

First draft: December 12, 1996
Prepared for the Fall 1996 WPTPA mini-conference.
Please do not cite.

2-6-97
WORKSHOP IN POLITICAL THEORY
AND POLICY ANALYSIS
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Reprint files

Communities and Resource Management: A Critique

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1. Introduction

Conventional wisdom on the role of communities in renewable resource management has registered a remarkable *volte face*. According to current scholarship, professional advocacy, and media representations, community is critical to successful management of resources. Only a few years ago, the media, professionals, and policy-makers saw the resource user and the communities in which such users were located, as the sources of the pressures creating a world-wide environmental crisis.

The basic elements of earlier policy and scholarly writings about local communities and their residents are familiar. "People" were an obstacle to efficient and "rational" organization of resource use.¹ A convincing logic undergirded the belief that the goals of conservation and the interests of local communities were in opposition. Conservation required protection of threatened resources: wildlife, forests, pastures, fisheries, and irrigation or drinking water. Many of these resources, especially at the local level, could be easily exploited because they were open to all. The interests of local communities who relied on available natural resources for fodder, fuelwood, water or food, lay in exploiting these. This schematic representation, popularised in no

¹See, for example, Eckholm (1976), Gupta and Bandhu (1979), the discussion of the literature in Ives and Messerli (1989), and Wilson (1984).

small measure by Garrett Hardin's pernicious influence and bolstered by several theoretical metaphors that served to guide policy,² provided a convincing explanation of how resource degradation and depletion took place.

Empirical evidence about the context within which most rural communities were located helped prop up the view. Demographic growth could only increase consumption pressures. The poverty of rural communities similarly impelled the over-exploitation of natural resources. Market penetration worked in the same direction.³ Markets, it was additionally believed, could work only if private property rights in resources could be introduced to eliminate externalities.

The above explanation of resource depletion and the role of community was no innocent academic fancy. Because many consider the environment and conservation as moral issues, and because resource management and allocation is unavoidably political, any explanation of why resource depletion takes place comes complete with implications about how degradation and depletion should be prevented. The understanding of the role of community in resource use and management has direct consequences in terms of desirable policy measures. If the above understanding of resource use by communities was correct--that communities were powerless in the face of increasing consumption pressures--it clearly implied that conservation required restricting depredations by local users, and even, exclusion of local populations from resource systems. State policy, where it was concerned with conservation, was aimed at such ends;

²See Ostrom (1990) for a discussion of how the metaphor of the Prisoner's Dilemma and the logic of collective action have been important in shaping understandings about the possibility of cooperation.

³For a review of some of the literature on overpopulation and market pressures, see Agrawal and Yadama (forthcoming).

international conservation organizations promoted such policies.⁴

While some strands of the earlier vision still linger the differences between this old vision and new beliefs about community are nothing short of radical. Communities are now the locus of conservationist imaginings.⁵ A recent analysis opens with the following strong assertion, "The survival and quality of forests in most developing countries depend on the strength of community forest organizations formed by the people traditionally involved in forest use" (Ascher, 1995:1).⁶ Communities and rural users are the heroes rather than the villains of resource depletion. The sea-change in perceptions about the role of communities builds upon historical foundations. As the opening lines of another recent collection of essays inform us, "Communities down the millennia have developed elaborate rituals and practices to limit offtake levels, restrict access to critical resources, and distribute harvests" (Western and Wright, 1994: 1)⁷

In the previous chapter we described the historical context in which this recognition and valorization of community has taken place. The loss of faith in a teleological History that

⁴See Ascher (1995), Fairhead and Leach (1994), Gibson and Marks (1995) Hitchcock (1995) and Stahl (1990) for discussions of examples and brief reviews of the relevant literature.

⁵An enormous outpouring of literature bears witness. See Bhatt (1990), Chowdhary et al. (1989), Elbow (1994), Fellizar (1994), Ghai (1993), Gurung (1992), Lowry and Donahue (1994). See also Wisner (1990) for a review.

⁶Ascher continues, "These organizations, with help--rather than control--from the government, are essential for promoting forest development and limiting forest extraction." IN later parts of the book, he goes on to examine many of the conditions under which community organizations are more likely to be successful.

