



People in Places

Engaging Together in Integrated Resource Management

An International Conference June 27-29, 2011

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS

Conference Brief

November, 2011

CoastalCURA
COMMUNITIES MANAGING COASTS TOGETHER

Conference Brief

The Coastal CURA conference organizing team had three main objectives for People in Places. First, we wanted to examine and support the role of place-based communities in integrated natural resource management, by creating the opportunity for communities to share ideas with academics, NGOs and government, on how to improve their role in management. Second, we wanted communities to express the values they would like to see in policy and planning, and to encourage participants to talk over potentially contentious issues, and to share their experiences and values with one another. Third, we sought to showcase innovations in participatory research, and to share information and mutual experiences, such as those of Canada's community-university research alliances that are engaged on aspects of natural resource use and management. The insights and messages from the conference are described in this report.

Messages on natural resource and spatial management

What were the big messages coming out of the conference? The Coastal CURA organizers have identified four that relate specifically to natural resource and spatial management:

1. Embracing community values in governance. The People in Places conference was about values; values were at the root of most discussions. In an opening address by Mi'kmaq Grand Council representative Ron Knockwood, participants heard about the close connection between aboriginal Mi'kmaq values, natural resource use, and policy directions. Speakers from the west coast of Vancouver Island told us how the initiative for local coastal and aquatic management in that region was based on aboriginal (Nuu-chah-nulth) values. Similarly, values were a key ingredient of natural resource management according to speakers from the Canadian north, South Africa, the Philippines, the South Pacific, Mexico, and many other locations. Values were related to the alleviation of poverty, placing priority on local needs, recognizing rights to access local resources, and acknowledging the ecosystem/food-web connections.

2. Real community participation. The Coastal CURA research program has examined and supported decision-making by place-based communities with respect to natural resources. People in Places participants brought their stories of either community success with or barriers that frustrated them in taking on resource management decisions. It is clear that a participatory approach to management requires careful consideration of who should be involved, how they should be involved, and how to support involvement. At the same time, planning must begin with those most directly affected. We heard that community-initiated governance enhanced equitable and efficient outcomes. The conference field trips illustrated this with 'on the ground' examples – the host communities explained both their concerns and how they had addressed them.

3. Legal space for effective resource governance. Legal space is a fundamental prerequisite for communities to take part both in resource management decision-making and in stewardship. Some positive examples of this were reported at the conference, but there were also negative experiences, ones in which there was a lack of enabling legislation for community engagement, and a lack of space for deliberative debate in planning. Some cases such as South Africa's small-scale coastal fisheries, illustrated how urgent is the need for such legal space. A lack of this 'space' can lead to community opposition, when planning does not consider local needs and values. There must also be space for incorporating place-based knowledge into the planning process and for sharing information, to facilitate co-learning, with a 'level playing field' so economic or political clout does not have a disproportionate voice.

4. The need for multiple scales of governance. The governance of natural resources cannot take place at just one 'scale' of operation, as is often assumed by government resource managers. While there is typically a government agency (provincial, state) with authority over a particular resource, in many cases the resource use is at a much more local scale, so management institutions are needed at that scale as well. Furthermore, evidence from around the world illustrates that multi-scale governance is both needed and can work. Conference participants heard about some success in the "scaling up" of local-level initiatives, to the regional and national level, given the right institutions. At the same time, challenges must be met to ensure the resulting cross scale linkages work effectively, and to avoid excessive jurisdictional problems.

Messages on community-university connections and participatory research

1. This kind of meeting works. People in Places replaced the conventional conference format with inclusive plenaries and workshops (with community, academic and government voices), a public film festival, special Talking Circles facilitated by First Nation participants, and community-planned field trips. Half of the keynote speakers were drawn from the community, First Nations, or resource user. Plenary panels addressed reflecting on the past, strategies to address present problems and planning for the future. Arts and culture played a significant role – including music from Fogo Island, Newfoundland, and Nuu-chah-nulth singing and drumming from the west coast of Vancouver Island. Workshops addressed biosphere reserves, film as a tool for community voice, and ‘helping coastal communities plan for future climates’. The film festival allowed community participants to bring films from around the world to share experiences, ideas and values in a way that was accessible to all. The field trips provided a chance for conference participants to see in person the challenges faced in Port Mouton and Digby, Nova Scotia, and to discuss those challenges directly with community members. Overall, the conference participants – from NGOs, First Nations, governments, resource users and a range of communities – created remarkable energy and synergies, and engaged in networking that was valued by all.

2. Greater focus on participatory research and how to do it. Discussions at the conference, and especially among the student participants, reinforced the importance of the right research methods when working with communities. No matter what the specific topic being studied, the approach has to be different from that of conventional research. The conference presentations showed that there are many different approaches to community-based research, but the one key element required in all cases is a real respect for the community and the people involved.