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Response to C. S. (Buzz) Holling 1999. "Visions: A Personal Essay"

The Value of Visions and Art of Visionaries

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The ecologists and managers who attended a workshop in the Kruger National Park to develop an adaptive management process still find themselves in awe of the value of the vision they sketched with stakeholders at that time. It continues to provide excitement and stimulus as they build and shape the process to fit the unique and changing circumstances in South Africa.

For this reason, Holling's (1999) editorial gave us a jolt! Suspicion of people with visions comes as a surprise to us. Are we missing something that lies behind the editorial? Are we "blind" and "deaf" too? We think not and share here our experience and excitement in the spirit of what we see as Holling's *vision for Conservation Ecology*.

Our excitement comes from the value a vision can provide as a listening device, an integrator of conversations, a means to converge dreams with reality. We see this emerging in our work, and this is why we get excited about vision.

It is also why we are confused by the apparent contradiction in Dr. Holling's editorial. No vision for *Conservation Ecology*? We are excited by the prospect of a journal that provides a listening device for quiet voices masked by the noise of crusades, dogma, and parochial self-confidence. These include voices from less developed nations or circumstances, the young dreamer, or anyone whose experience deviates from mainstream thinking. They may not be heard simply because they do not couch their tales in the buzz words of the "noise," despite the fact that they express a noble and selfless vision that could provide boundless opportunity for enriching the global science and management of ecosystems.

Perhaps Holling's concerns arise from the possible uses to which a vision can be put. We can easily imagine situations in which a vision that is used to further ambition becomes a disruptive force, or a vision that is not allowed to evolve becomes stagnant, even bigoted. But we also see immeasurable value when a vision is used with reticence, humility, even altruism, to bring people together and create a better future.

Let us develop an analogy using Holling's sculpture scenario to illustrate how visions work for us.

Although his ideas were hazy before he started, they must surely have been collected into a form of "consensus" by the time he decided where the first cut should be, a humble cut made in anticipation of the potential latent in the wood. This is the sort of vision of which we speak. The wood grain is the reality with which this vision will converge. The first cut is the first step in that convergence. Thereafter, the artist is the generative power that molds the vision of "hazy" but creative ideas in harmony with the reality of the grain. The sculpture is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If the artist is blind to the surprises and deaf to the voices of the grain, he and the wood are not in harmony, but in conflict. The product is consequently more a result of ambition (self-centered and selfish) than of vision. The altruistic vision, on the other hand, can be integrative and open to other voices, to other influences, and to learning by doing.

What if there were many artists all trying to sculpt the same piece of wood? Then perhaps the process of deriving vision is more important than the vision itself. Holling hints at how his adaptive management workshops have evolved to "let the voices speak." Undoubtedly this draws out their expectations, a form of vision.

Similarly, we have found that the process of developing a collective vision, and seeking its expression in reality, is central to adaptive management. Vision provides the first step in integrating social values, scientific knowledge, and management experience in a multi-party system (Rogers and Bestbier 1997). It is the first step in developing the common purpose and knowledge base on which consensus thrives, and in collectively exposing disparate mental models (Senge 1990) to achieve consensus on ecological and management end points.