⁷Scholars recognize the importance of community not just for resource management in developing countries. See Huntsinger and McCaffrey (1995) for a critique of the state, opposed to the Yurok, in the US, and Hoban and Cook (1988) for a critique of the conservation provision of the US Farm Bill of 1985 for its inadequate involvement of local communities.

evolves toward a desirable end state reawakens nostalgic longings for a lost community. The absence of faith in progress allows the resurrection of community as a surrogate Utopia. But we should see the erosion of ideologies that provide alluring promises about the future only as forming the general context in which it becomes possible to quest for community. A host of far more specific factors aid advocates of community-based-resource-management to find a voice. The past four decades of planned development and several decades of conservation practice have made one fact amply clear: the capacity of states in developing nations to coerce their citizens into unpopular programs is strictly limited. Limits to centrally exercised power are brought home especially starkly in the context of attempts to impose state discipline on resource use. Where fodder, fuelwood, fish, or wildlife are intrinsic to everyday livelihood and survival, even well funded and enforced coercion might fail. But the fiscal crisis of the state and drying flows of aid from overseas have begun to prevent coercive conservation from getting much funding. Faulty design, inefficient implementation, and corrupt organizational structures play an equally important role as they combine with local intransigence and lack of subsistence alternatives to convert centrally sponsored conservation projects into spectacular failures.

While this political-economic context has directly contributed to the resurgence of community, positive contextual factors have also played a role. The spread of democratic political structures and the insistent rhetoric of participation⁸ make coercive development and conservation projects less attractive/practicable. The increasing prominence of indigenous and ethnic claims about the stewardship role of native populations in relation to nature indirectly

⁸Bratton, 1989; Clark, 1991; Cohen, 1988; Fernandes, 1989; Habermas, 1989; Kothari, 1984; Sheth, 1987; Warren, 1992.

assists the rhetoric of grassroots and community participation.⁹ A theoretical foundation for the role of community in resource management has become available through a respectable pedigree of research on common property (Berkes, 1989; Bromley, 1992; McCay and Acheson, 1987; McKean, 1992; NRC, 1986; Ostrom, 1990; 1992; Peters, 1994; Stevenson, 1991; Wade, 1987). In showing that communities have successfully managed resources around the world, scholars of commons have provided ammunition to those who contest the claims of state actors as well as those of privatization advocates.

In light of the significant symbolic, theoretical, and intellectual resources available to advocates of community, it is somewhat surprising that claims on behalf of community-based conservation often retain a rather simple quality. At their simplest, these claims assume the following form: Because "communities" have a long term stake in resources upon which they depend, they are the best managers of resources. In a prescriptive form, the thesis of community based conservation and resource management uses new beliefs about the suitability of communities to suggest policy recommendations. Involving communities in conservation and giving them higher benefits from the resources they conserve, will give them a greater stake in resource management and conservation. They will, therefore, become better managers.¹⁰

As Li has pointed out, this vision of community as the centerpiece of conservation and resource management is attractive. It permits the contestation of dominant narratives that favor state control or privatization of resources and their management (1996). These "generalized

⁹For a critical review, see Agrawal (1995). For sympathetic valorization of indigenous peoples and their knowledge, see Brokensha et al. (1980), Warren (1990), and Warren et al. (1995).

¹⁰See the various chapters in Western and Wright (1994) for an elaboration of this perspective.

representations" of community make available "points of leverage in ongoing processes of negotiation" (1996: 505,509). Generalized representations, still, are misrepresentations. They disguise, conceal, eclipse, and erase critical interests, processes and causal links within communities and between communities and other social formations. By exploring the specific ways in which they conceal, eclipse and erase, we suggest, it becomes possible to point toward more equitable, perhaps more efficient, avenues of conservation even as communities continue to occupy center-stage.

2. Images of Community

To simplify, most of the literature on conservation and resource management sees community in one of three ways: community as a spatial unit; community as a social structure; community as (a set of) idealized norm(s). Using one or a combination of these images of community, scholars and activists advance the claim that communities are critical players in conservation/resource management. These views of community, we suggest in this chapter, are not very instructive or capable of furthering insight. Because they do not withstand critical scrutiny, even collectively, they are also not very productive as foundations from which to contest dominant narratives. Finally, they have only restricted value for policy-making. They do not adequately attend to politics and institutions, nor to strategic aspects of interactions that take place within communities, nor finally, to different forms in which heterogeneity affects resource management outcomes.

