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Participation through Communication

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Introduction

As we begin the 21st century, environmental thinkers are divided along a sharp fault line. There are the doomsayers who predict the collapse of the global ecosystem. As expressed by my fellow Canadian and famous environmentalist, David Suzuki, there will be “an Apocalypse of Biblical proportions.” Then there are the technological optimists who believe that we can feed 12 billion people and solve all our problems with science and technology. They try to discredit all environmental concerns and subscribe to growth for its own sake. I do not believe that either of these extremes makes sense. There is a middle road based on science and logic, the combination of which is sometimes referred to as common sense. There are real problems and there is much we can do to improve the state of the environment.

History of Greenpeace activism

I was born and raised in the tiny fishing and logging village of Winter Harbour on the northwest tip of Vancouver Island, in the rainforest by the Pacific. I didn't realize what a lucky childhood I'd had, playing on the tidal flats by the salmon spawning streams in the rainforest, until I was shipped away to boarding school in Vancouver at age fourteen. I eventually attended the University of BC studying the life sciences: biology, forestry, genetics; but it was when I discovered ecology that I realized that through science I could gain an insight into the mystery of the rainforest I had known as a child. I became a born-again ecologist, and in the late 1960's, was soon transformed into a radical environmental activist.

I found myself in a church basement in Vancouver with a like-minded group of people, planning a protest campaign against US hydrogen bomb testing in Alaska. We proved that a somewhat rag-tag looking group of activists could sail a leaky old halibut boat across the North Pacific Ocean and change the course of history. By creating a focal point for opposition to the tests we got on national news and helped build a ground-swell of opposition to nuclear testing in the US and Canada. When that bomb went off in November 1971, at the height of the Vietnam War and the Cold War, it was the last hydrogen bomb ever detonated on planet Earth. Even though there were four more tests planned in the series, President Nixon canceled them due to public opposition. This was the birth of Greenpeace.

Flushed with victory and knowing we could bring about change by getting up and doing something, we were welcomed into the longhouse of the Kwakiutl Indian Nation at Alert Bay near the north end of Vancouver Island. We were made brothers of the tribe because they believed in what we were doing. This began the tradition of the Warriors of the Rainbow, after a Cree legend that predicted one day when the skies are black and the birds fall dead to the ground and the rivers are poisoned, people of all races, colors and creeds will join together to form the Warriors of the Rainbow to save the Earth from environmental destruction. We named our ship the Rainbow Warrior and I spent fifteen years on the front lines of the eco-movement as we evolved from that church basement into the world's largest environmental activist organization.



Next we took on French atmospheric nuclear testing in the South Pacific. They proved a bit more difficult than the US hydrogen bomb tests. But after many years of protest voyages and campaigning, involving loss of life on our side, they were first driven underground and eventually stopped testing altogether.

In 1975 we set sail deep-sea into the North Pacific against the Russian and Japanese factory whaling fleets that were slaughtering the last of the sperm whales off California. We put ourselves in front of the harpoons in little rubber boats and brought the Save the Whales movement into living rooms around the world.. That really put Greenpeace on the map. In 1979 the International Whaling Commission banned factory whaling in the North Pacific and soon it was banned in all the world's oceans.

In 1978 I was arrested off Newfoundland for sitting on a baby seal, trying to shield it from the hunter's club. I was convicted, but the photo of me protecting the seal appeared in over 3000 newspapers the next morning. Due to this and other protest actions baby sealskins were banned from European markets in 1984, effectively ending the slaughter.

Can you believe that in the early 1980's, the countries of Western Europe were pooling their low and medium level nuclear wastes, putting them in thousands of oil drums, loading them on ships and dumping them in the Atlantic ocean as a way of "disposing" of the wastes. In 1984 a combined effort by Greenpeace and the UK Seafarer's Union put an end to that practice for good.

By the mid-1980's Greenpeace had grown from that church basement into an organization with an income of over US\$100 million per year, offices in 21 countries and over 100 campaigns around the world, now tackling toxic waste, acid rain, uranium mining and drift net fishing as well as the original issues. We had won over a majority of the public in the industrialized democracies. Presidents and prime ministers were talking about the environment on a daily basis.

