

To Play the Fool: Can Environmental Conservation and Democracy Survive Social Capital?

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Two community-based conservation processes in the United States provide comparative case studies to examine how social capital relates to democracy. Following a summary of social capital research, we describe the cases: one designed to preserve an endangered species and the other to restore water quality. We discuss how social capital dampened democratic practice in one case, while invigorating it in the other. We conclude that, by relying indiscriminately on social capital in the absence of complementary state structures, conservationists risk losing the very nature they seek to defend, and all citizens risk losing the energy and space essential to democracy.

Keywords: Conflict; Democratic Paradox; Endangered Species; Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP); Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL)

Wise enough to play the fool.¹

Environmental managers in established democracies throughout Europe and North America, as well as so-called new democracies across the earth, are turning to community-based conservation (CBC) processes to maximize public support for environmental conservation and restoration. Their rationale is that, although these processes may temporarily escalate conflict, the inclusion of diverse interests in early planning stages results in more efficient policy implementation.² This efficiency is

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achieved by leveraging existing social capital, with the resulting policy generating additional capital for continued improvement. From this perspective, social capital is the currency of democracy, freely available to any policy maker. An alternative view, however, might suggest that CBC processes use social capital to dampen possibilities for radical change, which is essential if we are to alter the current trajectory of environmental destruction.³ Institutions ranging from the World Bank to small municipalities have espoused social capital as the panacea for human society's most difficult problems. Moreover, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have embraced this concept as a label that enables them to study an array of ill-defined ideas under one conceptual umbrella.

Although we agree that social capital is a potentially useful concept, and that involving local communities in conservation planning is laudable, both are detrimental to natural and political processes if applied indiscriminately. With the goal of critically evaluating the relationship between social capital and environmental policy within contemporary democracies, we chose two CBC efforts for comparative case studies—the Bastrop County Texas Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the Houston toad and the San Antonio Texas Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) process for Salado Creek. We begin with a brief summary of the term social capital, particularly as it relates to the practice of democracy. We then present our case studies. Following the case analyses, we discuss how social capital functioned to dampen democratic practice in the first case and how it worked cooperatively with state structures to enhance democracy in the second. We conclude by arguing that, unless social capital is coupled with equally strong state structures, it simply perpetuates continued domination by established interests. By relying indiscriminately on social capital as a means for involving communities in developing and implementing environmental policy, conservationists risk damaging the earth they seek to defend, and all of us risk losing the space for democracy.

What Is Social Capital and Why Should We Care?

Print and Coleman argue that social capital is “the most influential concept in the last decade to emerge from economic sociology, let alone to affect political science and interdisciplinary studies.”⁴ Given social capital's runaway popularity, the eclectic definitions that have emerged should surprise no one. Bourdieu defines it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” and emphasizes that these relationships must be resilient and deeply felt.⁵ Putnam defines it as “features of social organization, such as trust, forms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.”⁶ According to Paxton, “Social capital requires objective associations among individuals, and [those associations must be] reciprocal, trusting, and involving positive emotion.”⁷ Fukuyama describes it as a set of moral values that creates normative expectations regarding behaviors of community members.⁸ Lin defines it as “resources embedded in a social structure; accessibility to such social resources by

individuals; and use or mobilization of such social resources by individuals for purposive actions.”⁹ In all versions, the ability to secure benefits through membership in the community motivates observance of group norms. Policy makers and non-governmental organizations such as the World Bank have accepted it as “the missing link” in explanations of why some nations develop more efficiently than others. Criminologists, development experts, economists, psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have latched onto social capital as the explanatory variable for the most slippery social ills.¹⁰

As the forgoing paragraph indicates, definitions (and hence measurement) of social capital are both multitudinous and ephemeral. Although we are aware of these difficulties, this essay focuses more on problematic axiological connotations and political implications than definitional and measurement problems. Schuurman argues that social capital gained popularity among development scholars and policy makers largely because it legitimizes both the neoliberal consensus that the state is an inappropriate institution for encouraging development and the anti-political tendency to blame the victim. Social capital is appealing because it enables neoliberal economists to keep the state “at bay” and enables prosperous countries and regions to congratulate themselves on their social capital, without accepting any responsibility for others’ marginalization or poverty. To illustrate this tendency, Schuurman cites Fukuyama’s widely accepted claim that state-sponsored institution building “has reached a dead end with the establishment of liberal democratic political institutions and capitalist economic structures throughout the developed world.”¹¹ Bowles and Gintis offer a more generalized critique of social capital, claiming it “swept to prominence not on its merits, but on the defects of its alternatives.”¹² They argue that leftists found social capital attractive because of its emphasis on trust, generosity, and collective action, while rightists found it attractive because it offered non-government entities (such as neighborhoods, parent teacher associations, and bowling leagues), rather than government intervention, as stop-gaps for market failure.¹³ They maintain that reliance on social capital discourages focus on fundamental causes of social and political problems such as hierarchical division and economic inequality.

Unfortunately, by embracing social capital as the foundational political structure, both liberals and conservatives collude to elbow democratic practices out of the picture.¹⁴ Mouffe’s concept of democratic paradox, perhaps most fundamentally captured in the agonistic relationship between equality and liberty, indicates the danger of using social capital to purchase environmental policy. Simply put, attempts to maximize individual liberty do so at the expense of political equality, while attempts to maximize political equality similarly curtail individual liberty. The mutually exclusive goals of liberty and equality make environmental policy paid for with social capital at least improbable and potentially disastrous.¹⁵

Community-Based Conservation as Social Capital Generator and Repository

The fungibility of social and economic capital has engaged the attention of natural resource agencies and elected officials seeking less costly alternatives to

traditional privatization, command and control, and subsidy-based approaches to environmental restoration. Community-based conservation promises to reduce implementation costs through the creation and use of social capital.¹⁶ Moreover, it promises to reduce administrative costs by paying for management at least in part with social capital.¹⁷ Although it is reasonable to assume that greater support within the local community translates into lower enforcement costs, higher compliance rates, less conflict, and higher community satisfaction, this does not necessarily enhance conservation. There is no intrinsic advantage to efficiency; even when bad policy is efficient, it remains bad policy.

