If We Build It, People Will Want to Help: The Management of Citizen Participation in Conservation Psychology

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Saunders presents an excellent agenda for maturing the emerging field of conservation psychology (CP). One component is greater cooperation between researchers and practitioners — an essential, if all too familiar, element in the evolution of new fields. But there is a fascinating attribute that sets us apart from many other new environmental fields. The animal of most interest to conservation psychologists not only can talk back, it's motivated to do so.

CP must concern itself with practitioner and researcher needs but it is important that we also meet the needs of everyday people, their desire to be listened to, to be respected, to make a difference. Within CP we must insure that people are not treated merely as the target of interventions nor as merely the subject in experiments. They are in fact participants, with us, in crafting the future. What CP is adding to their many pursuits is the constraint of sustainability.

We could claim that including citizen participation is an unfair burden. But is this true? What I'd like to suggest is that CP gains an enormous advantage by closely attending to people's urge to be involved, and we gain the *benefit* of highly motivated co-workers.

But while people want to participate, they are not passive recipients of information or goals. They have their own reasons for being involved. Humans are striving, goal-directed creatures motivated to seek, use and generate information in pursuit of their own plans. White (1959, 1971) characterized this notion as one of competence, a fundamental inclination to develop the capacity to effectively participate. In White's conceptualization, competence has attributes of both skill and motivation. The skill involves having the procedural knowledge needed to act effectively. The motive is a basic part of human nature: a tendency to continually develop competencies.

Half a century after White, the positive psychology movement is making much the same argument. Fredrickson (1998), in studying the functional role of positive emotions, found that such emotions motivate the building of physical, intellectual, and social competencies. McGregor and Little (1998) report that people pursue tasks that provide pleasure and personal meaningfulness. Yet they also report that people actively seek new tasks that broaden their competence. Seligman (1999) examined the effect of different types of behavior on well-being. His ingenious experiment involved participation in one pleasurable and one helpful activity. Seligman found that helpful actions made the entire rest of the day go better while the pleasure of pleasurable acts faded fast. What is most fascinating is that, to work, helpful acts must call upon one's personal competence.

If we accept the urge toward participation as innate, particularly when calling upon one's competence, then we are well advised to use this inclination. That said, we face the truth that avoidance of citizen participation in our projects is pervasive. This isn't entirely our fault; methods for obtaining participation seem to bring out the worst in everyone, justifying initial reservations. Procedurally we might follow Lewin's (1952) use of citizen meetings to present problems and develop solutions. An excellent update, targeted for CP, was recently done by Matthies and Kromker (2000).

When envisioning how CP might use this procedure three themes emerge:

- *Use multiple motives.* People participate for many reasons, and CP should use them all. Significant among these is self interest, including human fascination with problem-solving, the drive to broaden our competence, the clarity gained from direct action, and the sense of purpose derived from meaningful work. Whatever else CP uses to motivate participation, it can leverage the effect by also working with (rather than against) these various forms of self-interest. We will increase citizen involvement when we are sensitive to the multiple goals people strive for, creating settings that allow for simultaneous pursuit of these goals within the constraint of sustainability.

- *Capitalize on local knowledge.* Useful knowledge is not exclusively held by researchers and practitioners. The knowledge held by citizens is no less applicable than ours. In fact, their competence with regard to local issues can exceed ours. This issue is succinctly captured in Scott's (1998) summary of why efforts to improve the human condition so often go awry, "...I would say that the progenitors of such plans regarded themselves as far smarter and farseeing than they really were and, at the same time, regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent that *they* really were" (343). For CP to progress we need to understand that undervaluing local knowledge will impede our goal of sustainability.

- *Anticipate lifelong participation.* People are motivated to participate long after we have done our job and left. People have lifelong involvement in whatever changes are made to their behavior and environment. Therefore CP must design interventions that expect to be modified and adapted. In fact, we need designs that take advantage of the tendency in humans to tinker with their world.

I truly believe that humans can be reasonable, clever, and decent under certain conditions. And I believe that CP knows something about those conditions. I also think that human talent is a vastly under-used resource. But to use this resource well requires that we turn our ingenuity into engaging long-term citizen involvement.

It is humbling to learn that we are not the sole source of expertise and that our designs will not remain unchanged. But perhaps a new field is better starting from a humble position than to end up there after a host of failed schemes.

Some researchers and practitioners have shown a sensitivity to the need for citizen participation. They've understood that success derives from plans that are compatible with not just environmental constraints but also with the precious resource of human motivation.

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Conservation Psychology: Challenges and Opportunities

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In a recent editorial in *Conservation Biology*, several colleagues and I argued that "to preserve the earth's natural heritage, the social sciences must become central to conservation science and practice" (Mascia et al. 2003). Although appreciation for the social sciences is growing within the conservation community, psychology remains on the margins of conservationists' consciousness. Carol Saunders' extremely valuable paper should help to catalyze conservation-ori-

ented psychological research and its integration into conservation policy and practice. As the field of conservation psychology matures, however, its adherents will likely find themselves revisiting the issues of epistemic identity and research focus discussed by Saunders. New challenges are also likely to emerge as conservation psychologists increasingly engage in conservation research and policy processes.

The epistemic boundaries of conservation psychology may evolve or shift dramatically in the coming years. As conservation psychology and environmental psychology both mature, for example, these intellectual traditions may converge into a single academic literature or diverge into two very distinct fields of study. Epistemic evolution may similarly determine whether conservation psychology is ultimately considered a multidisciplinary field of study or a subdiscipline of psychology. My hunch is that conservation psychology (and analogues like conservation biology) will eventually be seen as a branch of "conservation science," best viewed as a problem-oriented field that draws upon the full range of academic traditions within psychology.

Ultimately, conservation psychology's research foci will define its epistemic identity. Saunders identifies two principal areas for conservation psychology research: 1) how humans behave towards nature, and 2) how humans care about/value nature. To the extent that these two research areas do not already capture it, conservation psychologists should also explore a third research area: 3) how humans learn/develop beliefs and knowledge about nature. Such research would provide conservationists with a better understanding of the basis for traditional or indigenous knowledge, help practitioners to develop more effective conservation education programs, and enable both scientists and practitioners to assess critically their own assumptions about the environment. Perhaps more importantly, while human-nature relationships clearly merit inquiry, many of the critical issues in conservation concern a fourth and fifth research area: 4) conservation-relevant human-human relationships, and 5) the relationships between humans and social institutions.[1] Indeed, the primary purpose of most conservation organizations is to modify existing social institutions to change individual behavior and thus conserve biodiversity. Conservation practitioners would benefit from conservation psychology research examining how and why new social institutions emerge and evolve over time, shape individual and collective behavior, and vary across cultures. Given that conservationists frequently work in unfamiliar cultural settings, there is a tremendous need for cross-cultural studies in all five research areas mentioned here.

Despite the widespread opportunities for new conservation psychology research, *existing* theory and knowledge probably provide the greatest potential for near-term