Storytelling in co-management relationships with First Nations

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For: RMES 500Q
Submitted to: Dr. Charles Menzies
December 14, 2007

Introduction

Co-management of natural resources is an increasingly common approach to addressing conflict between government bodies and local communities. In Canada, special attention is given to Aboriginal communities which are largely dependent on natural resources and whose rights over these resources have been confirmed through several Supreme Court cases in the past decade. Early co-management agreements were mainly for fisheries but have expanded to include land-based resources, sometimes on a regional scale, and parks and protected areas. Co-management describes a broad array of arrangements that bridge centralized government-based systems and decentralized local systems, and involves a sharing of rights and responsibilities (Berkes, 1994).

Descriptive analyses of co-management agreements have enumerated the conditions for success ranging from size of the bureaucratic structure, to mechanisms for the redistribution of wealth to local communities, to types of external support available (Clogg, 1999; Gardner, 2001; Pinkerton, 1989). An emerging understanding from these analyses is that success ultimately relies on the social relationships and interactions that are inherent in every characteristic associated with co-management (Pinkerton, 1989; Plummer & Fitzgibbon, 2004).

In order to reach agreement, those involved must share in the appraisal of facts and values of a situation and arrive at a shared view (Plummer & Fitzgibbon, 2004). Dale (1989) refers to the need for a "frame shift" in the resolution of the complex policy controversies of fisheries management. This requires the people involved to reconstruct their understanding of the situation so that previously unseen actions, motivations and beliefs become visible. He acknowledges that "appealing to a 'wise man' seems easier and more conclusive than having opponents meet in an intensive retreat", but concludes that trying to solve "people problems" in a quasi-judicial forum such as a tribunal offers little promise (Dale, 1989, p. 64).

If co-management depends as much on relationships as on institutions (Pinkerton, 1989), how can these relationships be built out of conflict, and developed to a point where mutual understanding and the creation of a shared vision can be developed?

Purpose

This paper responds to the increasingly common understanding that human relationships are the key to successful co-management. The purpose is to explore the role of stories and storytelling in the human dimension of co-management relationships with Aboriginal peoples. I will first show how a belief in different stories of the past has influenced present relationships with Aboriginal peoples in terms of land and resource management. I will then explore how the use of narrative can facilitate an understanding of different perspectives and histories, leading to respect, trust, and cooperation.

Conflict over stories of the past

In his description of the process leading to the creation of the Gwaii Trust, a non-profit economic development body in Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, funded by the Canadian

government and managed by the community, Dale notes that "the disagreement about a region's 'story' can be the defining factor in conflict between parties" (Dale, 1999, p. 924). When we speak of history there is a belief in the existence of one true account of what has happened in the past. In actuality, the histories we take for granted are the "master narratives" imposed by the dominant group in a society that ignores the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups including women, ethnic minorities, and Aboriginal peoples (Beauregard, 1991, p. 193; Mandelbaum, 1991).

In Canada, this master narrative is a product of the persistent colonial context where "those at the centre monopolize what comes to be considered a rational discourse and marginalize those who speak in a different idiom" (Cruickshank, 1997, p. 64). Culturally diverse perspectives are excluded, and a complex social reality is ignored in favour of the dominant group's story, which is then presented as the only story (Beauregard, 1991). This one unified story of a nation "threatens the narratives of families, clans, ethnic groups, villages, or regions that speak of their own times, spaces, beginnings, identities, orders and sensibilities" (Mandelbaum, 1991, p. 211).

Where the story begins can be different for different groups, especially Aboriginal peoples. The dominant history tends to ignore native inhabitants until they are "discovered" by explorers and colonists (Mandelbaum, 1991). In the process of reaching agreement over the Gwaii Trust, Dale (1999) notes that one of the overarching challenges to negotiation was the discrepancy over history; the Haida begin their story earlier than the non-Haida, which is significant since each community draws on history to explain their hopes for the future (Dale, 1999, p. 924).