Conservation has been in the forefront of a movement seeking a free, even self-aggrandizing form of social control to achieve its goals. According to many proponents, CBC initiatives build social capital, which leads to more initiatives and more social capital in an endless positive feedback loop.¹⁸ Exponential growth of refereed publications about social capital and greatly increased numbers of HCPs, a popular form of CBC, began in 1992. In the United States, scholars have joined political pundits in blaming the movement of women into the labor force, technological privatization of leisure, and a litany of other demographic changes for depleting the available stock of social capital. Although some scholars hold social elites primarily responsible for local civic disengagement, most simply claim that declining social capital has led to civic disengagement.¹⁹ A few critics have noted that social capital requires the investment of cultural, economic, and political resources.²⁰ Further, social capital has an oft forgotten negative side; it can lead to exclusion of outsiders, encourage free-riders, and may lead to the restriction of personal freedoms.²¹ The polarized nature of environmental conflict may give social capital additional negative value. Observing the social norms of one party to a dispute often results in denigrating the norms considered fundamental by other parties.²² In these situations, social capital drives the conflict into a self-reinforcing loop that makes resolution less likely over time.

The oft ignored dangers of relying on social capital, and the apparent decline of this commodity in the United States, demand actual case studies before social capital is accepted as a panacea for environmental conservation.²³ No case studies of CBC have directly addressed these issues, although Peterson et al. implicitly described them in their analysis of democratic processes relating to HCPs.²⁴ The predicted increase in the number of CBC plans in the United States during the next decade, and the concomitant increase of public involvement in natural resource conservation planning across Earth, provides an opportunity to identify and explore the dynamics of social capital in conservation.²⁵ Because ecological systems do not honor political boundaries, CBC initiatives also provide ideal cases for examining democratic practice. Environmental conservation requires cooperative interaction among groups that have erected numerous political and economic structures to protect themselves from each other. For example, the restoration of a single watershed requires cooperation among multiple municipalities, counties, and school districts (and sometimes states and nations) that perceive each other as competitors, if they perceive each other at all. Thus, by analyzing CBC initiatives, we illuminate how social capital functions as either a stimulus or deterrent to democracy.

Texts and Analyses

We attempted to provide a window on how social capital functions in CBC by tracing its practice through an HCP for the endangered Houston Toad and a TMDL for Salado Creek in Bastrop and Bexar counties, Texas, respectively. Because both case studies examined meanings developed through community interaction, we chose ethnographic methodologies.²⁶ In both cases, we immersed ourselves thoroughly in the social context, taking on the role of student and requesting that participants teach us how to interpret the situation. This regard for context enabled us to discover the importance of social norms as they pertain to development and implementation of environmental policy.²⁷

We attempted to maximize the extent our claims conform to actual features of group interaction through triangulation in data collection and participant validation.²⁸ Participant validation took several forms, including designing clarification questions into the interview protocol, conducting multiple interviews with the same person, and asking participants to critique conclusions from past and current analyses of the situation. We conducted multiple interviews with participants and invited them to critique tentative conclusions. The interview protocol provided basic guidance but encouraged participants to direct the course of these conversations.²⁹ This enabled participants to guide the interview protocol into issues that the original interview questions had not considered as well as to clarify previously vague concepts and to verify or refute researcher interpretations of events.

We verified conclusions drawn from our interviews through repeated and informal interactions with participants. Although some participants were ecstatic about the chance to speak openly about the conflict, many were hesitant to be candid, even within the constraints of a confidential interview. Some indicated that, although the interviews were confidential, they could not speak forthrightly because of their community positions. Outside of the formal interview setting, however, these community members often spoke more freely. Detailed field notes of interactions with participants enabled constant comparison between statements informants made in varied settings. Radio and newspaper accounts, unpublished city, state, and federal agency reports, and personal correspondence supplemented the field notes and interview transcripts.

For our analyses, we relied primarily on interview transcripts, audio and video tapes of community meetings, and field notes taken while attending community meetings and informal gatherings. We also attempted to preserve participants' language. We saw ourselves as methodological instruments and our interactions with participants as part of the research. As socially situated humans studying other socially situated humans, we were neither value neutral nor unresponsive to contextual sites. In fact, our motivation for critiquing the broad acceptance of social capital as a guiding concept for human interactions with nature stems from our concern that it may be detrimental to both our biological and our political survival.

We used thematic analysis to analyze interview and meeting transcripts.³⁰ Repeated movement between data collection and analysis allowed us to evaluate the precision of recorded explanations and encouraged the reflexivity so essential to any explanation of situated social action.³¹ We sought additional reflexivity by reexamining transcripts of previous interviews and public meetings, as well as by conducting constant comparisons between ongoing news coverage, field notes, and interview responses. This provided points of comparison for examining the nuances of the practices participants engaged in when negotiating and performing their group identities.

In the Houston Toad case, participants were primarily members of the HCP steering committee. We conducted at least two informant-directed interviews with 14 of the 15 original workgroup members for the Houston toad HCP. The other member attended only one meeting early in the process before resigning. We also interviewed two US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) employees, one Texas Parks and Wildlife Department employee, and a work group member who joined at a later date. We had several informal conversations with the project manager/facilitator. Overall, we conducted two or three interviews each with seven business representatives, six landowner representatives, four agency personnel, and one environmental representative. We also attended the group's regular monthly meetings, other meetings of local groups interested in the HCP, and meetings of agencies responsible for the Houston Toad's restoration. Throughout the project, we worked with the Texas Cooperative Extension Service to develop and maintain a database of information on the Houston Toad that was electronically available to all members of the HCP steering committee.

For the Salado Creek case, we recruited people willing to make a year-long commitment to serve on a Watershed Restoration Council that brought together research scientists, agency personnel, and citizen groups to share watershed information and develop management recommendations. We conducted telephone interviews with over fifty people and face-to-face interviews with another fifty in an attempt to recruit them as members of the TMDL committee. Although as many as sixty people attended at least one council meeting, only twenty attended regularly for the entire process. We conducted one or two follow-up interviews with these twenty people. It is difficult to categorize these participants in any meaningful way because their identities evolved over the course of the year. For example, during her initial interview, one person, who began attending because she was assigned to do so in a professional capacity, described herself as a technical advisor from the city water district. Eight months later, she described herself primarily as a concerned resident of the watershed. Working closely with state officials who were legally responsible for conducting the TMDL and with city officials who hoped to link community development projects to the TMDL, we coordinated and facilitated the group's regular monthly meetings for one year and participated in several outreach events.

