

Theories about Consensus-Based Conservation

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“Conservation and the Myth of Consensus” (Peterson et al. 2005) levels several serious indictments against consensus-based approaches to environmental decision making. Namely, the authors argue that consensus processes (1) reinforce apathy and ignorance of conservation issues; (2) legitimize damage to the environment; (3) quash public debate about conservation; (4) solidify the existing balance of power in favor of prodevelopment forces; and (5) block progress toward an ecologically sustainable future. Careful scrutiny of consensus-based approaches is important, especially considering their surging use in conservation policy. In the spirit of advancing the debate further, I review some of the limitations of the essay and its modes of inquiry.

A Debatable Premise

One limitation of the essay is its fundamental premise that “consensus processes are philosophically rooted in social constructionism (Hilkins 1989).” According to the authors’ characterization, social constructionism means “the existence of any ‘reality’ independent of human values, symbols, and meanings is questioned. Therefore, meaning is created rhetorically and becomes reality when accepted by consensus in a community. Different communities will inevitably reach consensus on different meanings, thus creating different realities. From this perspective, no reality constrains decision making other than consensus among community members.” Such a philosophy is sure to raise the ire of the readers of *Conservation Biology* who, to the last of us, believe that a material reality exists and must be respected if nature is to be conserved. I suspect that our distaste for constructionism (or at least the conception of it used in the essay) would also be shared by most participants in consensus processes, who largely consist of engineers, scientists, business owners, farmers, and ranchers (Leach 2004)—people whose careers and livelihoods depend on their ability to accurately

assess conditions and trends in nature or the economy. Then how can one evaluate assertions about the philosophical roots of consensus? Peterson et al. cite Hikins (1989) as their source for the claim, but that article concerns consensus-based epistemology in religious debates, with no clear link to biological conservation.

In practice, the quest for truer knowledge of ecological systems drives decision making in many consensus-seeking processes, frequently under the rubric of joint fact-finding. Joint fact-finding involves stakeholders with differing interpretations of the scientific evidence working together to develop common assumptions, commission new studies or analysis, and define remaining areas of disagreement or uncertainty (Ozawa 1991; Lee 1993; Ehrmann & Stinson 1999). Building consensus on disputed scientific issues often requires a professional forum in which a neutral facilitator pressures scientific experts from each side to justify their claims before their peers by using accepted standards of data quality and inference (Zafonte & Sabatier 1998). Others argue that consensus processes give scientists a more explicit seat at the table by forcing public officials to critically examine their own assumptions and to explain the reasoning behind their decisions (National Research Council 1996). In traditional settings, by contrast, “agencies are often mandated to accept public commentary and then make decisions behind the scenes” (Snow 2001:9). Far from “giving up on science,” many consensus-based processes use science as the main basis for locating common ground among stakeholders who may hold strikingly different notions about the value of conservation.

Confusing Consensus with Veto or Acquiescence

Peterson et al. present two contradictory visions of consensus while advocating an argument-based model that actually has much in common with well-designed consensus processes. One vision equates consensus with

veto power. For example, the authors worry that “one dissenting group or individual can veto any decision.” An alternate view is held by conflict-resolution luminary Lawrence Susskind (2000), who argues that all stakeholders—whether they consent to an agreement, oppose it, or do not participate at all—retain the right to pursue adversarial strategies such as filing lawsuits or seeking new legislation. All powers and options the participants may have had at the outset of a consensus process remain intact, and all laws remain in effect. As long as participation is voluntary, consensus rules create no new rights to block actions of other parties (Leach 2004).

Other passages depict consensus as acquiescence (e.g., “condoning the adversary’s policy preferences”). However, nothing in the literature on collaborative environmental management supports this view. In the classic text on interest-based negotiation that underlies much contemporary professional practice in mediation and facilitation, it is assumed that parties will walk away from any negotiation if their fundamental interests would be better served in some other venue (Fisher & Ury 1981).

Many aspects of the authors’ argument-based model aptly describe real-world consensus-building processes designed according to current “best practices” of the conflict resolution professions (e.g., Susskind et al. 1999; Wondollock & Yaffee 2000; Dukes & Firehock 2001). For example, Peterson et al. call for negotiation, deliberation, debate, and interdisciplinary conversations with the goal of “developing scientifically informed and socially legitimate environmental policy.” Nothing in this model of argumentation would preclude stakeholders from seeking consensus on policy or science. The term *consensus* admittedly means many things to many people, and it is difficult to have meaningful debates about its merits in purely conceptual terms without reference to actual examples.

Few References to Empirical Research

A final limitation of the essay is its purely theoretical line of argument. Peterson et al. present no data, anecdotal or otherwise, to support their claims about how the consensus movement is affecting biological conservation. The closest the authors come to an empirical discussion is when they describe the history of the cooptation of “sustainable development” as a conservation metaphor. But even here, while blaming “consensus theory” for the demise of the metaphor, they never name or implicate any actual consensus process.

Of course, purely theoretical contributions should be entirely welcome in the pages of *Conservation Biology*, especially for essays, which by convention are “more speculative and less documented than research papers.” However, a great deal of current empirical research examines the questions raised by Peterson et al., and this

research paints a more complex picture of consensus and its implications for conservation. First, it is clear that the success of actual consensus-based processes varies widely, particularly if success is defined in terms of ecological restoration projects or policies adopted and implemented on the ground (e.g., Koontz et al. 2004; Sabatier et al. 2005; Scholz & Stiftel 2005). Many consensus processes are highly prolific; others end in stalemate having achieved few tangible outcomes after consuming substantial quantities of time and effort. Findings from this substantial and growing body of research are summarized in recent review articles (Conley & Moote 2001; Leach & Pelkey 2001; Kessler 2004; Dukes 2005; Leach 2006) and in two ongoing initiatives to synthesize existing knowledge: one led by the Community-Based Collaboratives Research Consortium and another by the National Research Council’s Panel on Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making.

Toward a Research Agenda

Despite the challenges of empirically evaluating collaborative environmental management, one encouraging aspect of its current ascension in the United States is the great diversity of approaches being practiced around the country. Professional environmental mediators seeking to learn from this diversity regularly convene conferences to share personal experiences and to receive the latest findings from empirical research. Universities are beginning to offer courses and degrees in collaborative environmental management in which students debate the many theories underlying consensus and analyze studies of actual consensus processes.

Although this variation in practice and scholarship precludes blanket claims about the merits of consensus (Dukes 2005), it also creates opportunities for experimentation and scientific evaluation. In a recent assessment of the field, Emerson et al. (2005: 222, 229) proclaim, “We need to do a much better job validating the claims made for [environmental conflict resolution], and this can be done only through the collection of considerably larger data sets and the application of more powerful, multivariable analyses” and “longer-term, longitudinal analysis.”

Such a research agenda would seem to hold promise for discovering a path toward political systems that better support biological conservation and sustainability. Arguably, consensus-based processes hold at least as much promise as “the status quo for environmental decision making” advocated by Peterson et al. (Nature 2000; Dietz et al. 2003). By dismissing consensus before the evidence is in, we risk missing an opportunity to improve the way society charts its ecological future. “Conservation and the Myth of Consensus” succeeds in raising important questions about the strengths and limitations of collaborative environmental management. Now, it is time to go outside

and see how the theory measures up against empirical reality.

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