Transition from confrontation to consensus

For me it was time to make a change. I had been against at least three or four things every day of my life for 15 years; I decided I'd like to be in favor of something for a change. I made the transition from the politics of confrontation to the politics of trying to build consensus. After all, when a majority of people decide they agree with you it is probably time to stop hitting them over the head with a stick and sit down and talk to them about finding solutions to our environmental problems.

All social movements evolve from an earlier period of polarization and confrontation during which a minority struggles to convince society that its cause is true and just, eventually followed by a time of reconciliation if a majority of the population accepts the values of the new movement. For the environmental movement this transition began to occur in the mid-1980s. The term sustainable development was adopted to describe the challenge of taking the new environmental



values we had popularized, and incorporating them into the traditional social and economic values that have always governed public policy and our daily behavior. We cannot simply switch to basing all our actions on purely environmental values. Every day 6 billion people wake up with real needs for food, energy and materials. The challenge for sustainability is to provide for those needs in ways that reduce negative impact on the environment. But any changes made must also be socially acceptable and technically and economically feasible. It is not always easy to balance environmental, social, and economic priorities. Compromise and co-operation with the involvement of government, industry, academia and the environmental movement is required to achieve sustainability. It is this effort to find consensus among competing interests that has occupied my time for the past 15 years.

The rise of environmental extremism

Not all my former colleagues saw things that way. They rejected consensus politics and sustainable development in favor of continued confrontation and ever-increasing extremism. They ushered in an era of zero tolerance and left-wing politics. The features of this environmental extremism can be found in one or more of the following attributes:

Environmental extremists are anti-human. Humans are characterized as a cancer on the Earth. To quote eco-extremist Herb Hammond, "of all the components of the ecosystem, humans are the only ones we know to be completely optional". Isn't that a lovely thought?

They are anti-science and technology. All large machines are seen as inherently destructive and unnatural. Science is invoked to justify positions that have nothing to do with science. Unfounded opinion is accepted over demonstrated fact.

Environmental extremists are anti-trade, not just free trade but anti-trade in general. Witness the riots against the WTO and globalization. In the name of bioregionalism they would bring in an age of ultra-nationalist xenophobia. The original "Whole Earth" vision of one world family is lost in a hysterical campaign against globalization and free trade.

They are anti-business. All large corporations are depicted as inherently driven by greed and corruption. Profits are definitely not politically correct. The liberal democratic, market-based model is rejected even though no viable alternative is proposed to provide for the material needs of 6 billion people. As expressed by the Native Forest Network, "it is necessary to adopt a global phase out strategy of consumer based industrial capitalism." I think they mean civilization.

And they are just plain anti-civilization. In the final analysis, eco-extremists project a naive vision of returning to the supposedly utopian existence in the garden of Eden, conveniently forgetting that in the old days people lived to an average age of 35, and there were no dentists. In their Brave New World there will be no more chemicals, no more airplanes, and certainly no more polyester suits.



The idea of consensus process

In the seaside villages of the Fiji Islands, the elder men gather in a circle in a special hut every day at about 4 in the afternoon. With the sound of a younger man pounding kava roots in the background, they speak slowly, in turn, of village affairs. No votes are cast in these sessions. They just keep talking, softly reforming their words until there is nothing more to add, until they all indicate agreement by saying no more. They have reached consensus. Its time for a cup of kava.

Of course it could be argued that a bunch of old men hardly represents a democratic representation of the Fijian village people. This is true and one might hope they eventually reform their system to at least include women, workers, and the interests of children. So it is not the make-up of the council that provides a lesson, but the process used to reach decisions.

When I first witnessed this council of elders over 20 years ago, I had not paid much attention to the word consensus, and it would be some years until I realized the power of this soft-spoken process of finding agreement among many points of view. It was my conversion from a radical environmental activist to a seeker of sustainability that also transformed my life from one of creating confrontation to one of practicing consensus.

The development of sustainable development

In 1982 I was invited, along with 80 other environmental activists from around the world, to Nairobi, Kenya to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the first UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm, which I had also attended. This was the first time I had heard the term “sustainable development” so it must have been very recently invented. It changed my way of thinking forever.