In this essay, we use first-name pseudonyms for all participants as a means of complying with Institutional Review Board confidentiality requirements at Texas

A&M University and standard reporting procedures for qualitative research. We use the following system of internal documentation to identify quotations from interview transcripts: Pseudonym, Utterance, Interview Number, Location (S = Salado Creek, B = Bastrop County). For example, a quotation identified as (Scott, U4, I2, S) came from the fourth utterance in the second interview with the participant identified as Scott in the Salado Creek case study. To identify quotations from meetings, we used the following system: Pseudonym, Location (S = Salado Creek, B = Bastrop County), Meeting Notes. For example, a quotation identified as (Ramona, B, Meeting Notes) was uttered by the participant identified as Ramona at a Bastrop County HCP meeting. Statements from informal conversations and other interactions are identified as fieldnotes.

Houston Toad

Background

Created in 1982, the HCP program evolved into a form of CBC for integrating local interests, control of land use, and national priorities such as preservation of endangered species. Section 9(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) prohibits *taking* endangered species of fish or wildlife. The ESA defines take as, “to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.”³² To further clarify, the USFWS issued a regulation in 1981 providing that “significant habitat modification or degradation where it actually kills or injures wildlife by significantly impairing essential behavioral patterns, including breeding, feeding or sheltering,” constituted unlawful harm under section 9 of the ESA.³³ This regulation is intended to limit land management activities that constitute “a taking incidental to, and not the purpose of, the carrying out of an otherwise lawful activity.”³⁴ To mitigate potential restrictions on the use of private property, the US Congress authorized incidental take permits in 1982. This modification to the ESA allowed the USFWS to permit an otherwise unlawful taking of a listed species if (1) the “taking is incidental to, and not the purpose of, the carrying out of an otherwise lawful activity” and (2) the applicant has devised an acceptable HCP that lists the steps “the applicant will take to minimize and mitigate” the impacts of the proposed activity on listed species and “the funding that will be available to implement such steps.”³⁵ Although the HCP process was used rarely until the early 1990s, its promise to transcend the schism between environmental protection and property rights encouraged a dramatic upswing in use, as indicated by 14 incidental take permits issued prior to the 1992 presidential race, compared to 745 approved as of January 2005 (HCPs plus amendments).³⁶

In many cases, regional incidental take permits held by local governments have enabled arrangements beneficial for both the endangered species and the human community.³⁷ Some groups expressed concern, however, that private property rights would be neglected in a process led by federal agencies and local governments. To address this concern, the 1999 Texas Legislature enacted a statute that addresses

government entities choosing to enter into HCP agreements (Texas Senate Bill 1272).³⁸ The statute includes the following relevant sections:

1. The plan participants shall appoint a citizens advisory committee to assist in preparing the regional habitat conservation plan and the application for a federal permit. At least four members or 33 percent of the citizens advisory committee, whichever is greater in number, must own undeveloped land or land in agricultural use in the regional habitat conservation plan area. A landowner member may not be an employee or elected official of a plan participant or any other local, state, or federal governmental entity.³⁹
2. The plan participants, together with the commission and the landowner members of the citizens advisory committee, shall appoint a biological advisory team. At least one member shall be appointed by the commission and one member by the landowner members of the citizens advisory committee. The member appointed by the commission serves as presiding officer of the team. The team shall assist in: (1) the calculation of harm to the endangered species; and (2) the sizing and configuring of the habitat preserves.⁴⁰

Senate Bill 1272 legally mandates and further legitimizes the existing power base of private property rights interests within HCP steering committees. The Bastrop community was the first group in Texas to implement these guidelines.

The Houston toad was originally described in Houston Texas in 1953 but was extirpated by urbanization. It was the first species in Texas to be placed on the endangered species list.⁴¹ In 1978, the USFWS designated critical habitat for the Houston toad and dubbed it “probably the rarest and most endangered amphibian in the United States.”⁴² Although it once ranged throughout most of southeastern Texas, the Houston toad now resides primarily in an area of deep sandy soils in the Lost Pines region of Bastrop County.⁴³ Many factors threaten the remaining populations in this area. Suburban and agricultural development was the first major threat to Houston toad populations and remains the greatest obstacle to recovery. Other threats include introduced species, such as the red imported fire ant, logging, and road mortality. The conversion of Bergstrom Air Force Base into an international airport between Austin and Bastrop County has further intensified development.⁴⁴

Despite the critical habitat designation, the USFWS did little to ensure the Houston toad’s survival in the years following listing. Developers had little or no interaction with the USFWS, often working without incidental take permits. In 1998, a pending lawsuit by the Sierra Club led the USFWS to take action. The agency developed a presence in the county by turning off water to non-permitted subdivisions under development. Thus, the USFWS alienated itself from many stakeholders by first appearing to neglect the needs of the toad and then the needs of the community.⁴⁵ Employees of the USFWS were aware of their increasingly negative visibility in the community. Leroy, a USFWS employee said, “Well, I guess there were some efforts made before, but we didn’t stick to our guns until 1999. So it’s like, ‘what happened all of the sudden?’” (I1, U103, B). Despite awareness of this backlash, the

USFWS surprised the community again during the summer of 2000 by authoring an HCP for 46 subdivisions in the county without soliciting community input, and then sending copies of the HCP to landowners in the affected areas of the county. Leroy admitted that the agency “pretty much shoved it along without letting anyone know” (I1, U137, B) but reasoned that expediting the process was in the community’s best interests.

The HCP

In an effort to resolve the escalating dispute, stakeholders in Bastrop County created a workgroup to address the needs of the Houston toad as well as the human community. All parties agreed that development of a regional HCP was the best way to resolve the conflict. A successful HCP would grant the county an incidental take permit that would enable individuals and businesses to continue certain land uses; at the same time it would enable recovery of the Houston toad. The USFWS, together with the Bastrop county Judge, initiated this process and donated funds for the employment of a full-time facilitator for the process. Numerous other businesses and other groups donated money and/or materials.⁴⁶

In August 2000, Bastrop County and the Texas Cooperative Extension Service hired a project manager/facilitator to (1) identify stakeholder groups and leaders, (2) provide conservation and funding alternatives, (3) facilitate scientific efforts, and (4) negotiate among stakeholders. To accomplish these duties, she organized a workgroup to “define a regional community-based HCP that reduces the current economic and regulatory burden for community interests in their efforts to comply with the federal Endangered Species Act and that is also protective of the Houston Toad” (Workgroup Document). Aside from the goal of keeping private landowner interests a priority, the workgroup aimed to promote understanding and acceptance of the ESA and habitat conservation planning within the community. Consistent with Senate Bill 1272 guidelines, the work group consisted of 16 stakeholders representing business (7), landowners (6), a state agency (1), and a local environmental interest (1). After receiving input from the workgroup members, but prior to the first official meeting, the facilitator decided not to give the USFWS stakeholder status. The preference for local interests was further reflected in the work group’s decision to include only one person representing a local environmental group and to preclude representation by national environmental organizations. Between October 2000 and January 2002, USFWS representatives received invitations to only two of twenty-two meetings, and attended both.⁴⁷

