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Discussant's Comments, Forestry Stream

I have been attending forestry sessions, but in talking with many of you between sessions and in the evenings, I have gotten the sense that much of what I'm hearing as the important messages for people doing work on forest management would apply across resources. I do not feel that there is anything particularly carboniferous or woody or leafy about the messages I have extracted from the forest sessions, and for the most part I will state these messages in their general form rather than in terms specific to forests.

My first group of observations has to do with doing what we do better than before. The keywords here seem to be DATA, CONTEXT, and TIME.

1) Quantitative data. First, I am really impressed by the care being taken to gather good quantitative data on resources and households in many of the studies being presented in Vancouver. The good thing about this is that we can use these data for better cross-case comparisons and measures of outcomes. The risks are that we may think we know more than we really do know once we have all these quantitative measures and that we may place too much faith in them.

2) Ecological, economic, and institutional indicators. Second, combining biological measures of the ecosystem along with institutional arrangements and economic indicators (forms of property rights, use rules, measures of outcomes) is important in making robust comparisons across cases, across resources, and across time, and thus in pushing our theory testing. We need to look at things from many angles. Some of the most impressive presentations I saw were based on collaborations between natural and social scientists, and it looks to me as if we should encourage more of this collaborative work. The social scientists need more ecology and the ecologists need more institutional analysis. (I have the impression that the people who study fisheries are ahead of those who study forests in this regard.)

3) Sampling and case selection for structured, focussed comparisons. Since no theory can be confirmed or rejected with one case, we need to use carefully chosen combinations and samples of cases to figure out such things as:

- when collective institutions emerge and when they do not;
- when they work (generate good outcomes) and when they do not;

-- when communities enforce rules primarily to manage the commons well, and when the real objective of collective enforcement of rules is to cement a particular distribution of power, either inside the community or between persons in the community and those outside;

We assume too easily that community control is good but we ought to be measuring that in order to check it.

4) Questioning first impressions and looking for the invisible. The panels I visited also made it clear how important it is to focus on what Jim Scott would call the invisible, to make a self-conscious effort (unlike states!) to see what is hard to see, especially in connection with the enforcement of rules. Are penalties really extracted from the people who are supposedly penalized for infractions? Who watches the watchers?

5) Economic and political context. We are struggling to incorporate context: both economic pressures from markets and political pressures from higher layers of authority. This is important but messy, since one of the contextual factors we must now include is globalization itself: how do the negative effects of globalization (homogenization and cultural loss) and positive ones (communication, sharing, mobilization) operate together?

6) Longitudinal studies. We need to get more TIME into our research

- before and after exogenous shocks
- before and after major changes in community mobilization or operational rules for using the resource;
- before and after institutional changes (institutions in transition)
- the origins and demise of institutions, not only the way institutions operate at equilibrium

The most comprehensive project gathering longitudinal data that I know of is IFRI (International Forest Resources and Institutions), which Elinor Ostrom launched at about the same time that IASCP took shape. But it has been very exciting to discover how many institutions in India, for instance, are doing similar things -- longitudinal studies that gather quantitative data on ecological, economic, and institutional indicators -- and are now in a position to report on results at IASCP. Studying the same cases over time is the only way we can find out if successes last, if failures get reversed, and if outcomes observed at one time are stable and persistent or are one-time flukes.

The second set of observations has to do with stepping outside of what we do to examine its philosophical meaning and its internal logic.

7) Philosophical implications. There also seems to be some craving for, or consensus on the importance of, assessing our philosophical roots. But there is no consensus at all on what those roots are. What we do is appealing to both left and right because of the interest in the welfare of ordinary resource users and the interest in property rights, and it is very confusing to outsiders. Maybe we insiders do not feel confused -- but perhaps we are fooling ourselves if we feel that way. We should force ourselves to be more systematic about working through the philosophical origins and the philosophical implications of what we do. Perhaps there should be panels in the

future that attempt to examine the relationship between what we do to the liberal property rights tradition, the classic enlightenment, communitarianism -- even more explicitly and thoroughly than Fikret Berkes did in his presidential address referring to the enlightenment. Do our research findings actually challenge the enlightenment traditions or confirm them? Do our research findings from non-Western settings confirm a division between the West and non-West or indicate a universality to certain problems and a family of solutions? Do we represent some sort of grand convergence of contending philosophies, the different strands of thought brought together by ecological crisis? Or are we walking around carrying a worn patchwork quilt of ideas, badly stitched together from ill-fitting pieces?

