

PART 1. ENHANCE AWARENESS

MODULE 2 SYNTHESIS OF BACKGROUND INFORMATION. Familiar Lens(es)

The vast majority of lands in the United States are open or working lands, such as farmland, forests, pasture and range lands. Over the last 30 years, urban sprawl, population increases, and economic development have resulted in land fragmentation and significant social changes in rural communities. Nationally, between 1997 and 2001, the average rate of crop, forest, and range land lost to development was 2.2 million acres per year. In many regions, ranches and farms are being replaced by residential areas. In others, large parcels of land are subdivided into smaller landholdings or “hobby farms.” The lands lost are often highly productive, yet they are almost never returned to agricultural use. To support these smaller landholdings, infrastructure such as roads, water & sewage systems, etc. must be built or expanded. The loss of open and working lands leads to habitat degradation and a decline in natural and agricultural biodiversity.

Land fragmentation is not just a problem for ecosystems. It is also about rural communities and local heritage, with social as well as ecological consequences. Rural quality of life and land conservation are closely connected. Land conservationists know that they need to understand the views of rural communities to achieve their goals. Some land conservation programs are trying to account for this connection and are designed to save both land and farmers or ranchers by offering tax relief or monetary compensation to landowners in order to conserve open space.

Weaving rural quality of life into land conservation is difficult because of the diversity of land conservation programs, the different types of land in need of conservation, and the increasingly complex array of rural stakeholders involved (farmers, ranchers, timber industry, commuters, retirees, etc.). Conservationists face the challenge of how to understand and integrate diverse groups of rural stakeholders with different cultural beliefs and values resulting from different economic situations, histories, and relationships to the land. Conservationists need information on the cultural beliefs and values that stakeholders use to understand land conservation. Prior to the research summarized below, we had not encountered any significant recognition or discussion of the systematic, and at times profound, importance of cultural knowledge and values to the development, implementation and evaluation of land conservation.

1. Diverse Stakeholder Perspectives (Lenses)

Conservation practitioners are experiencing changes in their clientele, due to soaring land values near expanding cities that are changing the faces of rural communities and options for lands that previously produced crops, timber, livestock, wildlife, clean water and biodiversity. As one example of how social science can help address such issues, in August 2005, an interdisciplinary team of researchers launched a 3-year study funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Texas A&M University partnered with the Houston Advanced Research Center to focus on the western edge of the southeastern forest, the “Big Thicket” study site. The University of Maryland partnered with the Maryland Center for Agro-Ecology, Inc. to focus on the “Chesapeake Eastern Shore” site. Across this forested region, communities share similar natural resources. However, the two study sites reveal a wide range of cultural perspectives. By better understanding cultural knowledge of conservation lands, researchers aim to help stakeholders identify their “common ground” and better work together.

The research team started by identifying key actors within the local communities. Participatory observation was the technique used in this process. Project staff participated in a number of events over the course of the project where they represented the project's activities and/or presented on project activities and findings. These conferences, demonstrations, symposia, field days and workshops include two NRI Rural Development Project Director meetings (2006 and 2007), one Rural Sociological Society annual meeting (poster presentation), one presentation at Maryland Day at the University of Maryland (2008), one Maryland land planning workshop (2008), one science conference in Texas (2007), one local, Texas biodiversity event (2007), one department event focused on communication and conservation (2008), one conservation leadership development conference in Texas (2008), one local citizen biodiversity event in Texas (2007), one national workshop on stewardship of conservation lands (2007), one international workshop for the Society of Conservation Biology (2008), and one internet collaborative learning community on community and conservation (2008).

During informal interviews with 12 citizens active in land conservation and development, researchers asked who should be on the list of people to be interviewed formally. This procedure, known as "snowballing", resulted in an initial list of 125 names, including local implementers of land conservation programs, county and community leaders, farmers, ranchers, development proponents, and rural residents. Next, an equivalent number of interviewees (about 50) were chosen from each of the 2 study sites. The initial list was prioritized, balanced across 4 stakeholder perspectives: "producers", "regulators", "economic developers", and "NGO's". The aim was to include as many diverse perspectives as possible, given logistical constraints.

The key informant interviews provided in-depth information about a wide range of topics, such as land conservation, development, rural livelihoods, rural heritage, nature, and community. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and then coded for salient themes. The resulting database consists of data from about 25 informal interviews, 100 semi-structured interviews and 1200 surveys on land conservation in both Texas and Maryland. The qualitative data collected during interviews provided project team members with insight into rural stakeholders' cultural knowledge about land conservation. The database represents a source of information for researchers, land conservationists, local environmental, community and development groups, and land developers who are interested in fostering collaborative programs in conservation across traditional stakeholder boundaries.

As an overview, researchers identified six specific perspectives on land conservation as:

- 1) a moral imperative with a mandate to ensure long-term protection of public good against potential human and institutional misuse;
- 2) a dynamic, adaptive process that allows the natural resources on lands to be used and harvested to meet human food and material needs;
- 3) the application of technologies and planning to create the housing, goods and services needed by human communities in a manner that best protects the environment;
- 4) the equitable management of a public good that has multiple uses for different stakeholders;
- 5) the management of land in an ecologically sound manner consistent with agency mandates and the needs of different stakeholders; and
- 6) the saving of a way of life that is based on the ability to use what nature provides, see wildlife and experience nature around us.