As the meetings progressed, adversarial relationships became increasingly pronounced. Although utility company, state agency, and environmental representatives did not demonstrate adversarial attitudes toward other group members or the USFWS, most landowners and those representing non-utility business interests began the process as opponents of the USFWS and/or utility company representatives. Ironically, the decision to exclude the USFWS meant that the agency was rarely available to advise group members, who then blamed the USFWS for failing to

provide appropriate guidance. One participant argued that the USFWS should “show us the way, and the cheapest way, instead of kinda stonewalling” (Shane, I1, U121, B). Other members complained that the USFWS “didn’t have a clue” (Jack, I1, U20, B) or was “scared to answer” questions (Janice I1, U140, B). Even when the USFWS provided information, participants were dissatisfied. Anne expressed concern that “information is a little skewed . . . because it is prepared by the USFWS” (I1, U2, B).

Almost a year into the process, the workgroup submitted a draft HCP to the USFWS and invited USFWS employees to attend a meeting to discuss revisions. Agency employees expressed frustration about being excluded from workgroup meetings and being “the last ones” to get a copy of the draft HCP (Fieldnotes). The USFWS critique of the draft shattered a false sense of accomplishment held by most workgroup members. In an initial interview, Janice had said, “If it makes sense . . . I think they’ll approve it” (I1, U25, B). After the USFWS negatively reviewed the draft HCP, she asserted, “I don’t think you could get anywhere with them [the USFWS]” (Janice, I2, U15, B).

Communication breakdowns and/or overt deception between workgroup members and USFWS employees further exacerbated the conflict. The USFWS requested a 15,000 acre (6,071 ha) preserve as mitigation within the regional HCP, but failed to explain why 15,000 acres was the critical size. In the absence of this explanation, workgroup members accused the recovery team of arbitrarily selecting 15,000 acres (Fieldnotes, Meeting notes). During one of two meetings between workgroup members and USFWS employees, stakeholders asked the USFWS representative if land entered in Safe Harbor contracts could count as part of the 15,000 acres.⁴⁸ The agency’s official representative did not give an explicit answer, but another USFWS employee leaned over and whispered to one of the authors that Safe Harbor lands could never count toward the 15,000 acres because the contracts could be reversed (Meeting notes). One workgroup member alleged that, early in the process, a wildlife biologist from the USFWS’s Austin Ecological Services office told her that once Bastrop secured the 15,000 acre preserve, they could “pave the rest of the county” (Janice, I2, U54, B). This unverified statement gained mythic status among combative stakeholders and provided justification for dismissing future USFWS input.⁴⁹

A dramatic political event occurred during the summer of 2001. Texas Senate Bill 1122 was introduced to prevent what some people viewed as an unacceptable incursion on private property rights. Utility companies across the United States had begun refusing to move forward with utility installations in new developments on land designated as habitat for endangered species until owners/developers could present evidence of their compliance with federal law. The proposed bill would have made it illegal for utility companies to include ESA enforcement considerations in the utility permitting process. The supposedly neutral workgroup facilitator assisted in drafting the bill, and business representatives from the working group testified on its behalf at a Senate hearing, claiming that the Houston toad HCP supported the bill. Texas Senate Bill 1122 had never been discussed during a workgroup meeting, and some members who learned about it through the media were incensed that they had been implicated in what they saw as emotional and partisan politics.

Utility workgroup representatives felt betrayed by the facilitator and targeted by workgroup members who had lobbied for it. Although they continued to attend meetings, this rift led the utility companies to pursue an independent incidental take permit, rather than relying on the county's HCP (Fieldnotes, Meeting notes).

Rather than bridging existing divides, workgroup meetings served as a forum for demonizing the USFWS.⁵⁰ Narratives about the USFWS's unfairness evolved in these meetings and gained mythic proportions within the community. In one widely circulated story, a landowner discovered that a permit to repair a fence surrounding his property would cost him \$20,000 in mitigation fees (Meeting notes). Workgroup members followed up on this narrative during individual interviews. After retelling the fence story, Janice asked, "I mean what do they want you to do, not replace the fence so the cows can get out and kill somebody, y'know, because a car hits them or something like that?" (I2, U30, B). Stories such as these strengthened some committee members' beliefs that the USFWS excluded logic and reasoning from its decision-making processes and was just "after money" or "nit picking" (Craig, I2, U205, B).

One participant expressed her relationship with the USFWS as, "I'm like a missionary up against the head hunters" (Val, I2, U18, B); another told us that agency personnel "feel like they are little gods, and they have their little kingdoms; and it just permeates what they say and do" (Ryan, I2, U29, B). Tom described a meeting with USFWS employees as "Pearl Harbor II" (I2, U4, B). Melanie referred to herself and other landowners as the "silent victims" (I2, U71, B).

Rather than working toward an amicable means of enforcing the ESA, many workgroup members attempted to use the HCP process as a means of avoiding compliance. In addition to further alienating workgroup members from the USFWS, this led to new hostilities between group members. When utility representatives reacted negatively to Senate Bill 1122, landowners and some business representatives accused utility representatives of "being intimidated by the [US] Fish and Wildlife [Service] into enforcing the Endangered Species Act for them" (Ellen, I1, U35, B). Another member told utility representatives they were "lying over and dying" (Meeting notes). Because utility representatives simply wanted a HCP to provide operational certainty, they gave little attention to rights-based arguments promulgated by other participants. They said of the HCP process, "We've just got a job to do. We have to get a permit, I mean this is—this is not rocket science, we just need to get a permit, . . . it's just, you know, a practical decision" (Cindy, I1, U148, B). The state agency representative also framed the process as a straightforward means for rationalizing compliance with the ESA. Since the USFWS was operating according to the strictures of its legal mandate, she explained, it could not accept anything that failed to comply with the mandate. "They're not going to approve something that's gonna get them sued" (Becca, I1, U60, B).

The rejection of the draft HCP led to disillusionment with the process and doubts regarding its potential success. One participant grumbled, "I'm a little discouraged. . . . I thought we'd already be having—have something in the works by now, at least a finished product, and you know, the ball would be sitting in [the US] Fish and

Wildlife [Service]'s court. But, we're not. We're not close to that. We're at least a year away from that. And, um, so that's frustrating" (Ben, I2, U12, B). Janice said, "It just seems like it's very possible that, y'know, we may end up having to disband this thing. And, uh, all of the work will have been for naught. Y'know, then I'd probably regret it" (I2, U22, B). Although all committee members began the CBC process enthusiastically, their efforts did not achieve fruition. In March 2002, the committee turned the responsibility for developing and ensuring implementation of Bastrop County's HCP for the Houston toad over to professionals. A consulting firm would write the plan and then, in consultation with an attorney and a biologist, would ensure that it met legal requirements posed by the ESA.