2.1 *Community as Spatial Unit*

As a spatial unit, the origins of community are seldom examined, and it is supposed to come into being simply by virtue of individuals sharing common circumscribed territory and space.¹¹ The added presumption is that spatially located communities are small in size. Although neither of these two assumptions are discussed at any length in writings focusing on conservation and resource management they are shared quite widely, to the extent that sometimes community simply denotes a small group of households situated contiguous to each other.

A long line of research on community supports the view that they owe their distinguishing character to being small and territorially circumscribed. Tonnies saw *gemeinschaft*, of which community is a rather imperfect translation, as characterized by "intimate, private and exclusive living together" (cited in Bender, 1978:17). Such closeness was practically impossible in large cities and given the nature of earlier means of communication, very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve at a distance. The distinction Tonnies proposed found enduring resonance in sociological writings on the changes community underwent during "modernization," urbanization, and industrialization (Bender, 1978:47-107) because of increased mobility and greater size of settlements.

The popularity of this view of community can be traced at least in part to the fact that the renewable resources which communities use, manage and protect themselves are spatially situated. Government initiated programs to conserve natural resources in the past often failed

¹¹Most of the contributors to the volume edited by Western and Wright (1994) use this view of community implicitly when they operationalize the term. Although the editors explicitly disavow definition, or perhaps because of it, the territorial aspect of community becomes most significant in the case studies presented in the volume. See, for example, the study of Joint Forest Management in India by Poffenberger, the discussion of aboriginal community by Hill and Press, the example of CAMPFIRE elaborated by Metcalfe, or Donovan's discussion of forest conservation in Costa Rica.

because of the inability of governments to exercise coercive authority at distance. Because communities are presumed to be located near the wildlife, fishery or forest resources upon which they depend for subsistence, a circumscribed geographical location for communities is also convenient to assume.

2.2. Community as Social Artifact

The feature of community that finds the greatest attention in its constructions as a social artifact is its composition. Typically, community is seen as an aggregate of similarly endowed, relatively homogeneous households/individuals who possess common characteristics. Once a homogeneous composition to community is assumed, the existence of heterogeneity along multiple dimensions, hierarchy, conflicts, and the impact of these features on resource use and management practices become moot. It is far more easy to assume that homogenous communities would be able to manage resources without the kind of tensions and conflicts that are commonly perceived to exist between the state and the community, or even within communities as a result of market or other external influences.

Further, the assumption that communities are homogeneous makes it far more easy to defend their capacity to authoritatively control the use and management of local resources. The shift toward community is advocated on the ground that communities possess significant comparative advantages in relation to the state in managing local resources. But internally riven and ineradicably fractured communities are likely to experience greater difficulties in controlling resource use patterns of members who are marginalized or dissatisfied. Homogeneous and peaceful communities, among whose members a consensus exists about the appropriate

strategies to use and allocate local resources, are far more likely to manage resources sustainably and equitably. The rhetorical weight of community comes from papering over the differences that prevail within existing communities.

More recent studies of resource use at the local level have begun to recognize the problems theoretical and representational problems raised by depicting communities in homogeneous terms (Agrawal, 1994; Gibson and Marks, 1995; Moore, 1993). The multiplicity of interests, objectives, and identities that any community contains requires recognition. Scholars who question the assumption that communities are homogeneous, undermine the possibility of consensus in the capacity of communities to manage resources effectively. But systematic treatment of how heterogeneity affects resource management at the community level is still lacking. The usual strategy of scholars who recognize difference, hierarchy and conflict within communities is to suggest that for communities that are heterogeneous, either the ability to manage resources sustainably is compromised; or sustainable management is characterized by highly unequal distribution of benefits. But moves that make inferences about resource management outcomes from composition related features of communities are problematic--they fail to take into account institutions and the role of institutions in mediating and resolving conflicts.

