Local Voices at the Front Lines – Coastal Zone Canada 2010 Plenary Address

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Slide 1 – there is something ironic and a little cheeky about an academic standing here to address you on the topic of local voices at the front lines of coastal zone management. The only reason I am willing to do it is because my co-presenter, Randy Angus – who really is on the front lines – will hopefully support everything I have to say.

Slide 2:

Also, this talk is based on the results of a lot of long term, multi-sited research that has been undertaken by many researchers around the world and that studies recent trends in coastal zone management. Much of this research is anthropological in focus and in methods, if not in disciplinary affiliation – that is, it collects the voices of people who are on the front lines – both in terms of using coastal resources and in terms of being affected by management approaches.

Slide 3:

One local example of such research is the Coastal CURA project which has been focused here in the Canadian Maritimes (as is illustrated by the map here), and has followed a participatory research approach where local community partners, such as Randy, have been integral to the planning and carrying out of research into topics of concern that they have identified.

Much of this research, both here in Canada and abroad, has allowed for some reflection on what has not worked in the past – both in terms of resource extraction and in terms of management models – and this reflection on past experience has allowed for some focus on the future work that needs doing if we are to improve our track record.

In my short talk today, I am going to introduce seven areas of focus for future work in integrated management – these areas have been identified by our CURA research partners, but they resonate with what we have been hearing more generally from voices on the front lines all around the world.

Slide 4

The first area of focus for future work is an obvious one – people who rely on coastal resources have been saying for a long time that they want to have more voice and more decision making power when it comes to managing those resources. There needs to be a lot more work (and creative work) done on how to balance local voices, the voices of mandated regulators, and the voices of other stakeholders in coastal resources in our governance structures. Many people working around the world would agree that some voices are just too loud – and they are drowning out the other voices that need to be heard. Consultation without meaningful engagement is not the answer – neither is hoping for unanimity to emerge without some careful laying of ground rules.

Slide 5

The second area of focus for future work is meaningful engagement with power – we need to learn to work effectively with powerful stakeholders to

arrive at solutions that work for all parties. And remember that all power is relative – every stakeholder has more power relative to some other stakeholder.   Dealing with these power differentials will take some creative thinking as well - this might involve the government setting ground rules that recognize power differentials at the stakeholder table and sometimes it might involve disappointing powerful actors (including regulators themselves) or holding them more accountable.

Slide 6

The third area of work – building relationships that furthers integrated management - follows naturally after engaging with power – because power comes in all types and sizes – bureaucratic, financial, economic, cultural and political. Sometimes local communities will find their objectives frustrated by another community just down the coast – and sometimes regional or national bureaucracies work at cross purposes. Building relationships across these vertical and horizontal organizations will reduce silos and wasteful competition for scarce resources. But as this slide illustrates with an example from the clam harvesting industry – there are a lot of players and building effective lines of communication will be difficult.

Slide 7

Our CURA research has suggested, then, that there is an urgent need for all parties in coastal zone management to be prepared to learn from each other. Recent research in social learning has pointed the way for the fourth area of work – groups learn differently, and have different patterns of creativity, than do individuals. Transformative learning relies on what some have called triple loop learning – single loop learning identifies a technical problem and

works to find a solution. Double loop learning identifies problems in social or bureaucratic structures, while triple loop learning allows us to reflect on the values and aspirations that motivate us in the long run. All three types of learning will be very important – but only if all parties are open to the experience. The day is long past when we can talk about "capacity building" in communities – that capacity has to be built across the board.

Slide 8

One of the most difficult tasks before us then, is to stop finding a new language or new spin on old concepts that keeps redefining the problem and shifting the ground under us in terms of potential solutions. Shifting terminology keeps us reconceptualizing the problem instead of getting down to the hard work of really solving resource management problems effectively. People on the front lines don't care if you call it co-management, or integrated management, or sustainable development – they just want to get down to work to solve problems. The fifth area of work that needs doing then might be called claiming language (or pinning it down, if you will, so that the tendency to elastic meaning is reduced) and we are all on the same page as to meaning. This will require that local groups be vigilant to measure the gap between management action and local values. Identifying those values that are bedrock, and working to create management practices that promote those values, is going to be hard work. The time for shifting terminology is over.

Slide 9

The sixth task involves what our CURA partners have labeled cultural production. This is a difficult task to capture in a few words, but it is

motivated by the continual erosion of local cultures that result from universal management plans based on a single generic format. The idea of cultural production has a good fit with what some academics are calling the ecology of place – the recognition that local places are created through the co-evolution of nature and culture. Understanding that process and recognizing the collective human patterns of values, behavior, rules and norms that is associated with any one place is important for any management approach. But local places have to be more effective in communicating those aspects of their culture that create a recognizable place out of a geographical space. This is important work that needs doing if all the other pieces of the puzzle are to fall into place. We cannot expect others to understand us unless we are able to communicate what we are all about.

Slide 9

The seventh task is visioning (or re-visioning) integrated management with all these other tasks in mind. And we would like to suggest some way forward in the interim – scalar issues of where to start (international regulation or local initiatives) do not require a one size fits all response – regulators can support small scale local initiatives as well as larger scale planning exercises – in fact, they might find it easier to start small and scale up (no offense to the LOMA folks). But don't expect local initiatives to do all the work for government – they need support (as much or more support as the big projects).

Large scale projects have their proponents, and their allure – but many have argued that the "global perspective" (whether of environmental activism or of growth and development) actually detracts from the real on-the-ground

engagement needed to address problems where they occur. There is no privileged position or platform where the bigger picture becomes clear without lots of input from real local problems that inform that larger picture – so regulators need to have effective mechanisms for connecting with the smaller scale, at whatever scale they are working.

And finally, we need to recognize and grapple with the fact that all management proceeds from values – some values are explicit, others are implicit in our planning exercises, but you cannot impose values onto local situations if they have no fit with local expectations and desires. Wise management that doesn't meet local needs is not wise management at all – so we need to have lots more discussion about just whose values should prevail in any one case.

Which leads me to Randy's presentation on the situation in Malpeque Bay….