Salado Creek

Background

In 1972, the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, or Clean Water Act (CWA), instituted a national program for cleaning up waterways throughout the United States.⁵¹ Administered by the newly created Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the CWA primarily targeted point-source pollution through a permitting process. Regulation of non-point-source pollution was a more difficult challenge because there was no easily identifiable source of such pollution. For those who seek to promote public involvement in environmental policy, the most relevant portion of the CWA is section 303, which sets out the regulatory process. Although the goal of the CWA is to restore all public waterways in the United States to a standard that was both fishable and swim-able, states have the option to demonstrate that this standard is not reasonably attainable. In such cases, they may downgrade the waterway to a lower standard of "designated use," such as industry or agriculture. States then determine water quality standards for the waterway's designated use and monitor to ensure maintenance of at least this quality. Finally, states must identify waterways where limitations imposed under National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits are insufficient to achieve the standards required for the waterway's designated use (generally because of pollutants from non-point sources). This third group of waterways is designated as impaired.⁵²

The TMDL process is the CWA's method of addressing non-point source pollution. Section 303(d) requires that, after identifying waterways with impaired water quality, states must (1) establish a priority ranking of these sites, (2) allocate maximum total loading of various contaminants among point and non-point sources, (3) implement control measures, and (4) assess the results. Section 303(d) essentially mandates a watershed approach, because waters are impaired by multiple dischargers and pollutants, and many of these pollutants come from non-point sources throughout a watershed. States must incorporate public participation in the TMDL process, and the planning process for impaired waterways must be continuous. In 1986, the CWA was reauthorized and amended. The reauthorized

act affirmed the states' primary authority and responsibility for developing and implementing programs to meet federal water quality goals and specified a national policy for control of non-point sources of pollution. The non-point source policy requires each state to assess its water pollution and determine which water bodies fail to meet the water quality objectives because of non-point source pollution. The state is then to develop a state management plan and implementation measures to reduce the pollutants.

The San Antonio River Basin traverses at least three ecoregions in Texas: the Central Texas Plateau, the Texas Blackland Prairies, and the Western Gulf Coastal Plain. The basin is dominated by urban and industrial development associated with the City of San Antonio, Texas, but agriculture also is a major economic force in the counties through which the river basin runs. Water quality throughout the San Antonio River Basin has been declining for decades due to pollution from both the agricultural and the urban environment. Segments of this watershed are unsafe for human or wildlife use due to elevated concentrations of toxic metals, fecal coliform bacteria, and nutrients derived primarily from urban non-point source runoff. Rehabilitation of these water bodies is required under the EPA's TMDL strategy for watershed restoration. The Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) is the state agency responsible for this task in Texas.⁵³

The TNRCC used a variety of monitoring techniques for gauging the water quality in Salado Creek. When results of repeated monitoring all failed to produce results consonant with the creek's designated use criteria, the state listed it as an impaired waterway under the CWA § 303(d). The TNRCC identified insufficient levels of dissolved oxygen and high fecal coliform bacteria concentrations as the primary culprits for the listing. After being tasked with rehabilitating the Salado Creek Watershed, the TNRCC determined that water quality in these river reaches would be restored by 2003 under the Statewide Basin Management Schedule. Among other tasks, the TNRCC was responsible for evaluating impacts among proposed alternatives for developing and approving the TMDL process for the Salado Creek Watershed.⁵⁴

On 17 October 1998, Salado Creek, which normally winds unobtrusively through residential areas, parks, and commercial districts in eastern San Antonio, turned into a raging river of destruction, carrying away cars and drivers, swallowing mobile home parks, filling local homes and businesses, and causing millions of dollars of damage.⁵⁵ The Creek was no stranger to controversy. Its listing on EPA's 303(d) list of impaired watersheds was only one of many local management controversies. Some residents chalked up both the agency listing and the intensity of the 1998 flooding to malfeasance by local government officials. City government, faced with projected dire shortfalls in drinking-water capacity, had diverted nearly all water entering the creek from the local aquifer, which dramatically curtailed flow and caused water quality to plummet. In addition, citizens suspected that flooding intensity was due at least in part to permits granted by the local public works department that allowed dumping of fill in the floodplain. While a few vocal groups had urged city and state officials to pay more attention to the creek, there

had been little local interest. Once the flooding had destroyed homes and businesses, however, both city officials and private citizens began paying close attention to Salado Creek's management.⁵⁶

The TMDL

The sources of pollutants in urban watersheds such as Salado Creek are exceptionally diverse and complex, suggesting that rehabilitation requires agreement and commitment among diverse stakeholders. The TNRCC assumed that a successful TMDL process would be strongly affected by the nature of the interactions among policy makers, science and technology experts, and the local community. The agency invited us to design and facilitate a community involvement process that would increase the probability of completing a successful TMDL for the Salado Creek Watershed. In addition to assisting the TNRCC, we hoped to gain greater insight into the relationships between CBC processes and democratic governance.

We held thirteen watershed restoration council meetings over a period of fourteen months from November 1999 through December 2000. We used Steven Daniels and Gregg Walker's collaborative learning approach to guide our approach.⁵⁷ Because collaborative learning takes a systems-thinking approach, the first workshop included a presentation on basic systems theory and another on watersheds as systems. Stakeholders accepted the invitation to comment on these presentations and then suggest additional information they believed the technical experts should provide to support the council's efforts to restore the Salado Creek Watershed. We used this feedback to design subsequent meetings, enabling lay members of the group to see that information they considered important had been incorporated into the revised description of the watershed. The research team also asked stakeholders to identify additional stakeholders and then take the lead in inviting them to participate. When participants first began attending meetings, all had specific perspectives from which they identified with the watershed and specific outcomes they wanted to see achieved. As the process unfolded, individual identities became enmeshed within the system represented by the entire group, which was mutually shaped by all participants. Responses of those who developed strong group identity through their participation suggest that, while this did not minimize individual interests, it enabled members to position themselves more productively in relationship to the identities of other members.

