

Cultural Perspectives:

The Land-Based Community Looks at Sustainability

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The Utton Transboundary Resources Center sponsored an extraordinary conference in early September 2004, “Crossing Cultural Boundaries for Sustainable Solutions.” The 80 invitees included Native Americans, Hispanics, Anglos, farmers, municipal water providers, and bureaucrats, most of whom are dealing with water settlements involving diverse cultures and crossing boundaries of sovereign authority. Panels explored cultural perspectives on water, looked at successes in transboundary settlements, and considered how judges think about water settlements. Participants interacted within a hypothetical transboundary scenario in which they took cultural roles not necessarily their own. The objective was to create a problem-solving community among conferees, and to explore how communities create sustainable solutions.

As conferees shared their experiences it became clear that sustainability has a different meaning in market-based and land-based cultures. This difference sheds light on our struggles to define sustainability.

The Imperative of Place

Land-based communities are those in which people are linked to their place. In such communities, the health, the past, and the future of the people are identified with the health, the past, and the future of the place. A conferee from Zia Pueblo said,

“Pueblo people have been here since 1200 AD, and we’ll be here till the end of time. If we mess up our own environment, we have no one to blame but ourselves. There are temptations, but when you look at the long term you can resist those temptations. Pueblo people say ‘We can outwait anybody.’ It’s not me saying that, it’s the Pueblo. When I am gone, the Pueblo will still be here.”

The certainty that the land-based Puebloan peoples have that they will still be here focuses their traditions and practices on balance and the future, that is, on sustainability.

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In contrast, market communities are recent social inventions: markets emerged as an organizing social principle in the 18th century. The Industrial Revolution created the fictitious commodities of land and labor from the basic elements of life—nature and people—in order to depersonalize production and allow labor and resources to be allocated by markets. Production itself was divorced from the social organization provided by family, clan, tradition, and place, and remarried to the market. This new way of thinking spread like wildfire. Today, we have forgotten that this is a fiction; the transactability of land, water, and labor seems “natural.”

Like all market transactions, transactions in nature and labor focus not on balance, but on growth; not on the future, but on the powerful and undiscounted present.

The Indivisibility of Nature

A Navajo conferee described himself as “a Navajo who is trained to be a white man.” From this vantage point he observed:

“Navajo teaching is that four elements make up life: water, fire, solid, and air. In this society we try to divide those up, to take ownership of those things that sustain life—this part is yours, that part is mine. The elders are saying that we’re working against the law of nature, the law of life. You can’t own these things.

“In learning to be a white man that’s what I’ve learned. White people want to divide things, to own things, and that’s how your life is measured, as I understand it. We need to work together to arrive at a solution from our different perspectives. The old people say ‘You cannot take water.’ When they say you cannot take water, they’re saying you cannot own it. It is common ownership. But common ownership doesn’t have a place in Anglo-American jurisprudence, because that is all about separation.”

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This is a crucial point. The market is also all about separation. People (called “labor”) and nature (called “resources”) are separated from their place to be allocated as commodities by the market. This separation gave rise to a “wealth of nations” under the market’s invisible hand that far exceeded Adam Smith’s dreams; it also deeply changed how people and nature relate to place. People are no longer seen as “belonging” to the community they live in. Resources, water for example, are no longer seen as “belonging” to the watershed. The market-based community is a highly dynamic environment in which both social and natural systems are driven by the engine of growth. No wonder it becomes difficult to define “sustainability” in this context!

Environmentalism or Natural Justice?

Market-based communities cast the challenge of “sustainability” as an environmental issue, a problem of the natural world. In contrast, members of land-based communities see the twin separation of people from both nature and community as a single, organic threat to the sustainability of their lives. As one conference participant said:

“Extinction happens to communities as well as to species. We have seen tribes become extinct. Acequia communities have fears about becoming extinct. When you transfer water rights out of an acequia, you take a step toward the extinction of that community. We care, not only for the viability of natural systems, but about the imperative of justice for social groups. We should be talking, not about the environmental imperative, but about the imperative of natural justice.”

Another added:

“Environmental approaches to water have left out critical issues about communities. It goes back to seeing water as a commodity. If we’re going to evolve, we have to start thinking about cultural, spiritual issues.”

It Takes Two to See One

The role of the counselor in helping individuals understand their behavior

has been described as “It takes two to see one,” in the same way that depth-perception depends on having two eyes. Our own ability to understand our social and economic behavior appears to suffer from an impairment similar to that of the one-eyed man. We do not see that the market is a recent invention with an as-yet undetermined impact on the world, and our impaired vision makes it difficult for us to conceptualize sustainability. The market-based world has much to learn from land-based communities. Our land-based neighbors see aspects of our separated society that we cannot. They can tell us about it. We merely need to listen better than we have to date.

Humans are institution-inventing creatures. It is our institutions that make us such effective animals—sometimes too effective. The great sustainability question, to my mind, is “Can we see the dynamics of our institutions and change the elements of those dynamics that are bringing us to catastrophic collapse?” To answer affirmatively, we will need the rare perspective on our market institutions offered by land-based communities, to whom those institutions are foreign. If our Navajo colleague can learn to think like a white man, perhaps he can also help us see our world through the eyes of a Navajo.

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