
Why Conservation Needs Dissent

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Introduction

In “Theories about Consensus-Based Conservation,” Leach (2006) argues that “Conservation and the Myth of Consensus” (Peterson et al. 2005) was based on a questionable premise that consensus processes are rooted in social constructionism, confused consensus with veto power and acquiescence, and lacked empirical support. We welcome this opportunity to clarify and expand upon key issues presented in Peterson et al. (2005) in light of Leach’s critique.

Ontological versus Epistemological Realism

As Leach notes, our entire argument relied on the well-established premise that consensus-based processes are conceptually grounded in social constructionism (Fuller 1993; Hacking 1999). Although our essay was “not intended to debate the philosophical roots of consensus theory, social constructionism, or ecology” (Peterson et al. 2005), it is possible that our epigrammatic description of the philosophical underpinnings of consensus may have led to confusion by blurring distinctions between ontological and epistemological realism (Castree & Braun 1998; Crotty 1998). The former, which suggests reality exists independent of the human mind, might well be espoused by every reader of *Conservation Biology* as Leach maintained; but the latter, which suggests reality is unambiguously available to human understanding regardless of culture, experience, or motivation, certainly is not. Along with Leach and most other people, we assume a material reality independent of human thought (ontological realism). We maintain that most conservationists, including those sharing the perspective articulated in Leach’s article, fall somewhere between epistemological realism and epistemological construction; that is, we acknowl-

edge the influence of both human perception and non-human material entities on what is believed to be true (e.g., Crotty 1998.).

To further clarify, consensus-based processes necessarily push knowledge formation away from realism toward constructivism (Peterson et al. 2005). If science suggests A leads to B, consensus-based processes may serve as educational tools for molding public opinion to reflect science (i.e., we agree that A does indeed lead to B.). However, all too often, consensus processes validate a construction that A leads to something other than B, regardless of scientific conclusions. Patently, we would have far fewer environmental controversies if diverse publics invariably based their decisions on scientific consensus regarding ecological processes. Although our article was more concerned with perceptions of lay participants than readers of *Conservation Biology*, it is worth noting that scientists themselves are not immune from social constructionism. More than 100 years ago, Chamberlin (1890) urged scientists to employ multiple working hypotheses to counter the tendency toward socially constructed orthodoxy. Similarly, Popper’s (1959, 1962) greatest contribution to science was demonstrating that efforts to reach consensus about knowledge, rather than to falsify deductively derived hypotheses, only magnified the distorting influence of sociocultural perceptions and constructionism.

The only way collaborative (as differentiated from consensus) processes can push knowledge formation toward realism is by adopting a philosophy that privileges dissent (falsification) over consensus (corroboration). Interestingly, Leach’s (2005) ideal case of knowledge formation in “consensus” processes involves “forcing” people to challenge assumptions, debating scientific claims, identifying areas of disagreement, and critically examining participants’ reasoning with the hope that consensus will follow. This is dissent-based conservation by another name.

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Empirical versus Rhetorical Interests

Leach expresses concern with the exclusively theoretical focus of "Conservation and the Myth of Consensus." However, in the case of consensus-based conservation, a theoretical essay may have more immediate utility than the empirical research advocated by Leach. As Leach acknowledges, "the term *consensus* admittedly means many things to many people . . ." According to his essay, consensus includes all forms of "collaborative environmental management." Conversely, we have specified consensus processes as those wherein mutual agreement is the central metric of success. Leach's all-encompassing definition raises serious questions about how one might use empirical studies to determine "how the theory measures up against empirical reality." The case studies Leach mentions include an incredibly diverse array of public participation processes with varying emphasis on mutual agreement as the metric of success. Given this framework, we could easily have referenced hundreds of relevant case studies, related to both natural resource and other public policy making. As long as consensus-based conservation can allude to any form of public participation, empirical studies will only make the rhetorical device of *copia* (abundance, amplification through excess; i.e., creating a long series of citations that suggests there are far too many for the writer to specify) more pronounced (Conley 1994). In this context, huge data sets and powerful multivariable analysis, no less than descriptive case studies, serve primarily rhetorical, rather than empirical interests.

Leach's all-encompassing definition of consensus-based processes, which defies any single criticism, reflects what Gieryn (1995) refers to as expansionist boundary work. By defining all forms of social interaction among diverse stakeholders as consensus processes, practitioners of consensus-based conservation may consciously or unconsciously hope to expand their cultural authority into space already claimed by others (e.g., practitioners and researchers of alternative dispute resolution, democratic praxis, experiential learning). Although we do not necessarily have a problem with this strategy, it should be recognized for what it is. One of the most dangerous aspects of accepting such a broad definition for consensus is that the social preference for agreement and moderation enables powerful sectors within society to co-opt public participation for further consolidation of their influence in environmental decision-making venues. Accordingly, we suggest the empirical studies Leach calls for should focus on how each diverse version of "consensus" constrains power relationships, influences the definition of consent, and constrains metrics of success (Peterson et al. 2004, 2006).

Those using carefully bounded concepts of consensus (e.g., McCool et al. 2000) still must address the problem that studies demonstrating negative results are less likely

to be written for publication, favorably reviewed by referees and editors, and ultimately published than are studies reporting statistically significant, positive results (Berlin et al. 1989; Sterling et al. 1995; Møller & Jennions 2001). Potential biases in empirical syntheses of consensus-based approaches to environmental conflict are further exacerbated by the fact that many participant groups fail to meet process preconditions (McCool et al. 2000), so the consensus-based, collaborative process technically never began, but failed nonetheless.

Leach suggests we offered contradictory visions of consensus involving veto power and acquiescence. Perhaps the confusion here stems from the specificity of our definition, in contrast to Leach's all-encompassing definition of consensus. Veto power and acquiescence are serious, and fairly common, problems faced by practitioners attempting to implement consensus-based approaches to environmental conflict. If one assumes consent requires agreement, then one participant can veto a decision by disagreeing. The groups' desire to reach agreement can easily translate into pressure to acquiesce to majority opinion. Leach's claim that "all powers and options the participants may have had at the outset of a consensus process remain intact" is a well-known truism for most forms of alternative dispute resolution but has little relevance to questions of veto and acquiescence.

Dissent-Based Conservation

Finally, we advocated neither continuation of the status quo nor governance identical to that practiced before consensus processes became popular for environmental decision making. Instead, we suggested more use of argumentation, which capitalizes on the adaptive, participatory, and dissent-based advantages of liberal democracy. As Leach suggests, the implications of consensus for conservation are highly complex, requiring both intensive and extensive critique. If it is carefully facilitated and selectively applied to cases where "scientific information about an environmental issue has high predictive power and its application is relatively uncontested" (Peterson et al. 2005), consensus-based decision making can make policy development, implementation, and enforcement more efficient. Furthermore, careful assessments can indicate appropriate strategies for helping stakeholders prepare to participate in a consensus process (Daniels & Walker 2001).

Indiscriminate use of consensus processes in contentious and power-laden environmental disputes, nevertheless, reinforces apathy by setting unrealistic expectations for harmony among divergent stakeholders; reinforces ignorance and legitimizes damage to the environment by suggesting that one opinion is as good as another,

no matter the evidence; and represses public debate, reinforcing existing power relationships by favoring agreement over argument. All these processes frustrate any impetus toward sustainability. Evolution toward sustainability, or anything else, requires variation, coding, and selection, and in a democracy variation derives from dissent. Given the increasingly interconnected, and diverse social world we inhabit, environmental managers in nominally democratic nations would do well to focus more energy on capitalizing the potential of democratic dissent.

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