

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES

Arthur J. Hanson
President, IISD

Address to the
International Association for the Study of Common Property
University of Manitoba
26 September 1991

1
2-18-94
WORKSHOP IN POLITICAL THEORY
AND POLICY ANALYSIS
518 NORTH PARK
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BLOOMINGTON, IN 47403-3895 U.S.A.

I am pleased and honoured to present my first address as President of the International Institute for Sustainable Development to this Common Property Conference. Those of you who know me as Professor of Environmental Studies at Dalhousie University will recall my long-standing interest in topics pertaining to this theme and particularly on community-based natural resource management.

Global Action

The challenges we are tackling by linking sustainable development to issues of common property are indeed formidable. Ultimately they are global in extent. The air we breathe, and use as a global sink, has become the latest testing ground for common property management. The intense debates surrounding the practical measures for limiting global climate change symbolize the opposite poles of stewardship and fierce exploitation which shape most common property situations. On the horizon are global conventions to regulate action regarding climate change, biological diversity, and possibly world forest utilization. As well, there is the existing law of the Sea Convention. We can assume a generation of work lies ahead, regarding transformative thinking on common property resources at a global level.

I am bringing up this global level of problem-solving at an early point in my talk for a couple of good reasons. One is simply to underscore the significance of these matters as part of the broader framework within which other common property problems can be situated. For example, if global warming of the atmosphere creates ocean current and temperature changes, chances are high that migratory fish stocks, or even ecosystem productivity will change. A second concern about changes in global commons is the broad range of contributing factors which operate at a local level.

We have come full circle. Starting from local decisions affecting local ecosystems, we now can link their impacts to issues of major national or international significance. Acting upon similar common property resources such as fish or forest lands in many parts of the world, people make local decisions (e.g. to deforest for agricultural development) which have global consequences. In turn, global change will have longer term local consequences. This coupling reflects the complexity of the sustainable development agenda for the 1990s. The adage "Think globally, act locally" has value in setting out the framework for common property decision-making.

One of the messages that I wish to leave most clearly and emphatically this morning is that we have a tremendous responsibility to build workable paradigms for sustainable development at the global commons level just as we have been doing locally and regionally. It is not too much to expect that some very helpful principles for global action can be derived from the micro-level work which has characterized the socially and ecologically-based studies of common property in recent years.

Earth Summit

Sustainable development is of course the central theme of the Earth Summit (UNCED) taking place in Brazil next June. The Summit preparations are taking place at all levels and on many topics throughout the world. I would like to ask how the results of this meeting, and really the next several sessions of IASCP in the years ahead, will mesh with the aspirations and action which may emerge during and after Brazil? In particular, how will your own agenda help to shape UNCED's Agenda 21, which is intended to guide environment and development action into the next century? More fundamentally, are the approaches now emerging as components of the sustainable development paradigm at odds with, or complementary to, the mainstream of common property theories?

These are important questions to ask at this point in time because we are at a potential turning point in our attitudes towards common property situations and towards societies which have different value systems towards resources and sustainability concepts. It is interesting, even remarkable, that in this past week two of the mainstream journals in North American popular literature have devoted cover articles to traditional knowledge of aboriginal peoples. In Time

magazine (Sept. 23, 1991), the title is "Lost Tribes, Lost Knowledge". In National Geographic an even more dramatic title: 1491. These articles reflect mainstream shifts. The remarkable coalitions, for example between environmentalists and indigenous peoples, now forming in all parts of the world will be forcing functions to bringing about real changes in the relationships between governments, development interests and local people over issues of property, especially land and forest resources.

Poverty Alleviation

Although we may be at or near a turning point where wasteful and iniquitous practices could be replaced by more sustainable approaches, there are no guarantees. For the landless, those currently struggling to sustain livelihoods where resources are depleted by forces beyond local control, and those engaged in bitter battles over recognition of resource rights, long-term guarantees often take second place to short-term survival needs. The cause and effect linkage of poverty to environmental degradation is a critical element of sustainable development. We know enough about property rights to unequivocally state that secure resource access, whether on a shared or individual basis, is essential to poverty alleviation (and prevention) and therefore to sustainable development strategies. This fact is not new to this audience or to governments; yet it remains as the major stumbling block for real action.

Sustainable Development Principles

I would like to explore some of the emerging principles of sustainable development, including those important in the local context where many common property studies are focused. Let us start with three ideas:

1. Intergenerational equity. This idea, simple enough to grasp, provides an ethical basis for sustainable development. Surely it is one of the most compelling concepts to drive common property debates. We have seen simplistic interpretations of the "Tragedy of the Commons"; and we have seen dramatic presentations of spiritual beliefs which guide intergenerational relations in many indigenous cultures. How can we make intergenerational equity an operational concept in our decision-making?