The story of the land and its peoples before European contact has important implications for contemporary resource management. Particularly, information about the extent and nature of Aboriginal management of the land and resources has led to unjust decisions of the past, and is a source of current conflict. For example, a number of recent studies have revealed extensive pre-contact plant cultivation by Northwest Coast Aboriginals, proving that these societies deliberately managed the land and disproving the prior belief that they were merely hunter-gatherers, (Deur, 2005; Lepofsky et al., 2005; J. McDonald, 2005; Turner, Smith, & Jones, 2005). A belief that Northwest Coast Aboriginals were hunter-gatherers allowed colonizers to consider the land "empty", and effectively unused by them, helping to justify their displacement onto reserves, and the denial of a host of rights to the lands and resources, many of which persist today.

Different stories of history persist into the colonial period. McDonald (1994) describes the participation of the Tsimshian in their local economy over time, and explains how they were in fact an integral "part of" regional development rather than "apart from" it, as conventional histories would say (p. 157). These different stories of the past, both recent and pre-contact, have significant ramifications for public policy; Dale (1999) observed that "Aboriginal people "are often preoccupied with the unacknowledged and therefore unfinished business of the past" (p. 944).

Sustaining different stories

Can resolution of conflicting stories of the past come simply from creating a new, unified history? Mandelbaum (1991) addresses narrative conflict in the planning field, suggesting a strategy of sustaining difference rather than attempting to merge all stories into one. He believes that there is a need to maintain multiple stories or risk losing parts of history and all that we can learn from it.

The strategy of converging stories into one involves reducing them to chronological statements of facts and relies on the hope of one universal truth that can be recovered. This belief requires resolution of disputes by an authority, probably a court of law, to produce an inclusive story (Mandelbaum, 1991). This method will appeal to many who look to "facts" as a way of avoiding and transcending conflict (Mandelbaum, 1991), but in disputes over resource management, attempting to achieve resolve in a quasi-judicial forum seems unpromising (Dale, 1989, p. 64). The alternative allows for a plurality of stories and embraces controversy rather than seeking to resolve or ignore it (Mandelbaum, 1991).

In a postmodern vein, this pluralist strategy seems to raise more questions than it provides answers for: Is there any "truth"? How will it be achieved in practice? Will it be possible to make decisions and take action? Mandelbaum (1991) acknowledges that there are many matters where agreed upon facts should be sought, but believes that there are other issues where "passion and deep belief" reign, that will not respond to analysis that has only the categories of "truth" and "error" (p. 213).

Telling stories can both create and destroy communities (Mandelbaum, 1991, p. 213). Stories of resource management that ignore the role of Aboriginal peoples has led to conflict that persists to the present, but storytelling among parties and individuals in co-management can facilitate understanding, trust, and build a common vision that is necessary for success (Dale, 1999; Pinkerton, 1989).

Narrative and the human dimension

An understanding that social relationships are critical to every aspect of co-management is emerging among practitioners and academics (Dale, 1989, 1999; Pinkerton, 1989; Plummer & Fitzgibbon, 2004). Also emerging is a recognition that narrative can help to facilitate understanding between diverse groups, leading to the development of respect and trust, and the ability to move forward from conflict. (Benjamin, 1969; Dale, 1999; Dyck, 1986; McGee & Nelson, 1985; Plummer & Fitzgibbon, 2004).

There is, however, a presumption that "narrative has more to do with hiding sins than with revealing truths" (McGee & Nelson, 1985, p. 144). This is exemplified when a parent asks their child: "Are you telling me a story?" when they mean to accuse them of lying. To bring narrative into a position that recognizes its role in communicating and making meaning among diverse publics, we must dispel the false dichotomy between narrative and rationality, and instead make a place for finding meaning within storytelling (McGee & Nelson, 1985, pp. 145-146).

Benjamin (1969) laments the loss of storytelling in modern society and believes the dissemination of information, that which is promptly verifiable, has replaced storytelling and is perceived to be incompatible with it. In our world of information, events come to us with ready explanations. Conversely, "it is the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 89).

Our information society reduces stories to the raw material, or qualitative data from which truth, facts, and arguments must be abstracted (Mandelbaum, 1991). According to

Benjamin (1969), however, considering a story as such does not leave space for the depth that it can communicate:

> [Storytelling] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of a storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (pp. 91-92)

The use of personal narrative by a Cree elder when speaking to non-Aboriginal audiences in the 1970's led to an understanding of Aboriginal issues among the listeners that was not similarly achieved by the aggressive political oratory that was a popular method of expression by Aboriginal leaders at the time (Dyck, 1986). Stories that challenge non-Aboriginal peoples' place in history can be deeply uncomfortable, and may cause the listener to disengage, unable to learn from a story that calls into question their sense of self. When a storyteller leaves meaning and moral implicit to the story rather than explicit, the listener is left to draw their own conclusions (Benjamin, 1969), which in the case of a history of denial of Aboriginal rights may be more easily palatable (Cruickshank, 1997; Dyck, 1986).