And finally, there is a third set of observations related to practical results for resource users and the resource systems they depend on.

8) Sharing among resource-using communities: The IASCP itself is devoted to exchange of information, both practical and theoretical, for the purpose of building generalizations about commons -- about users, rights, governance, evolution over time. But some of the sessions I have attended have made me aware that there is a parallel movement among communities that use common resources to share contacts and information with each other. I learned this morning about four different such federations in Nepal, Indonesia, Meso-America, and Scotland. I think we can assume that these exist also in India, Canada, and elsewhere. These leagues create direct links among communities of resource users to share strategies, either for designing rules for resource use or for pooling capital or even for conflict resolution and troubleshooting. This situation reminds me of the early growth of the labor movement in industrial countries: there are huge collective action obstacles to mobilization at first, but if the parts coalesce eventually then tremendous collective influence and tremendous collective gains for component units are serious possibilities in the future. This kind of direct contact among communities is something that the IASPC is undoubtedly delighted to see, whether it can claim any credit for this development or not.

9) Learning what it takes to stimulate government enthusiasm rather than hostility toward local innovations in the use of common-pool resources. Many of us agree that we have helpful practical suggestions in specific cases to make for improved environmental management, but we are often reminded that the crucial stumbling block is often a lack of interest or support for these improvements on the part of national and sometimes local governmental authorities. We often encounter communities that have done a good job of institutional design and started their resources on the road to recovery, only to be hindered by political decisions over which they have no control. Some governments are hospitable, some are grudgingly willing, and others object outright to such attempts. This would suggest that we ought to be sorting through our empirical findings to figure out what the preconditions are that cause national and local authorities to tolerate or consent to community control and local experiments in resource management. If we had more robust scholarly findings about what creates support for community based resource management outside of the concerned community, we could turn this information into practical advice on two points: (a) where practical efforts should be concentrated and where they are an utter waste of time due to lack of contextual support, and (b) over the long term what factors can be manipulated to improve the likelihood of increasing government sympathy for local resource

control in specific places where that is the largest stumbling block to progress. But this immediately raises questions about how far the IASCP's role as an organization should go.

10) Activism by the IASPC. Never far away from us at this meeting, is the issue of advocacy on the part of the IASPC. In spite of what I said above, the IASCP as an organization has bylaws preventing the organization (never its individual members of course) from taking positions on policy issues or becoming an organization of advocacy. The drafters of the bylaws did this because of their familiarity with organizations that have been torn asunder by the inability to agree on whether to make such recommendations to the outside world, or more often by the inability to agree on the content of such recommendations. What the IASCP does do as a group is to generate and disseminate information, and as a group we could easily consider trying harder (not relying so much on the potential audience FINDING this information). Michelle Curtain (Secretary-Treasurer) and Charlotte Hess (Information Officer) take care of the IASPC web page and the common property library at Indiana University, and are always looking for ways of getting information into circulation. Nancy Peluso and Julie Greenberg, our Digest editors, are always looking for ways to make the Digest more useful. As the world computerizes, these tasks will become easier and cheaper to accomplish via the internet, but we should also explore regional conferences and other mechanisms. There may also be some particular points of agreement, on questions that are not particularly controversial but do still have practical applications, that the IASCP would be willing to endorse now. Finally, bylaws are democratically constructed by the members, and members can change bylaws (even though on this point my own individual belief is that the bylaws are right as they are now). At the very least, though, since many people have raised the issue of activism and advocacy at Vancouver, we should discuss the role of the organization, and the freedom of its members to act on their own, in our Digest, on the web page, and on the commons listserver [commons@aesop.rutgers.edu].