Many people have the impression that the term sustainable development is a kind of compromise between environmentalists and developers, or industry. This is not the case. The origin of the term is within the environmental movement itself. At this time in the early 1980's most of the environmental movement was in the developed industrialized countries. These groups were basically anti-development as it was popular to oppose all large industrial projects. For environmentalists working in the developing countries it was impossible to adopt an “anti-development” policy if they were to remain credible. So the term sustainable development was adopted as a compromise between environmentalists in the developed countries and those in the developing countries.

The term sustainable development was finally brought into popular use when the Brundtland Report, "Our Common Future" was published by the UN Commission for Environment and Development in 1987. It recommended that "Round Tables" should be created in all jurisdictions. The



Round Tables would be composed of people from all walks of life and all interest groups. They would work to develop a consensus on how to achieve sustainable development, or sustainability as it is now usually described. Of course by this time the term was meant to encompass all aspects of the environment, the economy, and society.

Of all the countries in the world, Canada took up the challenge to create Round Tables more than any other. This was due, in part, to the fact that two Canadians, Maurice Strong, who chaired the 1972 and 1992 UN Environment Conferences, and Jim McNeill, who headed the UNCED Secretariat for Our Common Future, were deeply involved in the project. It was also due to the Canadian inclination to negotiate public policy issues rather than legislate or litigate them. One common phrase used to distinguish ourselves from our American cousins to the south is "Americans litigate; Canadians negotiate."

By 1990, there were "Round Tables on the Environment and the Economy" established at the national level, in all ten provinces, and both territories. Although they were all constituted somewhat differently, e.g. some had elected politicians as members and others did not, they all had the common mandate to develop high-level strategies for sustainability and to operate by the process of consensus. The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy is still very active today.

During a very active five-year period from 1990 to 1995 the Round Table movement flourished in Canada. I was appointed to the British Columbia Round Table in 1990 and was a member until shortly before it was disbanded in 1994. We produced an impressive array of documents, all representing a consensus among the 30 members who represented all the interests in BC society including environment, industry, communities, labor, aboriginal, and government. These documents described our advice to government on subjects such as Sustainable Energy, Sustainable Economy, Sustainable Cities, and Learning for Sustainability.

During those four years, there were annual meetings at which all the Round Tables in Canada came together to compare notes and to work towards a common understanding of consensus and sustainability. These were wonderful opportunities for learning and everyone who participated gained a new appreciation for the potential to resolve conflict and plan for the future through the Round Table process.

Achieving consensus among many competing interests

The Round Table, consensus process, is a particular type of dispute resolution process. Many dispute resolution processes involve only two parties such as the mediation/arbitration process in labor/management negotiations. The professional mediator is usually dealing with the relatively simple matter of finding a middle ground between two positions, whether it be pay-scale, job benefits, maternity leave or other matters of contract. As we know, even this process can be extraordinarily difficult and often drags out for a seeming eternity.



Finding agreement on matters of sustainability, which by necessity involves the economy, the environment, and society, there are both a multiplicity of issues and a diverse array of interest groups involved. These discussions usually involve the whole spectrum of disputes over land use, resource use, life-style and philosophy, preservation vs. conservation etc. Such complex problems simply cannot be resolved by the traditional two-party mediation process. The Round Table, consensus process is designed to provide a framework for dialogue that does allow progress to be made, despite the incredibly complex nature of these issues.

Consensus process is not a rigid, rules-based, system such as Robert's Rules that govern corporate directors meetings and the like. But it is not a free-for-all either. The dialogue must be structured in such a way as to achieve an understanding of each others point of view among all the participants. This can only be achieved if certain principles and methods are adopted and adhered to.

First and foremost, it is important that a professional facilitator, who understands the nature of consensus and has had experience with it, is engaged to help guide the process. The facilitator is not "in charge" like a chairperson but rather provides a service function, helping to steer the Round Table towards mutual understanding. In recent years the International Association for Public Participation (<http://www.iap2.org>) has brought together professionals who have developed these skills.

Second, and equally important, **CONSENSUS DOES NOT MEAN UNANIMOUS AGREEMENT ABOUT EVERYTHING.** While it may be nice to think about an ideal or theoretical definition of consensus that means perfect harmony, in practical terms this is never possible. The practical definition of consensus must recognize that there will always be differences of opinion and therefore differences in the position taken by various participants in the Round Table process. This is where the talent of the professional facilitator is needed.

