

Comments on the State of American Environmental Decision Making

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On the morning of the last day of the 1999 National Conference on Environmental Decision Making, conference attendees participated in breakout group discussions that addressed five questions relating to this overarching question: "Can American society make sound environmental decisions?" This query was the theme of Professor Lynton Caldwell's Keynote Presentation that began the day's activities. His paper is included in this special issue.

To spur discussion of the main points considered in his paper, Professor Caldwell prepared five discussion questions for the breakout groups. The questions addressed the following points: Americans' conception of the environment; obstacles confronting public environmental policy; threats to the environmental future; contradictions between positive public and negative Congressional attitudes about the environment; and how to reconcile economic growth and environmental quality. Caldwell developed the questions to encompass some of the keystone issues facing American environmental policy. Caldwell points out that inadequate or highly divergent public conceptions of the "environment" may stymie effective and coordinated environmental policy initiatives. Even when there is the veneer of high public support for environmental policies, there may be conflicting personal values that lead to politics of conflict and interminable clashes between economic and environmental goals. In the cases of real support for environmental policy change, overpowering and intractable institutional obstacles may thwart the best of intentions for environmental protection. More complex and difficult to assess are any future threats to the environment; appropriate planning and response measures may overwhelm our current capabilities and resources. American society's inability to resolve even one of these keystone issues can have a major negative impact on the ability

of the United States to make sound environmental decisions.

The balance of this article summarizes the opinions of conference attendees on these keystone issues. The entire text of each question is presented first, followed by important points made by the breakout group assigned to the topic. Each breakout group consisted of approximately six people, including a facilitator. Just over one hour was allowed for discussion.

QUESTION 1: *Do Americans have a common understanding of "environment" as a focus of public policy? What do you believe are (or should be) the respective roles of local, state and national government in relation to the environment? What are the responsibilities of the private sector?*

Americans do not have a common understanding of "environment." Divergent views about the environment are influenced by a host of factors. Two of the most important are:

- *where people live*—For example, water raises different issues in places such as Arizona (where groundwater and drinking water scarcity are key issues) versus Minnesota (where protecting lake water quality is of primary interest). Also, environmental issues differ from place to place, from old growth forest issues in the Pacific Northwest to reestablishing prairies in the Mid-west.
- *people's cultural background*—Culture has a powerful effect on how people view the environment. The most stark contrast is between the dominant culture which views the environment as discrete components (e.g., a wetland, a river, an urban air problem) as opposed to more indigenous cultures which view environment as part of a whole. The dominant culture also takes a more linear view of reality whereas indigenous cultures believe in a more circular, closed reality. Differences in culture underlie the tension between protecting the natural environment and advancing industrialized society.

This discussion group believed that environmental policy should incorporate different conceptions of environment and

that pluralism can be a source of strength. However, they emphasized that conflicting views of the environment have led to problems in addressing environmental issues. Current environmental policy is highly compartmentalized, and based on the perception that environmental problems are discrete and geographically separable. The discussion group felt that it is preferable to take a much broader systemic approach to environmental problems.

The discussion group also felt that government has a very important role to play in environmental protection and in promoting a more systemic approach to environmental protection. One role of the national government is to establish national environmental standards. There is a perception, if not the reality, that individual states have incentives to weaken environmental standards to attract new business and have initiated "a race to the bottom." Strong national environmental standards would eliminate this problem. States need to: become less parental in relations to locals and tribes; assume technical support roles; and help locals make decisions that incorporate regional perspectives and focus on causes rather than symptoms of environmental problems. Tribal and local governments need to assess and articulate the environmental values of their citizens and take a more active role in implementing environmental programs.

The group felt that environmental problems do not correspond to current political jurisdictions. Thus, limiting this part of the question to the role of *existing* government institutions is not warranted. There is a need for the systematic evaluation of environmental decision making responsibilities in the US. If a fresh start or empty slate is assumed, then determinations should be made at what level particular environmental decision making should occur, and who should make the decisions. Then responsibilities could be allocated accordingly. Hopefully, suggestions for new institutional arrangements will arise out of this analysis.

The private sector must be included in all efforts to protect the environment. Unfortunately, some very strong and well-known

forces act as constraints to this goal. The foremost problem is the private sector's short time horizon. Emphasis on meeting quarterly earnings goals, combined with fast-paced technological change in many industries, virtually forestalls long range perspectives. Government regulation of the private sector is becoming more problematic as international corporations grow in size and power and scope. On a more positive note, many efforts are beginning to make the private sector more responsible for environmental quality. For example, green certification is where a complete life cycle analysis of the product is examined to make some basic environmentally conscious standard. The ecology of commerce initiative, as lead by The Natural Step, is based upon the assertion that all business depends upon the environment and that a long-term view is necessary. Lastly, many people, including Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School, advocate that aggressively meeting environmental regulations can actually be profitable.