23 Community as Idealized Norm

Community in this sense exists among individuals who share "*common* interests and *common* identification... growing out of shared characteristics" (Ascher, 1995: 83). Such a notion of community, as an internalized influence on action orientations, plays perhaps the most

important role in the importance accorded to communities for conservation related goals. But it may simultaneously be the least explicitly articulated characteristic of communities because it becomes a feature of any community by *assumption*. Communities may have been eroded elsewhere, but in rural areas of developing countries they can still be assumed to exist. Because such village communities are relatively less influenced than towns by the developments that accompany urbanization and marketization, those who advocate community in conservation can also see them as social formations that provide members internalized norms of behavior in relation to resource management.

If community members can be assumed to share similar purposes, and possess similar identities, the real task of resource use and management becomes far easier to undertake. The role of conflict becomes limited. The need to explicitly address structures that would address conflict within and across communities, similarly, becomes less pressing. Indeed, if community in this sense persists within social formations, then resource management may require far less effort.

3. Uncovering the Links between Community and Successful Resource Management

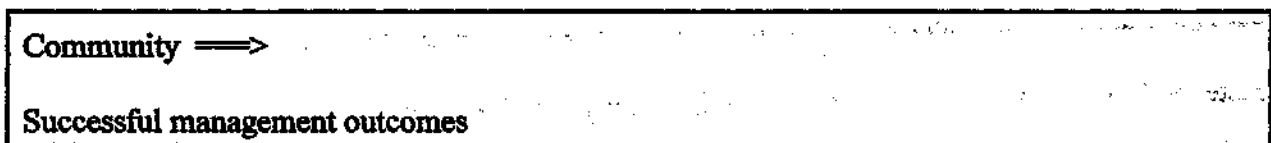
Despite the popularity of including community in analyses and discussions of resource management, little work exists that explicitly theorizes about the role or the effect of community. Generally, authors merely assume that certain attributes of community lead to certain outcomes. In the few cases where attributes are associated with results, the linkages are undeveloped. In this section, we describe and critique conventional wisdom about theories regarding

communities and natural resources.

3.1 The theoretical elements of community-based arguments

It must be stated at the outset that the vast majority of work regarding community-based natural resource development does not investigate the relationship between community and the governance of natural resources. Project documents and NGO policies, while asserting that community is a central factor for successful natural resource management, rarely if ever describe what they mean by community, or how community directly affects outcomes. For the most part, such work connects implicitly some aspect of community with better management, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1.



But what exact feature of community drives these successful outcome? Because community is a bundle of numerous concepts, and because few analysts describe how they are linking community with outcomes, the inferences suggested by the literature concerning community-based resource management operate on many levels. We continue the analysis using the categories of space, social artifact, and idealized norm.

The most often cited characteristic of community is its spatial dimension. If we insert this shared attribute into the causal model of figure one, the relationship asserts that by sharing a

geographic space, the successful management of a resource will occur. But the common location of a community can tell us little about its ability to manage a resource. The simple fact that not all communities do in fact succeed in this endeavor indicates that other factors are at work.

Further, locality is insufficient as the foundation for thinking about communities as the basis of resource management because for most resources, the geographical spread is more than that of a single community, and even more than of many communities. This is clearly the case for fugitive resources such as wildlife and fish (Sanderson and Naughton: 1995).

A common location does, however, imply the sharing of other characteristics which may facilitate successful collective management over their resources. Such common characteristics can, at first blush, seem all the more likely for those who live in the rural sector of developing countries which are the location for most of the these studies. Groups living in the same area might be small and have more communication than others in more urban areas, allowing for better social interaction and thus better collective decisions. People of the same ethnic group or caste tend to live together in the same area, indicating that the individuals share fundamental values and beliefs and less conflict over social goods. People living in the same locality engage in similar occupations, which also leads to roughly similar incomes, indicating that preferences over the use of natural resources are similar and facilitating collective decisions over them.

Much of this type of reasoning is at the core of studies which describe a community's homogeneity and heterogeneity. Conventional wisdom argues that the more homogenous a community is, the more likely it will be to reach successful social outcomes (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Homogenous community =>

Successful management outcomes

While inferences about homogeneity and collective outcomes litter the community-based natural resource management literature, few studies wrestle with either their difficulties of operationalization or theoretical underpinning. At the outset, fundamental problems exist regarding the measurement of the explanatory variables. All human groups are stratified (Davis and Moore 1945; Rae 1981). Further, social stratification occurs along numerous dimensions (Gruisky 1994, Sen 1992). Consequently, to assert that the homogeneity of a community leads to a certain result demands that the analyst specify which social dimension is important and how the homogeneity of that dimension is measured. Many authors use the concept of "relative homogeneity" in place of the obvious difficulties of measurement. This technique, however, is unsatisfying: without numerous examples to demonstrate what is meant by certain relative states, such measures are empty — and most analyses of communities and natural resources focus on one or a few cases. Nonetheless, such a slippery standard is often employed by authors who assert that outcomes were good or bad because a community was less or more homogenous (e.g. Taylor and Singleton 19xx).