Third, the Round Table process is inclusive as opposed to exclusive in terms of the participants. While it is important, for the sake of efficiency, to limit the number of people around the table, it is more important to make sure that all legitimate (and in some cases even questionable) interests are represented. For example, at one of the Round Tables to recommend a land use plan in British Columbia, the members agreed to add a person to represent the "All-Beings". It was argued that all the people at the table were there representing human interests and that other life forms should be given a place at the table. One of the best features about consensus process is that it is not about a majority "winning" a vote. So there is less concern about "how many votes" there are for a particular point of view and much less tendency for cliques and caucuses to emerge.



The job of the facilitator, in the final analysis, is to help the Round Table produce a consensus document, which expresses the areas of unanimous agreement among the participants, and where there is not unanimous agreement, an expression of that disagreement, in words that are unanimously agreed to by all the participants.

The above definition of consensus can usually be achieved, providing the facilitator is capable and the participants are genuine in their desire to make progress.

Enabling the round table process

Round Tables are not a substitute for government. They don't make policy like the Fijian elders, they provide policy advice to democratically elected bodies, whether these be national, state/provincial, or local. For this reason it is not usually appropriate for Round Tables to be ad hoc (i.e. self-appointed) in nature. It is usually best if Round Tables are appointed by, and answerable to, a democratically elected body that is in a position to make decisions based on the Round Table's advice.

Choosing the members of a Round Table involves first identifying the various interest groups, or "stakeholders" and then selecting an individual who can represent that interest effectively. One of the key requirements for a Round Table member is that they regularly report back to their constituency on the progress of the meetings. It is important that individual members do not "get ahead" of their interest group and are able to "bring them along" through the process.

There are many variations on this theme. For example, if a private company wants to foster the creation of a Round Table to consider an industrial proposal, it can do so by working with the appropriate level of government. If an environmental group wants to employ the Round Table process to focus attention on a development it believes is harming the environment, it can also do so by working with the appropriate elected body.

It is nearly always desirable that the appropriate elected body be responsible for determining or approving the terms of reference, appointing the members, and appointing the facilitator for the Round Table. Then the Round Table is consultative to, and answerable to, the democratic system. Private sector proponents can fund local Round Tables, providing they do not control the membership or direction of the process. This creates a situation where the credibility of the process is in the hands of elected government. If the government body loses confidence in the process, it is abandoned.



The round table process – how does it work?

Let us imagine that a Round Table has been established by a local government to consider a proposal to build a hydro-electric dam on a river. A facilitator has been appointed and calls the appointed membership to an initial meeting. At this meeting the first item of business after formalities and introductions is to review the membership of the Round Table and the terms of reference they have been given. If one or more members think that additional members are required to provide inclusive representation of all interests they must indicate this. Also, the members must be satisfied with the terms of reference; that they are not too limited in scope but also not too open-ended.

If the members of the Round Table agree that all interests are adequately represented (and this should be the case if the sponsoring body and the facilitator have done their homework) then the facilitator notes that consensus has been achieved! If they agree that one or more members should be added the facilitator also notes that consensus has been achieved. If they get into a disagreement over their membership the facilitator should impress upon them the inclusive nature of the process, taking members aside if necessary, until agreement has been reached. The strength of this approach is that the group begins with a small, yet important, step and is then able to celebrate the achievement of consensus before the substantive debate has even begun.

The next step is to discuss the terms of reference that have been provided to the Round Table. This begins the process of discussing the substance of the Round Table's business, yet it is still sufficiently general to avoid getting bogged down in details. Some members may think the terms of reference are too narrow, while others believe it is too wide. Here again the facilitator must use their skill to achieve a consensus. Once that is accomplished the Round Table is set to do its work, and it has already reached consensus on two important points.

Once the Round Table is comfortable with its membership and mandate, it can move on to the next stage, the identification of issues and concerns. Issues are real points of substance that most members agree are important to the discussion or task at hand. For example, it is an issue that the hydroelectric dam may burst and flood the villages below. Concerns, on the other hand, are more like worries, not always accepted by a majority of the members, but it is important to recognize them even if only one member has the concern. One member may worry that the power lines from the hydroelectric dam will cause cancer in people living nearby. Other members may consider this to be ridiculous. The facilitator should convince them not to alienate the member who is concerned and to accept their concern as genuine. Again, it is important to remain inclusive in the process, especially at the beginning when trust has not yet been established.

