

Contesting sustainable development in Tierra del Fuego

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Abstract

Despite wide ranging interpretations of the concept of sustainable development there is growing consensus about the ecological, social, and economic conditions necessary to foster a sustainability transition. In addition to quantitative assessments of sustainability indicators, qualitative process indicators are being identified. For example, active, democratic, and inclusive decision-making are shown to lead to more informed decisions and, presumably, more sustainable use systems. The creation of these conditions, however, often requires bridging lack of mutual trust and scientific uncertainty. And while the ideals of sustainable development suggest that all stakeholders get what they want, without compromise nothing approaching sustainable development is attainable. Obstructing compromise, environmental ideology represents a key remaining hurdle to achieving a middle ground in environment and development debates. In the 1990s, the US-based Trillium Corporation sought to implement a large-scale logging project in Tierra del Fuego, Chile, but was rebuffed by environmentalists who embraced ecotourism as the preferred development option. The case is analyzed in the context of calls to reconsider conceptually nature-society relationships and ideas in sustainability science about which land management systems best match sustainability goals. Findings show that the decision-making process for determining whether or not to implement the logging project was flawed. We explore two implications. First, achieving sustainable development requires a consensus view of nature-society relationships that embraces humanized landscapes. Second, inclusive and effective decision-making about sustainable development necessitates free and open exchange of information, collective learning about regional environment and development, and the identification of compromise positions.

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1. Introduction

Reference to sustainable development is pervasive. Despite strong critiques and wide-ranging interpretations of the concept (Davidson, 2000; Turner, 1997; Worster, 1993) it continues to serve as the basis for most discourse on environment and development, and has broad political appeal (Parris and Kates, 2003). Its popularity is linked to a vague but compelling notion: economic growth and material development can occur

while, at the same time, social welfare, equity, and environmental conditions are maintained or improved (Brundtland, 1987). But apart from the embrace of this idyllic scenario how to achieve it is contentious.

A main focus of sustainability science is to identify conditions and processes that promote more 'active, inclusive, and iterative communication' between stakeholders (Cash et al., 2003, p. 8088). The assumption is that this kind of decision-making climate leads to both more informed decisions and more sustainable use systems. But creating such a climate often requires bridging cultural differences (Sjöstedt, 2001; Vanclay, 1992), lack of mutual trust (Cash et al., 2003; Kaspersen et al., 1999), and scientific uncertainty (Ludwig et al., 1993;

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Tesh, 2000). Some of these challenges may be addressed via improved negotiating structures, such as the use of focus groups and facilitators, which can help to ensure inclusive and constructive dialogue and promote consensus building (Sjöstedt, 2001). Given the relative power of government, industry and science in controlling land resources and crafting environmental policy, however, a more fundamental balancing of influence is often necessary. Giving voice to all interest groups may require empowering them, perhaps, via enhanced political representation, land tenure reform, or expanded market access.

Batterbury et al. (1997) and Forsyth (2003) argue that improving communication between stakeholders requires democratizing science, thereby reducing barriers between scientists and lay people. One way to encourage such democratization is to have scientific and expert organizations acknowledge the social and political values that produce scientific statements, and increase the transparency of the decision-making process through which advocacy statements are made (Forsyth, 2003; Funtowics and Ravetz, 1993). For example, dominant environmental narratives, such as the American pristine myth or Sahelian desertification, frame science and policy in a way that influences perceptions of land use and what should be conserved or preserved.

There is widespread recognition in nature-society studies of the way in which ideology affects decision-making about environment and development, and how it leads to contestation (Cronon, 1995; O’Riordan, 1995; Trigger, 1999). Deep ecologists advocate reduced human impact on the environment and the preservation of nature, for example, whereas cornucopians celebrate human transformation of the earth. By definition, an inclusive decision-making process should give voice to all stakeholders, regardless of ideology. But beyond inclusiveness, we ask whether or not some environmental ideologies are more or less conducive to achieving sustainable development goals. This line of questioning revisits debates about the social construction of nature and wilderness preservation (Cronon, 1995; Proctor, 1998).

Contestation surrounding sustainable development often mirrors the classic tension between two polar views: Pinchot’s land improvement (or sustainability) vision versus Muir’s land preservation ethic (Worster, 1977, 1993). The case of the Río Condor logging project in Tierra del Fuego, Chile, exemplifies this tension and highlights barriers to finding a middle ground. Strong rhetoric and persistent legal actions against the project by environmentalist groups and Chilean elected representatives confronted it from the beginning. Its failure and the subsequent establishment of a nature reserve in the same area are celebrated by environmentalists as a victory for sustainable development (and against an environmentally unfriendly multi-national corporation).

Indeed, for Chile, a country in which forest resources have been dramatically transformed by human action (Armesto et al., 1998; Neira et al., 2002; Wilcox, 1996), the result may be a victory if some of the country’s last relatively undisturbed forest is protected. When considering jointly the ‘socio-ecological system in its entirety, with its social, economic, institutional and ecological dimensions’ (Gallopín, 2002, p. 390), however, the case becomes less straightforward.

The debate over sustainable development includes camps that argue against the core of the concept (i.e., for the preservation of nature and a cessation of material development) and those who argue for development, but of a new kind. For those who desire no development at all the Río Condor Project would never have been acceptable. But advances in sustainability science and understanding of ecology and land management practices, as well as industry’s seeming readiness to make trade-offs between economic, environmental and social development goals, underscore how many of the practical barriers to sustainability are being surmounted. Drawing on the Río Condor case, we consider the possibility that environmental ideology, and the way it influences scientific discourse, may represent one of the last remaining hurdles to achieving a middle ground in environment and development debates.

First, we evaluate the decision-making process surrounding the proposed logging project. Regardless of the outcome, did the process lead to a careful assessment of its merits? Answering this question requires uncovering the environmental ideology and use of science by the two most prominent stakeholders in the debate, the logging company and environmentalist groups, as well as the impact of distrust between the two. Second, while a full assessment of the sustainability of the project is not our goal—a process that would require in-depth analysis of political economic and biophysical data—the project’s proposed management system is evaluated vis a vis the broad goals of sustainable development.

2. Pursuing sustainability

Increasingly, practitioners of environmental history, conservation biology, and the social sciences are reaching the same conclusion: achieving more sustainable use systems requires a fundamental rethinking of nature-society relationships. Four factors or perspectives underlie this new thinking: (i) the ‘pristine myth’—the recognition that most areas on earth have been modified by humans; (ii) the social construction of wilderness—the notion that our views of what constitutes ‘wilderness’, and thus what nature should be protected, is culturally constructed and has shifted over time; (iii) the failure of conservation with development schemes—the realization that many parks are in a perilous and

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