At the beginning of the first meeting, facilitators invited members to introduce themselves, with a statement describing their purpose in attending the meeting. Facilitators unrolled a large fabric map of the Salado Creek watershed. We placed markers for significant geographic sites along the creek and asked stakeholders to stand on the watershed map near where they lived or worked and then introduce themselves to other council members, explaining their primary reason for attending the workshops.

A sampling of self-introductions from the group indicates the diverse identities of group members. Calvin was the first participant to introduce himself, stating:

I'm with the San Antonio Water System, and I didn't really know where to stand along the creek. I'm actually concerned with all the water quality along Salado Creek. . . . We don't really care where we go; if it's dirty we help clean it up.

Calvin illustrates the attitude shared by most agency participants. Although they did not identify with a particular location along the creek, they identified strongly with the aspect of the creek for which they had regulatory responsibility. Ramona, who lived near the creek and was interested in improving the aesthetic quality of the city, said, "I am seriously, anxiously, interested in seeing this creek reach the beautification that I know it can." Hank, a farmer whose family members have lived on the creek since they emigrated from Italy in the 1890s, told fellow participants, "It's our livelihood. We farm there; a family farm. We are concerned about the quantity and quality of the water so we can keep the crops growing." Suzy, a science teacher, was "concerned about upstream development, nonpoint source pollution, and about truly educating our children about the tremendous value of the creek." She compared the creek to "an emerald necklace" and said she was participating because she wanted "to preserve the treasure." Daniel, a retired military officer, spoke about his concern with flooding:

I'm with the — Home Owners Improvement Association. I live north of — Road and I-35, and when Salado Creek flooded it came right into my house and so I'm definitely interested in what slows down Salado Creek, and I am hoping that it won't happen again. (November 1999, S, meeting transcript)

These examples illustrate the primary motives that brought people to council meetings; people came because they had a professional responsibility, wanted the creek to be beautiful, wanted to use water from the creek to make a living, wanted to restore ecological integrity to the watershed, or wanted to prevent future flood damage. At this point, they had not yet imagined how concerns so diverse could form any unifying motive for policy formation. As they engaged in joint learning experiences, however, a unifying motive emerged, and they developed a set of technically feasible recommendations for improving the quality of their watershed that incorporated all of the concerns mentioned above.

Because we wanted council members to realize that their efforts were supported by appropriate government entities, we asked a representative of the TNRCC and the Mayor of the City of San Antonio to attend and worked with them to develop an appropriate set of remarks. The TNRCC representative, who held strong reservations about the value of public participation in any decision-making process, was positive, yet restrained. The Mayor, who was a planner by profession, expressed enthusiastic support and his hope that the group would become a positive force for change in the city's management of the Salado Creek watershed. He encouraged members to think systemically about the watershed, and to include concerns from all reaches of the watershed in their recommendations. He also pledged that the city would make funds available to assist in the implementation of council recommendations. At the

conclusion of the Mayor's remarks, Daniel leapt from his chair and requested that the funds be spent to clean out the creek bed immediately upstream of and throughout his neighborhood. He asked that all brush and trees be removed from the creek banks and that the creek bed be lined with concrete. Other council members sat back with astonished looks. The Mayor responded by stating that he hoped Daniel would think about the entire watershed and would consider the needs of other council and community members before deciding on such a drastic course (Meeting notes).

Future meetings included the introduction of new ecological, socio-economic, and political information about the watershed. Members were then invited to devote part of the time to discussions of how they would apply the information to improving the current situation. During the first four meetings, individuals tended to reiterate their personal motives during these discussions. Gradually, however, they began to integrate their own needs into what they perceived to be the needs of fellow council members. As the group progressed, it became increasingly apparent that participants were developing a growing desire and competence to engage in environmental management decisions that bridged competing interests. At the eighth meeting, one small group, including members representing all the interests mentioned during the first meeting, reported its discussion to the entire council as follows:

Well, we wanted to protect the ecology and water quality. We felt like work that needed to be done, in this area that was flooded, that we have to consider protection of property and life and that would be the driving force in that area. And what we would say is that would be the driving force, but also keep in mind protecting ecology, protecting water quality and protecting wildlife in the area. And at the same time develop recreation facilities to serve people in that area, and also all citizens, so that the whole city would benefit—which would encourage spending money on the creeks. So that is what we were looking at, that protection of life and property would be in the forefront, but flooding improvements should be done in such a way to protect the wildlife and also provide recreation opportunities and other economic opportunities. (June 2000, S, meeting transcript)

From this point, council members spent an increasing portion of each meeting developing and refining recommendations they would present to the city as a unified system for improvement. They also began discussing how to encourage implementation and enforcement of their recommendations.

Ironically, the Council's work was nearly derailed after they assisted in obtaining sufficient electoral support for a sales tax increase to provide funds for watershed restoration. Extensive publicity of the new funding encouraged participation by additional stakeholders. Suddenly, at a meeting when the original participants had expected to begin drafting recommendations, attendance more than doubled. Participants who had attended meetings for a year glanced uncomfortably at each other as new attendees vented, making statements such as:

I know what I own, and ain't no one gonna mess with it. I turned eighty-eight last month, and I'm gonna be out there another fifty years 'cause Genesis 6 and 3 gives me 120 years. On top of that, you don't want to deal with my relatives. I got fifty kids, I had five, and they went out and brought home five. And that gives me ten. They gave me twenty grandkids and they gave me twenty great-grandkids. And I

got a man sitting here that is the grandfather of two of my great-grandkids. So you don't want to deal with them. You better deal with my wife of fifty-seven years and me on buying that water rights and buying that land, because other people won that land up and down that Salado, and you ain't just gonna walk in and say we're gonna take it. Because a lot of them are meaner than me, and I'm as mean as a junkyard dog. (September 2000, S, meeting transcript)

Because the facilitators had essentially turned management of the group over to local participants by this time, the research team did not intervene. After listening to similar inflammatory comments for approximately 30 minutes, Cathy, one of the seasoned participants, attempted to redirect the conversation. Others, who recognized that the behaviors of the new members were threatening the nascent consensus the council had reached regarding how to improve the watershed, as well as how to behave as a council member, soon joined her. They had developed these informal norms through months of difficult interaction and were not prepared to give them up.

Cathy started by explaining the collaborative learning process they were using. She added that the facilitators "are here to help us make our own decisions about the creek, not to tell us what to do." She then introduced a group of people designated as "the nominating committee" (made up of participants who, at the request of the entire group, had spent the previous two months developing a slate of nominees who were willing to serve as officers in a continuing council). Hank, John, Janet, and Tina each spoke about the work the council had done and its future direction. Janet summarized the concerns of council members when she explained:

We are concerned that we need a place at the table to spend this money. We are concerned that people will come out from under rocks to spend the money on things we don't want. We need to protect the trees. We need to help people and we need safety and protection. We need to institutionalize ourselves.