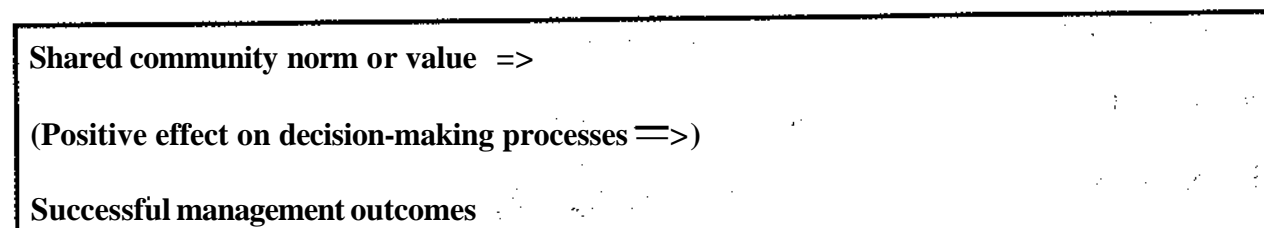
Given that the measurement of the appropriate common social characteristic can be made, the theoretical and empirical literature regarding group homogeneity and successful social outcomes is decidedly less clear than the community-based management literature infers. Many have speculated that differences in group size, individuals' assets, individuals' information, and individuals' payoffs should be negatively related to successful collective outcomes (Ostrom

1996 for summary). But theoretical and experimental work regarding collective action dilemmas do not lead to unambiguous results. As groups increase in the number of members, it is thought that the ability to achieve cooperative outcomes decreases (Olson 1965, Weissing and Ostrom 1991). But size interacts with a number of other important variables (e.g. marginal value of contribution to the social outcome, marginal return to the individual, ability of the community to muster the resources necessary to protect their resource, and amount of collective good produced) which may diminish its effect. One encounters the same contingency with other measures of homogeneity: While it may be thought that differences in assets decreases the ability of reaching cooperative social outcomes, it may in fact facilitate success, if certain members have stronger interests in achieving the outcome (Olson 1965; Keohane 1984). While information about other people usually helps individuals to cooperate in collective action, the contingent strategies of individuals may preclude collective action altogether (Fudenberg and Maskin 1986). While equal returns to participation may be intuitively pleasing, they may under-reward those who have worked the hardest to produce the social outcome, thereby imperiling it altogether. The only unambiguous finding from work in this is that the homogeneity of any one factor does not lead to any socially desirable outcome.

Shared beliefs are also forwarded as the reason for successful community outcomes: scholars and practitioners posit that the norms or values held for a group are responsible for an observed successful management outcome, and that attributes such as "community spirit;" (Ascher 1995:87) or "collective commitment" (Western) or "reciprocity" of individuals is critical to their success. There are two ways that a social attribute can lead to outcomes. First, the norm or value can influence individuals' actions directly. For example, if a religion proscribes the

cutting of certain tree species, then this attribute may be important in explaining the natural resource outcomes of a community (e.g. ZZ Matowanyika; Dorm-Adzobu). The second way a social attribute may influence outcomes is by shaping the process of a community's decision making; it is in this sense that the majority of the literature implicitly or explicitly extols the benefits of community level management (see figure 3).

Figure 3.



Work that forwards norms or values of a community can be more powerful than arguments centering on the more economic shared attributes of a group. While still open to criticisms regarding measurement (simple assertions that link ethic groups with attributes can be empty stereotyping), their impact on outcomes seems unambiguous. Does it follow, then, that if most of the members of a community share a value regarding the management of a natural resource, that a socially desirable result will occur?