2. Empowerment and participation in decision-making, listening, understanding and involving people in ways which permit their greater control of their own destiny. This is a second critical challenge of sustainable development. In practical terms it is ultimately the only way in which resource bases can be sustainably managed. Command and control, externally applied incentive systems and other regulatory approaches can be stymied if local participation is not a major part of the equation.
3. Primary environmental care. This term, promoted as a shorthand for the combination of access to basic needs and maintenance of community environmental health and ecological support systems, is another comprehensive way of linking common property concerns (clean air, water and sanitation) to sustainable development.

It is important, however, not to lose sight of how these locally-based concerns relate to higher level organization and macropolicies. Therefore let us examine three other principles which depend upon creating new relationships between environment and economy.

1. Regionally-based environmental-cum-economic planning. Plans which are ecologically and socially-based as well as being economically sound are the most likely to be sustainable. Such plans are also the most likely to deal adequately with identification of local knowledge and strengths, recognize rights and properly interpret the nature of ecological support systems. Yet adoption of and adherence to such plans is relatively rare, especially in resource-rich "frontier" regions.
2. Macropolicies in support of sustainable development. Nations are just beginning to examine how trade decisions, subsidy and taxation programs and other business and financial decisions influence sustainable development nationally and locally. In theory at least, we can show how trade and subsidy incentives destroy uplands in Southeast Asia and how out-of-control government debt in Canada constrains our potential to address growing ecological debts. Whether the common property at risk is the Great Lakes or a mountainside in Thailand we need good evidence of how to change macropolicies so they can support clearly identifiable and measurable sustainable development objectives.

3. Resource and environmental accounting. The toll of unsustainable practises in financial, human or ecological terms is rarely measured with any precision. Until we regularly do so, the short-term gains and impressive transformation of natural wealth will be the dominant measures. Meanwhile the cost to local livelihoods, soil fertility, groundwater and other common property resources, and biodiversity will continue to be lost on the balance sheet. This is a complex area for research. Unfortunately it also appears to be an area where many of the researchers interested in ecological and social topics have failed to connect with the statistical and economic thinkers who are pursuing these new ideas.

The Wheel of Sustainable Development

My summary comments demonstrate that sustainable development is a complex theme. We could not expect less if, as some of us believe, this new approach is to become the dominant development paradigm of our times.

I like to picture sustainable development as the hub of a wheel with a number of spokes. Each of the six topics I have described, plus some others, are spokes in the wheel. Take away some of the spokes and the wheel will be weakened or not turn. In other words, sustainable development will be derived from a combination of concerns which are not new (e.g. basic needs, empowerment of people and local communities) and some which are still quite untested (e.g. environmental protection strategies, resource accounting). It is how we bring the pieces together which counts. Certainly I hope people interested in common property theories will be able to see many applications in this wheel. We also need to examine the road on which this wheel travels. A road properly paved will allow the wheel to turn more smoothly than one which is rutted or rocky. A message to governments and others who control allocations in our societies.

Role of IISD

In the final part of my presentation I want to return to how a new organization, IISD, can hope to make a difference. We are starting out in a field which might be considered crowded. There

is no shortage of environmental, development and scientific research and action-oriented institutes. Yet we believe IISD does have a unique and important place. There is no other international development organization solely devoted to the function of promoting sustainable development within decision-making processes, which is our mandate.

Our approach is to help translate sustainable development concepts into practice. This is the great challenge which must be met by individuals, corporations, communities and governments everywhere. No single organization should be other than very humble in the face of this task. But we must also seek to be bold - - prepared to highlight unconventional innovations in our research, and to encourage implementation. We want to hear from people of all walks of life - - to "listen and learn" from community and individual experience in order to disseminate the most promising approaches. We also want to deal with root causes rather than effects of problems. It is no longer productive to ignore the factors underlying poverty, declining resource availability and pollution.

We will focus on institutional change, including the fostering of "institutions without walls"—the networks and cross-sectoral partnerships which are shaping solutions to problems as diverse as indigenous peoples rights and ozone layer depletion.

Perhaps the most critical matters to be tackled are the issues of attitudinal change and poverty alleviation. We refer to "communications of a second kind" when talking about attitudinal shifts. For it is very clear that despite high levels of interest in environment and development, including scientific and media communications, willingness to tackle hard issues, particularly those involving redistribution of wealth, is limited. The contrast between over consumption habits on the one hand, and poverty persistence on the other is dramatic. Yet so far we have failed to strike other than faustian bargains. IISD will make a lasting contribution if we can identify new compacts which will improve the well-being of poor people wherever they are in the world, but especially within developing countries.

Thank you for your attention. IISD will look forward to maintaining close relations with networks such as the Common Property Association and I very much appreciate this opportunity to discuss our views. On behalf of our Board and staff I would like to convey our hopes that your meeting will be successful and that the output can directly contribute to emerging sustainable development concepts and action.