Janet's presentation reminded seasoned participants how hard they had worked to reconceptualize the watershed as a system within which all members held legitimate interests (September 2000, S, meeting transcript).

Following this spontaneous presentation, Cathy took charge of the meeting. Each time a new member attempted to return the conversation to a single interest, Cathy turned to another experienced member to help move the discussion back to the goal of watershed improvement. At the next meeting, the attendance pattern again changed. The seasoned participants returned along with approximately 25 percent of the new attendees. The new attendees, for whom this was a second meeting, began accepting the behavioral norms the previous attendees had established earlier and joined in planning an upcoming field trip designed to further enhance understanding of the entire watershed. Professional facilitators left the group in December 2000, and the council has since developed into an active private foundation. Electronic messages received from members, communication with city and state officials, and interviews conducted with council participants indicate its continuing participation in governance issues relevant to the watershed.

Social Capital's Contributions to Democracy

Although we do not question the popular claim that social capital *can* improve democracy, we do question the comfortable assurance that it necessarily will do so. Most social capital research assumes that “higher stocks of social capital are synonymous with better working democracies,” and the state is, at best, “irrelevant for the creation of social capital.”⁵⁸ The CBC processes we analyzed do not negate the claims that

strong associations reduce the ability of the state to directly oppress citizens and provide a space for growth in organized opposition to a nondemocratic regime. . . . These associations teach tolerance, promote compromise, stimulate political participation, and train leaders—all of which contribute to a healthy democracy.⁵⁹

What they do indicate is that associations formed through social capital also provide a space for teaching intolerance, promoting hostility, and/or excluding non-members from democratic processes.

Both of the CBC processes we evaluated began with hopes of reaching an optimal solution through collaboration and consensus building. Agencies responsible for managing the natural resource in question hoped to capitalize on community involvement. The Bastrop County HCP went far over budget and past its scheduled deadline, and participants became disillusioned with the process and increasingly uncertain regarding their future relationship with the USFWS and the Houston toad. The recommendations that emerged from the Salado Creek TMDL process, however, were accepted by the TNRC and EPA. Further, the local municipality included many of the council's recommendations for watershed restoration in its long-range plans, and the watershed council has evolved into a successful non-governmental organization. Although both CBC processes required collaboration among diverse groups with acrimonious histories, their approach to social capital and democracy were fundamentally different. The Bastrop County committee used social capital as a currency for excluding all but the local majority view, while the Salado Creek committee used it to negotiate the democratic paradox.

Bastrop County's Houston toad HCP created a powerful illusion of unanimity. The dominant political structures in Bastrop County, compounded by Texas Senate Bill 1272, led to a committee dominated by property/individual right interests. National environmental groups were banned, and the person chosen to represent local environmental interests was included only because he was soft-spoken and pleasant, and agreed that property rights were fundamental (Fieldnotes). Despite its responsibility to facilitate the Houston toad's recovery and its concomitant legal status as the decision authority, the USFWS was excluded from the group. The illusion of unanimity was so complete that workgroup members who assisted in drafting and lobbying for Senate Bill 1122 were astonished when other members accused them of betrayal. Meetings served as a forum for demonizing the USFWS and isolating anyone who failed to join in that activity. Workgroup meetings provided an ideal opportunity for the proliferation of exclusionary social capital, and the destruction of bridging social capital. Workgroup members persuaded themselves

that it was both necessary and sufficient to protect the individual liberty they equated with private property rights. Because they assumed that only one perspective existed, they saw no need to facilitate argument among perspectives, and the issue of equality became moot.

It should not be surprising that the workgroup drafted a HCP for the Houston toad that offered a solution to the potential economic and regulatory burden on individual community members but included no demonstrable attempts to comply with the ESA. The summary rejection of the draft by the USFWS is a cause for guarded optimism among environmentalists and advocates of democracy. It demonstrated that, even when exclusionary social capital leads to a proposal that is supported by a powerful and well-organized constituency, existing political structures can attenuate that constituency's decisions if they directly impact the larger polity. Although economic demands accompanying the political shift to the right have made it increasingly challenging to list plants or animals as endangered in the United States, once a species is listed, it remains unusual for a single interest group to gain official sanction for a proposal that ignores the perspectives of stakeholders who advocate protection for that species. This follows from the public trust doctrine, which mandates that federal and state governments hold wildlife in trust for all US citizens.⁶⁰ Because the ESA mandates protection of critical habitat for animals that have been listed, even when that habitat is located solely in a community where liberty trumps equality, decisions involving endangered species must consider equal opportunity for all US citizens. Although the Bastrop County workgroup was willing to disregard equal treatment of other stakeholders in their efforts to maximize the individual liberty of Bastrop County's landowners, their attempts were stymied by the USFWS. Although some vowed to continue their efforts to halt what they believed were unjustified incursions into their private liberties, most said they hoped never to be involved in community governance again.

The Salado Creek TMDL process took a different route, embracing the democratic paradox. Members actively engaged in attempts to champion both liberty and equality throughout the process. Facilitators encouraged the broadest participation possible and guided members through discussions of their differences. Meetings were rarely comfortable. City and state agency personnel came with darting eyes and sat on the edge of their chairs, primed with excuses for an early departure should things get too hot. One seasoned community activist frequently startled other participants by leaping to his feet and shouting about past injustices. In between meetings, facilitators used email, telephone, and face-to-face conversations to encourage participants who were either overcommitted or frightened to return each month. At least within the context of the meetings, council members learned to embrace, rather than to reject and demonize, conflicting voices.

The TNRCC and EPA held decision authority in the formal TMDL process, and the City of San Antonio controlled the fate of many of the council's recommendations. These entities were represented (if sometimes unwillingly) at every council meeting and were at times subjected to harsh criticism. Along with other participants, agency representatives gradually began to assume that, although council meetings

would not necessarily be comfortable, they would be safe and might be productive. Although participants retained their individual identities, they developed a group identity by using social capital to bridge their differences. At the conclusion of the formal process, members were in a celebratory mood. Veteran activists and agency representatives who had endured multiple failed public participation processes celebrated a new approach that encouraged participants to link respect for individual liberty with assurance of equality. New participants responded affirmatively to requests to serve on other citizen committees. Although they argued about how the city's new funds for the restoration of Salado Creek should be spent, all members were pleased to have been a motivating force for securing these funds.