QUESTION 2: *What are the principle issues and obstacles confronting public environmental policy and how should they be addressed? Is a Constitutional amendment needed for environmental protection?*

There are numerous issues and obstacles confronting public environmental policy. This breakout group identified six primary issues but were able to discuss only three in detail. The first issue is the lack of recognized connection between a healthy environment and the economy. This is a recurring theme throughout the breakout group discussions, as it was directly addressed above and is also directly addressed under question five. This breakout group felt this was the most important issue facing US environmental policy and therefore spent much time brainstorming ways of addressing the issue. Eight potential solutions were considered:

- better publicize the clear connection between the "success stories" where a healthy environment and a healthy economy exist in a positive feedback system;
- stress the profitability of a healthy environment, following the ecology of commerce ideas mentioned above;

- establish stronger partnerships between government agencies responsible for environmental protection and designers of environmental educational curricula;
- establish cooperation and partnerships among business and environmental organizations;
- educate government decision makers, especially economists, about the connection between a healthy environment and a healthy economy;
- educate lending institutions about benefits of environmentally friendly projects and disadvantages of environmentally destructive projects;
- have government leaders emphasize long-term sustainability as one keystone of government policy; and
- re-vamp tax structure to encourage use of environmentally friendly equipment and manufacturing processes.

A second important issue that must be confronted is our nation's crisis orientation to public policy in general and environmental policy in particular. Experience shows that policies are most easily established when the situation is "critical." Unfortunately, much damage to human and ecological health has usually already been inflicted to bring the situation to the point of criticality. To reduce preventable damage and to foster the implementation of policies that would be more cost efficient and effective over the long-run, the public needs to have a long-term view. Leaders, educators, organizers, and others need to work to orient the public in this fashion.

A third important issue is that policies are often too general and inflexible. The "one size fits all" approach to environmental regulation, while potentially making the passage of any environmental law or regulation possible, ends up causing difficulties at the implementation stage. It is recommended that the federal agencies set broad environmental goals but let individual locales establish implementation methods. Regular and standardized mediation processes should be adopted to reconcile differences between policy setters and implementers.

Three additional issues that were listed but not discussed were:

- poor fit between government tools and environmental problems;
- important problems are not always "visible" to public and policy makers; and
- lack of integration of individual problems into broader issues.

The breakout group did not come to a consensus on the need for a constitutional amendment for environmental protection. The idea of raising environmental quality to the level of a core national value is a good one, however.¹

QUESTION 3: *What are the principle threats to the environmental future: overpopulation, excessive consumption, depletion of natural resources, air and water pollution, climate change, extinction of plant and animal species and ecosystems, etc.?*

The breakout group addressing this question listed seven principle threats to the environmental future. Three deserve special consideration. Four, in their words, deserve honorable mention. The top three problems are:

- lack of systems perspectives (e.g., not considering full life cycles of products, not understanding the roles of environment, economy and community);
- policies or lack of policies that lead to overpopulation; and
- view of environment as detached from ourselves.

Those problems deserving honorable mention are:

- inequity/environmental justice;
- societal subsidizing of environmental degradation;
- lack of foresight—long range future thinking; and
- lack of knowledge concerning all aspects of state of the environment.

It is interesting that this breakout group chose to list problems with "people" as opposed to strictly defined environmental problems (e.g., air pollution). People need to adopt systems perspectives. People need to institute policies to control overpopulation. People need to stop viewing the environment as detached from ourselves. People need to overcome injustice. People need to stop subsidizing environmental

degradation. People need to be more forward thinking. People need to generate more knowledge about the environment. The message is clear: if people could improve in these areas, there would be no environmental problems.

It is also worth mentioning that this breakout group highlighted issues brought up in the first two breakout groups. Systems perspectives and viewing the environment as a whole as opposed to something separate are common important themes.

QUESTION 4: *How do you explain the contrast between the apparent high public concern for the environment indicated by opinion polls and the often negative attitude in the Congress on environmental issues? How does the news media report these differences?*

This breakout group began its discussions by reviewing the assumption that there is a high degree of public concern about the environment. Yes, they concluded, there is a high degree of public concern about the environment but maybe only at a philosophical level. It is easy to be pro-environment if there is no cost to the individual. However, when environmental concerns are translated into environmental policies and implementation plans, then difficulties begin to arise. Especially at a local level, situations often emerge where people may be faced with trading-off jobs or paying higher taxes in exchange for environmental gains. In these situations, one's philosophical support for the environment may wane in comparison to more everyday concerns.

Additionally, culture and mental models of the environment add complexity to this analysis. Consumerism can overwhelm philosophical concerns about the environment. That consumerism has turned "citizens" into merely "taxpayers," or in the words of the breakout group, has turned "stakeholders" into "stockholders," reflects a larger trend in society away from civic responsibility to individualist economic calculations. Individualist models of the world support the contention of this breakout group that people often fail to think about interconnections in complex societal and environmental systems. Thus, in many instances, people may simply fail to under-

stand the impact of their behavior upon the environment.