The process of identifying issues and concerns begins to allow the members to stop stating their positions, and to identify the reasons why they hold those positions. Instead of saying "I am against hydroelectric dams", they are asked to say why, such as "the hydro dam will flood the valley and damage the tourism industry". The process of identifying issues and concerns should



be an exhaustive one, no stone should be left unturned. Even after all issues and concerns have been identified, this agenda item should be left open throughout the process, for additions if necessary. It is a general rule that in consensus process, the agenda should always be open so as to make it clear that nothing has been cut off from discussion.

At this point the facilitator should help the members of the Round Table to organize the issues and concerns in some logical or methodical way. Sometimes a group of issues will naturally come under a single general heading. The identification of issues and concerns will usually require about two full meetings. (Typically, meetings occur once a month, say beginning with dinner on a Friday and ending with a lunch on a Saturday). At the end of this process the members have achieved consensus on the issues and concerns.

Then begins the most substantive part of the process, working through the issues one at a time. For each issue, a procedure for information-gathering is determined. Documents and experts are identified. All members of the Round Table should be able to put any information before the group and should be able to suggest experts who might shed light on the issue. This often requires a budget for bringing experts to the table. In addition, it is often useful to go on field trips to see the location(s) that are involved in the dispute or discussion. It might also be useful to travel to other sites where similar issues exist, e.g. to the site of another hydroelectric dam. For each issue or concern, all members should be satisfied that the information-gathering phase has been sufficiently exhaustive and that all relevant information is now before them. This process can require many meetings but if for no other reason than exhaustion the members are usually able to reach consensus that enough information has been gathered and placed before them.

Throughout the process of identifying issues and gathering information the members of the Round Table become educated together. They get a better understanding of the other points of view and concerns. They get to know each other personally over meals and during field trips. Sometimes people with opposing views become friends and agree to work together to solve problems.

The next stage involves the facilitator's effort to help find common ground on as many issues and concerns as possible. It is quite usual for the Round Table to reach unanimous agreement around many issues. In the case of a hydroelectric dam, for example, it is likely that the statement "Studies should be conducted to determine if endangered species will be effected" may be unanimously adopted. But other statements, such as "Hydroelectric dams should be banned in this country", will likely not find unanimous support.

At this point the facilitator's most skillful task is at hand. The facilitator must help the members draft a document, outlining the nature of the proposal/dispute/land use issue and for each issue and concern, find wording that can be accepted unanimously by the Round Table members. This means producing a document that expresses clearly where there is unanimous agreement, and



where there is disagreement, a description of the nature of that disagreement in words that are unanimously accepted by the members.

Thus, a consensus document can be produced even though there is disagreement on some points. The great benefit of this process is that it then provides the actual policy-makers, government, with a very clear expression of public opinion. Compared to the war of headlines in the media that often characterizes land use and other resource issues, the Round Table approach brings clarity and coherence to the forefront of the debate.

The Consensus Document should then be distributed widely in the community, and formally presented, in person, to the level(s) of government that are involved in decision-making

Conclusion

Every Round Table process is unique. But it is important to remember that there are some common elements that are necessary to all Round Tables. Some of these are:

A willingness on the part of the various interests in the community to voluntarily come to the table.

Support from the elected Government for the process, in terms of authorizing the Round Table and appointing members to it.

Professional facilitation by a neutral facilitator with experience in consensus process.

"Good will" on the part of the participants. Consensus process will not work if there are hidden agendas, unholy alliances or ill will.

A willingness on the part of Government to "follow through" and to act on the recommendations of the Round Table.

I believe that consensus process is a powerful tool to bring about strategies for sustainable development. By creating an environment and a process where participants can get beyond their positions and understand the issues it is possible to focus on real problems and to marginalize extreme positions that have little or no basis in fact.

The real challenge is in gaining the sincere participation of all interests, even those that seem determined to remain oppositional no matter how much effort is made to accommodate their concerns. Once again, we are faced with the difficult judgment of what is extreme versus what is reasonable.

Thank you