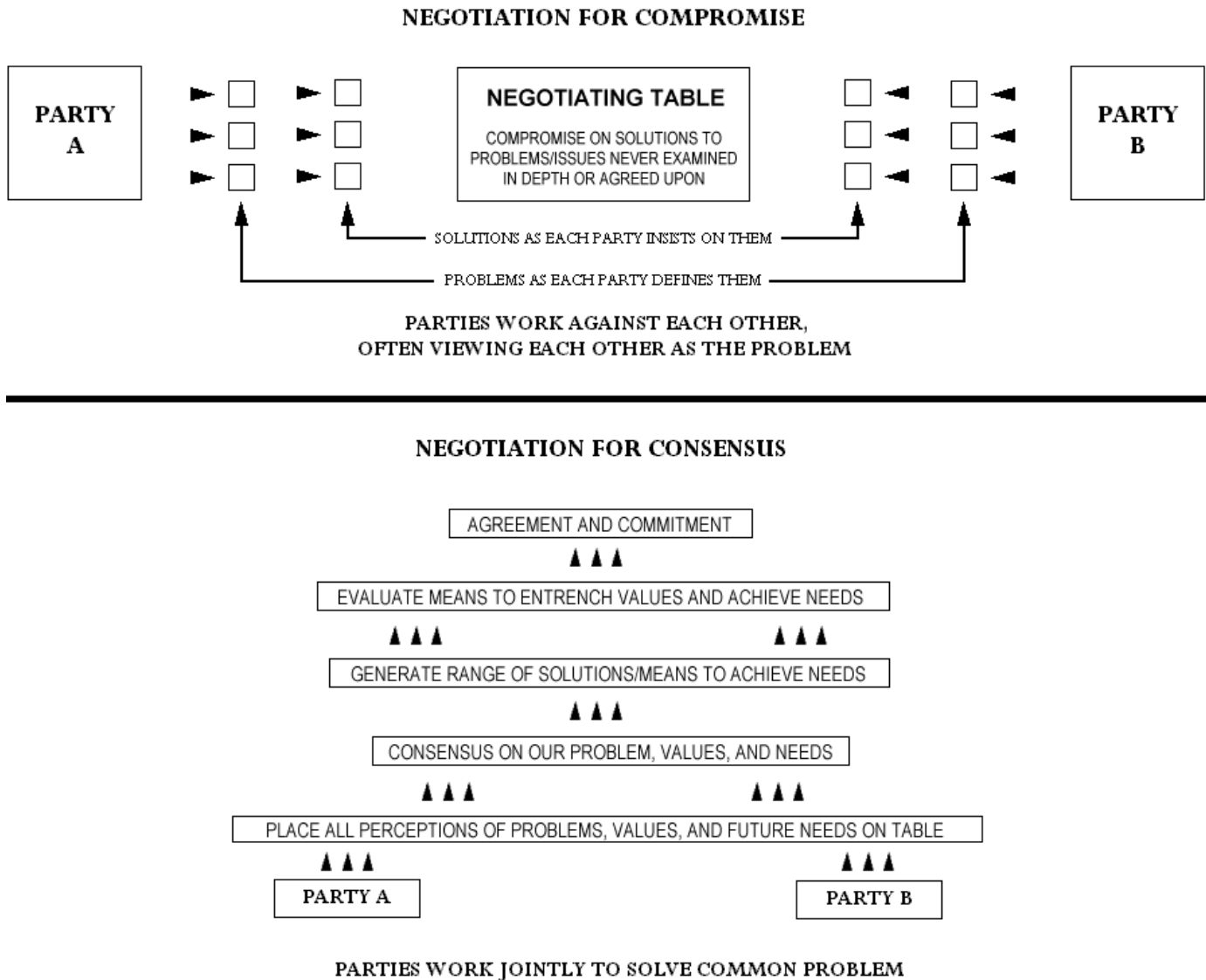
Given adequate consensus and some artistry, vision and reality converge over time to shape each other in a self-fulfilling prophecy, an expression of the latent wisdom and desires of the participants. However, this can happen only if the vision did not represent someone's personal ambition and its convergence with reality was brought about with humility and good will.

Visions for ecosystem management must also be developed and used with caution and humility. Although vision is a valuable tool for converging energies (Senge 1990), its value depends on how well it is translated into reality. This is a tricky task and requires a facilitator skilled at negotiating consensus rather than compromise. Because it is so essential, we have purposefully incorporated a process for generating a consensus vision (Rogers and Bestbier 1997) into adaptive management exercises.

Our process is based on the remarkable negotiations that led to peaceful change from apartheid to democracy in South Africa (Fig. 1). This process is designed to avoid the conflict that comes with seeking compromise between party-specific problems and solutions, as in Western democracies. Instead, the focus is on making the problem a common problem. However, rather than seeking solutions to the immediate problem, the vision of a better common future is achieved by focusing on common values and future needs. These common values and needs are latent in the participants, like the grain of the wood. The facilitator carefully extracts them in the same way the sculptor exposes the grain. When everyone is focused on the common

needs and values embodied in a broad consensus vision, the template for converging it with reality exists.

Figure 1. Contrasting strategies for negotiating a common future (Rogers and Bestbier 1997).



Our process of convergence is one of developing an objectives hierarchy that breaks the vision down into achievable ecosystem targets or end points (Rogers and Biggs 1999). The cascading linkages provide an increasingly detailed explanation of what the world should look like. Each step in the hierarchy is developed by the same negotiation process used to develop the vision. The facilitator helps the parties whittle away at the vision (wood) to expose the needs (grain) in ever increasing detail. The realities of what can and can't be done are merged with what needs to be done to achieve the better future. The vision provides an anchor or reference point that, like the block of wood, holds the potential the parties have for achieving it. In the hands of the right person, the vision encourages the voices to speak!

When used in this manner, a common vision preempts and dissipates conflict in a remarkable way. Witness the transformation in South Africa, a country so rich in cultural diversity that it has 11 official languages. Yet, despite so much potential for conflict, there is still an equal potential for achieving Nelson Mandela's vision.

Verwoerd took the autocratic command-and-control approach to his "wood." He knew the shape he wanted apartheid to take. When the shape would not emerge, his subsequent hacking began to destroy the wood's potential. Mandela's vision is forgiving, inclusive, and inspirational, encouraging the sculptors to forge a new nation themselves. Senge (1990) suggests that the USA was the first nation built on vision. Perhaps South Africa will be the first to also hear the silent voices.

If vision can work for nations, then surely it must have the potential to solve environmental conflicts, the potential to hear the quiet voices above the noise.

RESPONSES TO THIS ARTICLE

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