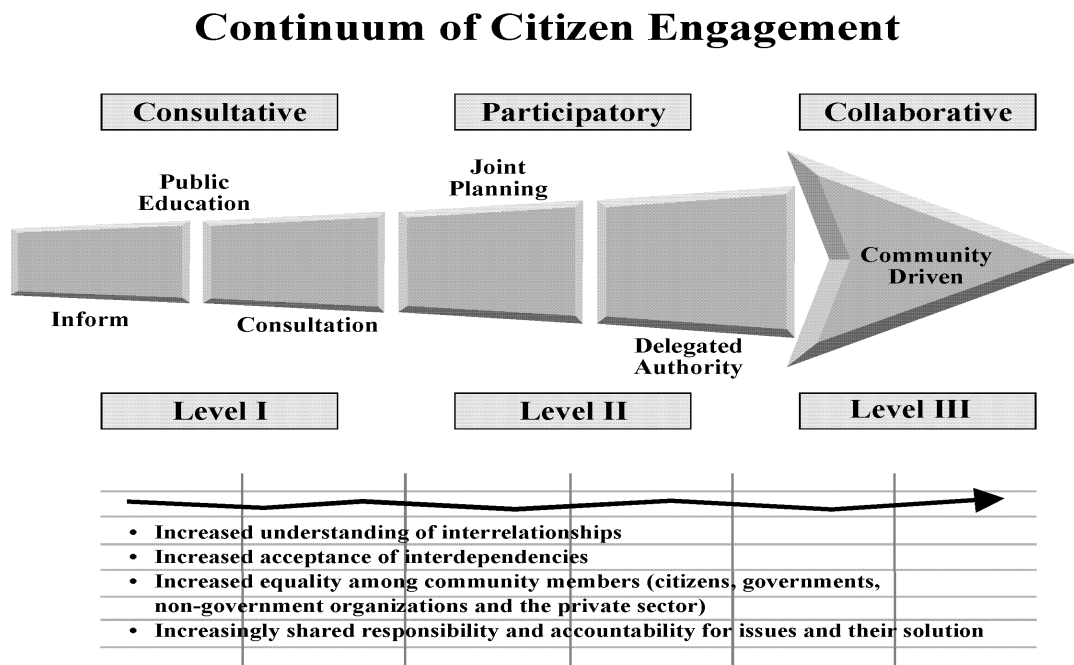
Source: Ellsworth and Walters, 1997

Figure 2: Continuum of Citizen Engagement

While there have been many initiatives in St. Lucia geared towards citizen engagement, in my opinion, St. Lucia is generally still at a stage on the continuum between level one, consultative, and level two, participatory. There are, however, a few examples that lean towards community driven natural resource management. The case of the Grande Anse Sea Turtle Watching Group follows:

Grande Anse Sea Turtle Watching Project: A Step Beyond Dialogue

Turtle watching has been conducted on the Grande Anse beach for more than a decade under the direction of the Department of Fisheries and the St. Lucia Naturalists' Society. This project has now been expanded to include community members in a manner that allows them to earn a living by providing a service for a fee, while playing an active role in the conservation of sea turtles. The project encompasses beach patrolling, turtle data collection, touring, vending and catering, all of which already involve, or will involve locals from the surrounding community. The new project was launched in April 2001. The initiative is a co-management arrangement involving governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, and community members, but the actual caretakers of the project are community members. The objectives of the programme are to:

- Conserve the marine turtle resource at Grande Anse Beach

- Increase local participation in environmental resource management

- Realise the economic potential and other development benefits from natural ecosystems within and around the community

- Promote heritage tourism as a tool for conservation and local cultural development, while promoting visitor interaction at the community level

- Foster linkages between rural communities and the tourism industry.

At present, locals conduct beach patrols on the Grande Anse Beach on four days of the week, from mid afternoon to daybreak. Fourteen guides from the community have been trained and hired and there are plans to increase patrolling activity to cover the remaining days of the week. Tagging of turtles also occurs by trained guides. The interpretation centre has not yet been constructed, but it is hoped that this will be done shortly. A gift shop, small catering facility, and washroom facilities are also planned for the area.

The area receives clientele from hotels, tour operators and local interests. Already, there has been a noted decrease in illegal slaughtering on the beach and the guides have made "significant earnings" (pers. comm., coordinator of the Grande Anse Turtle Watching Group). Funds collected go into the sustenance of the project.

The Grande Anse Turtle Watching Project is a step in the right direction, and every effort must be made to sustain it. However, the tourism industry is a big business, which is driven by market economy. It is thus possible that large and wealthy corporations may eventually determine the fate of this community-based ecotourism project, removing it from the hands of local communities. Steps must be taken to prevent this from occurring and to make allowance for tourist revenue that comes into the area to stay in the local community, rather than falling into the hands of larger developers and outside groups.

Conclusion

In concluding, it must be recalled that no matter how many strategies are put in place to conserve resources, these strategies could be ineffective if they are considered to be incompatible with political aspirations or traditional community rights. There must be a fair balance between economic, social and environmental components in order to encourage accurate perceptions and build positive attitudes towards conservation and development. Collaborative forms of management must be paramount and this goes far beyond simple dialogue. This type of management, with due consideration to social, economic and environmental aspects, as practised by the Grande Anse Sea Turtle Watching Group, facilitates the transformation of individual agendas into shared interests that support and reflect collective needs and understandings.

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