Although not reflected in the literature on community-based resource management, the answer is no. Olson has demonstrated that even in the face of perfectly shared preferences, collective action may not occur (Olson 1965). The inclination is for individuals to free ride on

the efforts of others. This principle and its empirical referents are too well-known to require further elaboration, except to say that even in the cases of religious groups with strong beliefs about individual behavior, churches rarely rely on individuals' beliefs alone to insure certain collective outcomes.

The implicit or explicit reference to the shared attributes ~ geographic, social, or normative ~ of a community is insufficient to explain collective outcomes of community-based natural resource management. Neither homogeneity of assets or beliefs can insure socially desirable results. This is not to say that social attributes make no difference to collective outcomes. On the contrary, it is clear that common preferences and/or characteristics can lower the costs to reaching positive social outcomes. But featuring community as a group of individuals with shared characteristics is insufficient for explaining collective outcomes. In response to this, a number of scholars who focus on local-level management of natural resources have turned to the study of institutions.

3.2 Community-based resource management and the CPR literature

Work by scholars regarding common property resources has provided some of the foundations upon which the more general community-based resource management rests. Indeed, the resurrection of concept of community has been aided by the numerous case studies which demonstrate how groups of people appear to manage their resources relatively independently from governments (see the series of papers presented at the IASCP conferences). The CPR literature has generated important insights into how, when, and why certain individuals choose to construct agreements about the use and management of their resources (Berkes, 1989; Bromley,

1992; McCay and Acheson, 1987; McKean, 1992; NRC, 1986; Ostrom, 1990; 1992; Peters, 1994; Stevenson, 1991; Wade, 1987).

Some of the variables examined by CPR scholars have direct relevance for those working in the broader area of community-based natural resource management. CPR analysts address issues regarding a group's spatial relationship, group size, and the location of the resource in relation to the group. CPR studies have also approached the issue of homogeneity and natural resource management by investigating the effect of individuals' assets, use patterns, perceptions of risk (Ostrom 1992 "The Rudiments of a Theory of the Origin, Survival, and Performance of Common Property Institutions," in Bromley et al.), and feelings of reciprocity (Oakerson 1992 "Analyzing the Commons: A Framework," in Bromley; C. Ford Runge 1981,1984.

A critical aspect to some of the CPR work has been the central role played by institutions in overcoming commons' dilemmas (Ostrom 1990). Rather than be satisfied with arguments that indicate outcomes are driven by homogeneous social attribute, scholars assert that institutions -- or the rules that individuals follow--shape personal preferences into social outcomes. This view widens the scope of the researcher to include those organizational structures that impeded or facilitate collective action, such as village councils, traditional authorities, work groups, savings associations, etc. Included in the perspective of institutionalists will be the pattern of property rights over resources, which gives incentives to certain patterns of behavior while discouraging others. Institutions provide incentives which can alter individual behavior and, in some cases, inspire conflict between members of a group who may share fundamental norms and values, ethnic histories, a language, or other social attribute.

The CPR literature has much to help guide those working on community-based resource

management. It does, however, possess weaknesses that should be taken into account by the community-based literature. First, the resources about which the community literature is interested are not always common property. In fact, in many cases a mixture of common, private, and government systems of property rights may apply to a single resource. Second, CPR cases tend to feature groups of individuals who have been relatively successful at managing their resources. Selection of cases has often been on the dependent variable of successful outcome. This in turn, has led CPR studies to assume the homogeneity of actors over most dimensions. It also leads CPR cases tend to ignore the local politics of institution building, conflict, and conflict resolution both within and between communities, and between the communities and governments. It is this last weakness — the lack of politics - that we argue is most crucial to include in all research concerning local groups and resource management.

If one assumes ignores the heterogeneity of individuals as does most of the CPR literature, then conflict can be seen as one against the group. Institutions to resolve such conflict flows from self interest rather than systematic differences in power among groups of individuals. Thus, the CPR literature tends to view institutions as rules which resolve the problem of cooperation among equally endowed users, not the problem of cooperation between asymmetrically endowed groups.