This breakout group believed that Congressional views of the environment parallel the public's. Philosophically, most legislators are pro-environment. However, at a detailed, case-specific level, numerous factors may weigh against aggressive initiatives to protect the environment. Constituent needs are foremost influences and certainly special interest group money can influence Congressional votes. Environmental policy making cannot be isolated from other Congressional concerns. At times, Congress may need to balance economic and quality of life concerns against environmental concerns. When this balancing act takes place within a framework of highly charged partisan politics, it may appear that negative views on environmental policy are more extreme than they really are. The practice of attaching highly controversial riders to popularly supported legislation can be seen as an abuse of the legislative process that may act against environmental protection. Lastly, when there are no clear decisions to be made on environmental issues (e.g., a crisis has not fully bloomed), Congress may find it easier to do nothing.

The news media may exacerbate rather than ameliorate environmental policy problems at the national level. The news media have found that controversy (e.g., spectacular headlines) boost sales. Because controversy depends upon people holding extreme views on an issue, the news media will focus on reporting extreme views. For example, environmentalist views are often reported in the extreme, at least more extreme than general public opinion. Issues are often presented as dichotomies, in very simplistic manners. Cooperation among parties is often under-reported. The news media can help move environmental policy forward by reporting on possible solutions. In the reporting, the notion of community is important. In fact environment is equal to community. The news media ought to reflect this.

QUESTION 5: *Can the concepts of "growth," "sustainable development" and environmental quality be reconciled? Can perpetual growth be sustained in a finite (closed sys-*

tem) environment? If not, what are the consequences for the environment and the economy?

This breakout group found the terms in the first part of this question hard to define, especially in less than one hour's time! More generally, it can be hypothesized that difficulties in reconciling growth and sustainable development and environmental quality arise, in part, because there are no universally agreed upon definitions for these terms. It is an axiom in the decision sciences that defining the problem is one-half of the battle. Until better definitions of the problem being expressed by this question can be composed and agreed upon, progress in this area may be limited.

With respect to the second part of this question, technically speaking the earth is not a closed system. The earth receives input from the sun and re-radiates energy back out into space. Practically, however, with respect to air, water, minerals, and other non-renewable resources, the earth is a closed system, at least over the next several decades or centuries.

These caveats aside, this breakout group believed that the concepts of growth and environmental quality are not easily reconciled. Referring to the famous formula—environmental impact = population x affluence (use/population) x technology (impact/use)—increases in population and affluence are overwhelming and will continue to overwhelm improvements in technology. Many ideas were put forth to move incrementally to sustainability, such as developing more compact cities, improving pollution prevention and recycling, dematerializing our society, shifting from products to services, moving more people back into agriculture, reducing the work week, and shifting from a division of labor to more self-sufficiency. Factors constraining these opportunities include the power of multi-national corporations, cultural attitudes about "making it to the top," ageism, and a decline in the influence of religion in mediating greed.

It may be that a new paradigm is needed to guide human life into the future. Specifically, a different concept or model for the economy is needed. We need to reflect on

what "work" is and how much "work" we need to do. Can we limit our desires to consume and achieve and direct these motivations in other directions? Should we continue to keep so many people alive? Do all cultures want a "Western" life? Is there a need to develop a common vision for humanity to replace consumption? One idea discussed was to set transcending oblivion—keeping earth sustainable until life on earth colonizes the universe prior to the sun's spectacular end-of-life—as a common vision for humanity.

Conclusions

Can America make sound environmental decisions? Taking some liberty in interpreting all of the remarks from the five discussion groups summarized above, the answer to this question is yes, America can make sound environmental decisions. Philosophically, the public is in support of environmental protection. However, it cannot be said that America is currently proficient at making sound environmental decisions or will be in the near-term given the large number of problems that plague US environmental decision making.

The message from the conference attendees is that the technical aspects of environmental problems are not the major impediment; the problems lie with us. While not

sharing a common view of the environment may be a source of strength in this country, not sharing a common view about how to coalesce different viewpoints into effective environmental policy is a barrier to sound decision making. People do not have a whole systems view of the environment. They do not understand how their behavior impacts the environment in complex and non-obvious ways. Partisan politics often places much higher priorities upon personal and party political achievement than upon achieving environmental goals. Only when a true crisis develops may action take place. The news media often acts to fan the fire of controversy rather than use its communication potential to work toward solutions. Sustainability is not reconcilable with the dominant cultural paradigm of growth. The private sector needs to be more proactive in achieving environmental goals and society needs to cease providing the private sector with incentives to do otherwise.

There is much to do. A new common vision for humanity is needed. Institutions needed to manage the achievement of this vision are needed. Specifically, institutions and their responsibilities for protecting the environment need to be re-thought from scratch. People need to become better educated about the environment and how

their behaviors impact environmental quality. The process of decision making needs to be re-assessed, from problem definition to who ultimately makes environmental decisions.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dev Joslin, Amy Wolfe, Marty Schweitzer, and Susan Schexnayder for facilitating the stimulating breakout group discussions and keeping thorough notes. Dev Joslin and Niki Nicholas also provided comments on a draft of this article. I also wish to thank Professor Lynton Caldwell for developing the excellent questions. Lastly, many thanks are extended to the conference attendees who participated in the thoughtful discussions that lead to this article.

Note

1. One idea for a constitutional amendment noted by Professor Caldwell in his remarks can be found in B. Tonn, 1991, "The Court of Generations: A Proposed Amendment to the US Constitution," *Futures* 23(5):482–498.

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