2. Examples from a Study of Land Conservation and Rural Communities

To illustrate what is distinctive about four of these perspectives, we have selected representative quotes from interviews and present them below. The identities of the interviewees remain confidential, so in the following snapshots, we construct a fictional character from the experiences of several interviewees who expressed similar ideas.

a. Community Perspectives: "Pat"

Land conservation has to do with saving a way of life, based on using what nature provides, ...to see wildlife and experience nature ... "as during my youth" .

- *" You know, [this is] destroying my backyard... destroying my childhood."*
- *"I really almost weep when I think about the woods that I loved as a kid, as to what they are today and what has happened. I know it is changing and I doubt if it can ever change back. When I was a kid, I roamed this woods and hunted them. There were beautiful big trees everywhere and not a whole lot of underbrush. "*
- *"My job is to maintain the integrity of the business while recognizing the facts of life. There are going to be new highways, new subdivisions, new businesses, new shopping centers...there is no escaping having to sell property."*

b. Producer Perspectives: "Chris"

Land conservation is a dynamic, adaptive process of sustainable harvest to meet human food and material needs. .."if the land can produce, it should produce".

- *"I would be hard pressed to tell you right now that I would be willing to tie up something in a conservation project that could be utilized in the future – to take it out of somebody's hand that could be utilizing it in the future for that community. Not to benefit necessarily an individual, but the community."*
- *" you plant, and you manage and you harvest that timber and provide a good for the public.....You are helping to create jobs and you are helping people....you are providing a service and products that people use everyday...."*
- *"You've got to get in there and you've got to cut, you've got to manage with fire, you've got to bring up that new forest underneath the old one."*

c. Regulator Perspectives: "Lyn"

Land conservation involves the equitable management of resources in the public trust, "consider multiple use, agency mandates, and voters".

- *"So, the citizens ... benefit by having clean water in the river ... they don't necessarily see direct benefit to individuals, but it is a societal benefit.., what we call ecosystem services. "*
- *"Well, our goal is to protect the natural vegetation and, and to do that you have to make sure that the conditions that result in that vegetation,... in Long Leaf pine uplands it's fire. In big river floodplains,... it's flooding."*
- *"for a land owner that's got a small tract being managed for multiple uses, certainly there's nothing wrong with removing some trees, let's say for firewood, while retaining most of the other trees ... There would still be considerable land conservation benefits"*

d. Conservationist Perspectives: "Kim"

Conservation of land is a moral imperative for the long-term protection of public goods (air, water, nature) ..."humans do not have the right to destroy it"

- *“We have a moral imperative to protect nature...”*
- *“Whether it’s a human disturbance or a natural disturbance, it will regenerate itself and it may not be the forest I prefer, but it’s the one that nature rolled the dice and said, ‘that’s what’s coming up’.”*
- *“So there are... a lot of people who appreciate nature. They benefit a great deal, directly, personally, from protection of land... we all have a stake in protecting biodiversity... many people would not understand ... what they gain personally from it, but each of us does.”*

3. Awareness of Familiar Lenses

The concept of a cultural lens is not well defined in the academic literature, although it has a vague set of meanings within the network of practitioners experienced in conflict resolution. Some of the meanings associated with this popular term are as follows:

- “a metaphor for a point of view” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lens>)
- “If you are talking from your point of view, you would talk about what you want, need or feel like. To get a person to do something, it is much better to talk from the other person's point of view.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perspective_%28cognitive%29)
- “In conflict resolution a technique of using "I", "me", "my" language encourages the person to talk from their own point of view... Talking about your own point of view brings it upon the other person to be more understanding and cooperative.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perspective_%28cognitive%29)

When applied to understanding the diverse perspectives that stakeholders may bring to the table in dialogue about land conservation programs, it is important for practitioners to be aware of their own prevailing cultural lens and how that might influence them to filter or misunderstand what a stakeholder is trying to communicate. Some of the reasons proposed as to why people share similar perspectives include: (a) “birds of a feather flock together”, (b) similar life experience, (c) viewpoints are adopted as a “membership badge”, a signal of who is accepted within a social group, and (d) familiar language is more easily understood within a social group. For opposite reasons, a practitioner may subconsciously reject the perspective of a stakeholder from an unfamiliar social group. Such miscommunication may lead to escalation of conflict.

4. Summary

Conservation practitioners who work with stakeholders from diverse walks of life may benefit by identifying their own cultural lens and reflecting on how it may be familiar or different from the people with whom they work. One research effort that helped to identify diverse cultural lenses expressed through the words of stakeholders is summarized here. The utility of enhanced awareness of cultural lenses lies in being able to speak from a personal perspective. Conflict resolution research has shown “I” messages are less likely to escalate conflict than “you” messages because they communicate respect for the other person's point of view.

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