One reason a listener may disengage when made to feel uncomfortable comes from a belief that listening to another's views implies agreement with it, which can be a significant impediment to cross-cultural understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. In his article that explores Euro-Canadian fishers' opposition to Aboriginal land claims in British Columbia, Menzies (1994) recognizes this barrier, and through the use of stories attempts to "create a space in which one can understand their fear and their response to First Nations' claims without having to agree with them or even tolerate their views" (p. 777). As Menzies puts into practice the theories of story as

a vehicle for making meaning, he does not attempt to "convince" the reader of anything, but instead employs the power of story to allow the audience to create its own morals and meaning, and to develop a deeper understanding of the subtleties of a situation seemingly of their own accord.

Storytelling has proven an effective way of communicating subtleties of lived experiences that are not translatable into data and reports; human communication is unavoidable in public debate and should be recognized as legitimate and valuable (McGee & Nelson, 1985). It is especially instrumental in relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, including co-management, where it may be difficult to fathom one another's frame of reference, and there may be little interpersonal discussion between parties despite them living in close proximity (Dale, 1999; Dyck, 1986). This was the case when Dale (1999) began working as a community liaison for the Gwaii Trust. He tells how the parties moved from fundamental disagreement about the region's history to a successfully managed trust fund that was even chaired, for over a year, by a non-Native resident from the community that had been most opposed to Aboriginal rights. In a case such as this, where the parties come from different cultures and have been in conflict for generations, ways of reaching agreement that complement and transcend rational processes, namely the telling of stories, are particularly useful (Dale, 1999).

Time and space for narrative moments are more likely to happen away from the negotiating table under informal circumstances. Individuals involved in the Gwaii Trust had several opportunities for sharing stories with one another. For example, when the group of eight traveled to a conference to speak about the Gwaii Trust they spent an entire day developing their 15 minute presentation. This time and the informal

environment allowed for the sharing of stories. Those involved felt pride in having listened to and spoken about their different versions of history, a process of "using narrative to unearth issues unapproachable in a solely rational manner" (Dale, 1999, p. 942).

Conclusion

This paper has shown that stories can help to create or to overcome conflict, and are a part of successful co-management (Pinkerton, 1989). Disagreement over a place's history is a common barrier to co-management of natural resources involving Aboriginal peoples (Dale, 1999). What is perceived by society as the "truth" about a place is merely the story told from the colonial perspective that has risen to a place of dominance (Beauregard, 1991; Mandelbaum, 1991). Aboriginal groups often find themselves preoccupied with unfinished business of the past, and it is through a telling of their own stories, with listeners from non-Aboriginal society, that a moving forward can be achieved on issues of resource management (Dale, 1999).

Emerging from literature on co-management is an understanding that social relationships or the human dimension is integral to every aspect of these institutions: "motivations and attitudes of key individuals can make or break co-management, no matter how much legal backing or supportive arrangements an agreement has" (Pinkerton, 1989, p. 29). While details of co-management, such as the funding structure, meeting schedule, or size of committees, are easy to analyze and manipulate, influencing people's attitudes and relationships cannot be approached in such a rational manner. This is where storytelling finds a place in co-management.

Storytelling has proven an effective way of approaching uncomfortable issues of the past that must be addressed in order to move forward (Dale, 1989; Dyck, 1986). When aggressive oratory is perceived as a challenge to the listeners' sense of self, relaying the same messages implicitly through narrative allows them to make their own meanings in a less-threatening way (Benjamin, 1969; Cruickshank, 1997; Dyck, 1986). The challenge for those involved in co-management is in creating a space where these stories can be told; they will not happen at the negotiating table or in other formally structured times and places (Dale, 1999). The time and space necessary to build relationships may challenge rationally structured management institutions with their deadlines and deliverables, but allowing for narrative to weave through these established processes will help to build the understanding, respect, and shared vision that is necessary to successful co-management.

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