But conflict occurs mostly as one against another. Individuals with different levels of power will tend to have dissimilar preferences about the use of valuable natural resources. Thus, while sharing commonalities regarding language, culture, custom, or history, the preferences most crucial to constructing institutions regarding natural resources will not be similar. While some analysts highlight the "commitment" of an ethnic group to consensus, a fundamental

disparity over power and preferences over outcome can completely overcome such norms. Such a dilemma is exemplified in the work of Western regarding the Maasai in Kenya - while Western describes the norms that guide the Maasai to successful outcomes, his case consistently notes the lack of consensus that obtained within the ethnic group as those with power and those without clashed over different visions of resource use and management (Western 1992).

All scholars and practitioners interested in local level phenomena know well that most groups are highly differentiated in their assets, and thus their power. They understand that community-based resource programs benefit the better off to a greater degree than the worse off. They realize that the resolution of conflicts at this level also favors the better off in the majority of cases. Shared attributes may lower the costs of collective agreements, but the power of the elite often determines whether any agreement will be forged at all.

4. Policy Implications of a Political Understanding of Community

At the outset this chapter asserted that different visions of community lead to different policy implications. The idea that community and local populations are obstacles means that they should be excluded, and their resources be made state or individually-owned goods. The vision that communities are stake-holders and critical to resource use in the long run means that they must be involved. This chapter points to a different understanding of community - that for successful community involvement in resource management, paying attention simply to shared characteristics or highlighting them as the basis of resource management will always be insufficient. Several implications follow from recognizing the importance of the politics of communities.

First, because differences in power likely indicate individuals with heterogeneous preferences regarding their resources, community-based projects will be cornered by those who are elites unless institutions are constructed to deal specifically with this contingency. Cases from the participatory development literature abound with stories of how local elites coopted projects (Uphoff, Leonard and Uphoff). Constructing or facilitating institutions to prevent the powerful from taking most of the benefits is very difficult; long-enduring institutions at the local level are already likely to favor the powerful. Building institutions on the backs of extant institutions may be easier, but may not reach the goal of distributing the benefits of community-based management as intended.

Second, institutions of community-based management must attend directly to conflict. Conflict can erupt because the preferences of individuals in relation to resource use probably differs, because users from different communities might poach on each other's resources, because community organizations usually relate to higher levels of authority in the course of protecting their resources. These interactions will be conflictual. It is not sufficient then to delegate power and responsibilities to the community level for managing and using resources, while retaining the authority to resolve conflicts at higher levels, since this will lead to those who have greater access to higher levels of authority a disproportionate advantage for their claim. It can also undermine any real local level autonomy. Efforts to devolve authority to community level should be accompanied by efforts to craft institutions that will resolve conflicts among communities over resource use.

5. A Conclusion

One scholar claims that the inattention paid by scholars and practitioners to community the concept of community is strategic: while knowing that communities are politically riven and heterogenous, these authors advocate a return of authority over natural resources to the local level, and thus wish to gloss over the differences and problems regarding natural resources found within local groups (Li 1996). We are not as convinced that existing studies have such sophisticated intentions. Instead, we argue that work regarding communities and natural resources have made critical jumps in logic and have also ignored previous, related theoretical work. The result of such omissions is a body of work that is unpersuasive and potentially hazardous to those who wish to build programs based on the insights of this emerging literature.

This chapter has also been organized to address a more abstract relationship: Why do certain representations of community gain prominence at certain points? Different conceptions of community and its role possess quite different implications about "who gets what, when, and how." Of course, to say that different meanings of community and its role have different political implications is not to assert that different meanings are politically equally appealing, or equally capable of generating policy outcomes. For example, various political economic and contextual factors, some of which we sketched, would have made it extremely unlikely that claims defending the role of communities in conservation would have found much resonance or an audience in the sixties and early seventies.¹² Our questioning of community, we believe, comes at an apposite time given the increasing attention devoted to it in conservation politics.¹³

¹² Without endorsing the separation of materiality and meaning-making, our formulation still endows the politics of meaning an ontologically inferior status to politics of materiality.

¹³ Indeed, in the previous chapter, we have suggested that "community" and related concepts have come to assume the status of master words, capable of generating tremendous heat

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge several productive conversations with Elinor and Vincent Ostrom in the process of writing this paper. Arun Agrawal was on a fellowship from the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis while writing this paper. We also want to acknowledge the research assistance we received from Tania Turtle and the secretarial help of Paula Jerrells.

and passion in quite different fields.