Interviews conducted one year after the council's final meeting indicated considerable residual social capital. Calvin repeatedly stated his wish that public meetings he was currently attending for his agency would use a similar process (I2, S). Hank was pleased because one of the project's outcomes was that the city had restored Salado Creek's flow through his farm. His eyes sparkled as he told us about how the local television station had come out to the farm and interviewed his family on the day water flow was restored (I3, S). Suzy apologized because she was no longer an active member of the foundation that had developed from the council but explained how participation on the council had prepared her to serve on a technical advisory board for another watershed in the region (I2, S). Daniel drove us to a gated area where trucks were dumping fill along the edge of the creek and then used one of our university identification cards to secure access. After we returned to his home, he spread floodplain maps across the kitchen counters and showed us why the dumping we had just observed should be illegal and could contribute to flooding in certain neighborhoods. Later, he showed us a video tape of his testimony at a recent city-wide meeting. He was testifying against a watershed restoration initiative pushed by the foundation that had grown out of the watershed council; he explained to us that he had "stopped them cold. What they wanted to do would not only have threatened my neighborhood with flooding. It would have damaged water quality by lowering oxygen levels" (I2, U57). He then showed us his notes from the watershed council meeting that had covered this topic and thanked us for including him in such a useful activity. Cathy introduced us to the foundation's new president, and then the two of them explained new initiatives and recruiting efforts (I2, S). Nearly every person who had regularly attended meetings of the Salado Creek Restoration Council had remained politically active (some in direct opposition to each other). For some, this was a new adventure, while others simply said it helped them do an old task better.

Nature's Lessons

In wild nature, we find lessons for democracy. Terry Tempest Williams notes that in nature we "cannot help but recognize a radical form of democracy at play. Each organism is rooted in its own biological niche, drawing its power from its relationship to other organisms."⁶¹ Living organisms must retain their own individuality while simultaneously engaging in symbiotic relationships with others.

For some organisms, this can be studied on a single microscope slide, while others require complex simulation models because the ecosystem components and interactions are too numerous and complex for direct observation. An individual human's success, and in some cases survival, also depends on maintaining appropriate relationships. At some point, the appropriate scale for those interactions may have emphasized local institutions. Globalization, however, has made local institutions and resources less influential and certainly insufficient for strengthening democracy.

Nature does not assume a state of perpetual balance so much as a state of perpetual tension. Part of that tension can be read in the resilience of the organisms we humans know as pests. Rather than guard against disaster, they evolve ways to bounce back from it. The history of humanity can be read as one long attempt to control nature for the benefit of a few members of the human species. Although, when measured in sufficiently small scales and short time spans, we can congratulate ourselves on our success in this endeavor, our constructs always fall apart eventually. The dam cracks, the dike fails, and the buildings are washed away. Repair becomes the order of the day. Likewise, democracy requires room to maneuver. Because human society can be as violent as nature, the "white hot center" of democracy will never be a comfortable space.⁶² Attempts to make it so will fail, because people resist those attempts and maintain a site for struggle, or they submit and democracy dies.

Given bounded rationality's conceptual centrality in the discipline of economics, it does not surprise us that so many social scientists have accepted social capital as the answer to our social woes. Rhetorical and cultural critics, however, have less excuse for such acceptance. Social capital should not be construed as a universally desirable currency; it carries multiple entailments, and it is never free. Unfortunately, local communities are no more immune to nepotism, corruption, and commercial pressures than are national governments. Social capital can blind communities to the impact they have on others and encourage them to destroy natural resources they do not value. In the United States alone, CBC has led to the National Park Service eradicating predators in parks, irrigators cheating the government out of reclamation subsidies, and grazing advisory councils dictating winners and losers in federal forage allocation to the detriment of small ranchers and nomadic sheepherders.⁶³

This is not to argue against social capital. It can lead to increased governmental accountability, encourage more citizen involvement, and facilitate agreement in polarized political crises that call for flexibility and innovation.⁶⁴ It requires certain conditions, however, to enhance accountability and flexibility. Social capital must be shared across polarized views and across hegemonic configurations. If exclusionary social capital exists without bridging social capital, any agreement is more difficult to achieve than it would be without social capital.⁶⁵ Bridging social capital does not, however, mean doing away with difference. If the center becomes too powerful, both liberty and equality suffer.⁶⁶ Further, social capital must be connected at an appropriate scale. This is consistent with Paxton's research showing that associations connected to larger institutions had a positive effect on democracy, while isolated

associations had a negative effect.⁶⁷ Scalar issues are similarly crucial for environmental restoration efforts. For example, neither the Pacific salmon nor the Serengeti wildebeest can be profitably managed or understood by piecemeal CBC efforts; both require habitat currently populated by vast numbers of local, human communities.

Beyond the fact that we suffer individual harm when we lack clean air and water, to the degree that we decimate nature we also decimate ourselves. Human hubris grows each time we dam a river, domesticate another species, or drive one to extinction. In a world drunk on control, there is no space for the bumbling practices of democracy. Instead, we conceptualize it as something fragile, to be protected from non-domesticated argument.⁶⁸ There is a very real danger that, in relying indiscriminately on social capital to decide how our social systems will interact with natural systems, we will capitalize ourselves to death. By their very nature, environmental conflicts pit people against strangers: north against south, east against west, urban against rural. Within this milieu, we will do well to recall Peters' suggestion that, "instead of being terrorized by the quest for communication with aliens, we should recognize its ordinariness." Indeed, "there is no other kind of communication."⁶⁹ Democracy is an adventure that both requests and creates humility rather than arrogance, comedy rather than tragedy, and lunacy rather than rationality. In its full practice, we will collect bruises—not all of them metaphysical. As Peters argues, "Determining the range of creatures we will communicate with is a political question, perhaps the political question."⁷⁰ If we view communication as *the* political challenge of establishing democratic conditions that enable mutual recognition of self-conscious individuals, perhaps we can muster sufficient courage to play the fool.

Notes

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- [7] Pamela Paxton, "Social Capital and Democracy: An Interdependent Relationship," *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002), 256.
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- [28] James A. Anderson, *Communication Research: Issues and Methods* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987); David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1993).
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1. What led you to participate in the process?
 2. What participants have interests similar to yours?
 3. What are the similarities?
 4. Are there participants who have interests different from yours?
 5. What are the differences?
 6. What has been good or bad about this process? Most useful?
 7. Do you have any suggestions for improving the process?
 8. Did your relationships with other participants change during the process?
 9. Whose interests did the process serve?
 10. How did it do that?
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