

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS

9.1 The Collaborative Environmental Decisionmaking Process

The presence of the elements of collaborative decisionmaking within a group assembled to address an environmental issue fosters a discourse that can lead to a successful resolution of the process. This process encourages consensus and creative solutions. The collaborative process begins when a person or organization convenes a meeting of parties affected by an environmental problem or issue. In such situations, the establishment of a formal organization with a name creates a group identity among those attending meetings. The participants can identify themselves as members of a distinct entity that exists for the purpose of addressing the given problem or issue. At meetings, open discussions allow participants to present their positions, have them discussed, listen to others present their positions and have them discussed, obtain information from others, and share their own information. This can increase the knowledge and understanding of all the participants as they learn about the issues and the other participants. If the person, agency, or organization with authority or responsibility over the environmental features affected by the problem or issue is able to share power with the group, a successful collaborative process can result.

Margaret Thatcher once commented, “What great cause would have been fought and won under the banner ‘I stand for consensus’” (Reader’s Digest, 1999). While meant to be a derogatory comment about consensus, it actually illustrates something different from what she had in mind. Consensus can eliminate the waste of time, money, and effort that occurs where decisionmaking creates adversarial situations. In a contentious process, if someone wins,

someone else loses. Losers, while likely to be a minority, can also hold significant support that enables them to continue antagonism and opposition -- to the detriment of both winners and losers. Decisions in a collaborative process are reached as positions converge on a solution that is mutually satisfactory to all process participants, without the need for compromise.

Compromise still creates losers. In the realm of environmental decisionmaking, compromise always results in some environmental losses. Environmental problems and issues arise when human activities have negative effects on the natural world. If a group is attempting to prevent those effects from occurring, they must stop the harmful human activity. In most instances, it is not the degree of the activity that matters, but the fact that the act will degrade the environment in and of itself. Acting less will only degrade the environment less -- it is still degraded. A call for a decrease in the level of the action still results in injury to the environment. A compromise cannot alleviate all environmental harm. However, if consensus, and not compromise, is sought, collaborative decisionmaking can at least provide an opportunity to come up with new, creative solutions that may possibly alleviate environmental harm.

9.2 Understanding Collaboration

Collaborative environmental decisionmaking is a process inspired by the concept of participatory democracy and advanced by the exchanges inherent in a civic discourse. It involves individuals and representatives of agencies, organizations, and other groups in open discussions where the process participants share information and power as they take joint responsibility in attempting to make decisions, reach solutions, or resolve issues. The motivation for participating and cooperating comes from the idea that by integrating thinking, positions, needs, and concerns,

the participants in a collaboration learn from each other and develop creative solutions to problems.

While creating a formal organization where potentially affected parties are involved in an open process of information sharing is vital to collaboration, none of these factors are meaningful if power is not shared. Power sharing requires a person or organization in a position of authority to relinquish control so that the group can take joint responsibility for the process and make meaningful joint decisions. Motivations for power sharing by an authority can include avoiding controversy, reaching better solutions as a result of obtaining more information, or saving the time and money that might be expended in defending a position or creating a controversy.

Groups of interested and concerned citizens have increasingly demanded a role in decisionmaking beyond the right to comment on a decision that has already been made. Some governmental agencies have begun public involvement programs modeled on theories of participatory democracy. At the local level, this has resulted in more participation by the public because of greater personal interests, more familiarity with the issues, better accessibility to people at the top, and a decline in the layers of bureaucracy. One of the consequences of collaborative environmental decisionmaking is that all participants end up having ownership in the solution. However, there are few instances where ultimate decisionmaking authority is vested in local groups. Collaborative decisionmaking has not progressed to the point where many individuals, agencies or organizations in positions of authority are willing to give up decisionmaking power.

In the case of the Chesapeake Bay Program, the group was initiated by governmental agencies with the power to make decisions. However, those agencies were never able to

relinquish that power, they were unable to acknowledge that local knowledge can be important, and they had little confidence in a process that involved affected parties from outside the agency expertise circle. With respect to the Elizabeth River Project, the group did not begin with the authority to make meaningful decisions. It grew in power as it included those with authority in the process. That is a key concept for grassroots groups to consider. Those with power must be a part of the collaborative process in order to reach implementable solutions. If decisionmakers have no buy in to the process, they may never accept the results.

9.3 The Relevance of the Case Studies

While regulations, voluntary programs, and other efforts have effected some improvements in the condition of Chesapeake Bay, environmental degradation of the Bay is far from arrested. The Chesapeake Bay Program is a regional attempt by the federal government, three states and the District of Columbia to improve the conditions of this large body of water. These governmental partners have recognized a need to have an open process that involves local people in efforts to clean up the Bay. The Program has advocated participatory, democratic approaches to decisionmaking that create a dialogue among affected parties. The Community Watershed Initiative is an attempt by the Chesapeake Executive Commission to involve local groups in determining a course of action to bring the Program to the local level. The case study examined the regional body's interactions with local, grassroots organizations in what on its face appeared to be collaborative environmental decisionmaking. The Chesapeake Bay Program's use of collaboration was worth examining because, if the process had been successful, it had the potential for utilization by the many governmental agencies within the purview of the Chesapeake

Bay Program. Unfortunately, despite the fact that it involved the sharing of information in open discussions, it was not successful because of a failure to bring in community-level affected parties and to relinquish power by government agencies. This does not mean that a collaborative decisionmaking process cannot be used by a regional authority. Rather, if a decisionmaking process utilizes forums with open discussions and information sharing, includes all the affected parties that wish to participate, and provides the group with decisionmaking power, there is the potential for such a group to reach creative solutions.

The Elizabeth River Project is a grassroots program, as opposed to the Chesapeake Bay Program's heavy federal and state presence. It is local and accessible to ordinary citizens. The Elizabeth River Project Watershed Action Team was comprised of volunteers from many organizations and all walks of life, all desiring to do something about their local environment. A convergence of positions among these 119 individuals enabled the group to reach consensus on an action plan. The Watershed Action Team then evolved into an implementation team that put the plan into effect. This example of collaborative decisionmaking can serve as a model for environmental decisionmaking where communities or grassroots organizations want to resolve an environmental issue. This form of collaboration can involve literally hundreds of local citizens and groups in the decisionmaking process, and even though not initiated by a governmental agency, it can still bring federal, state, and local officials into the group and make them a part of the solution.

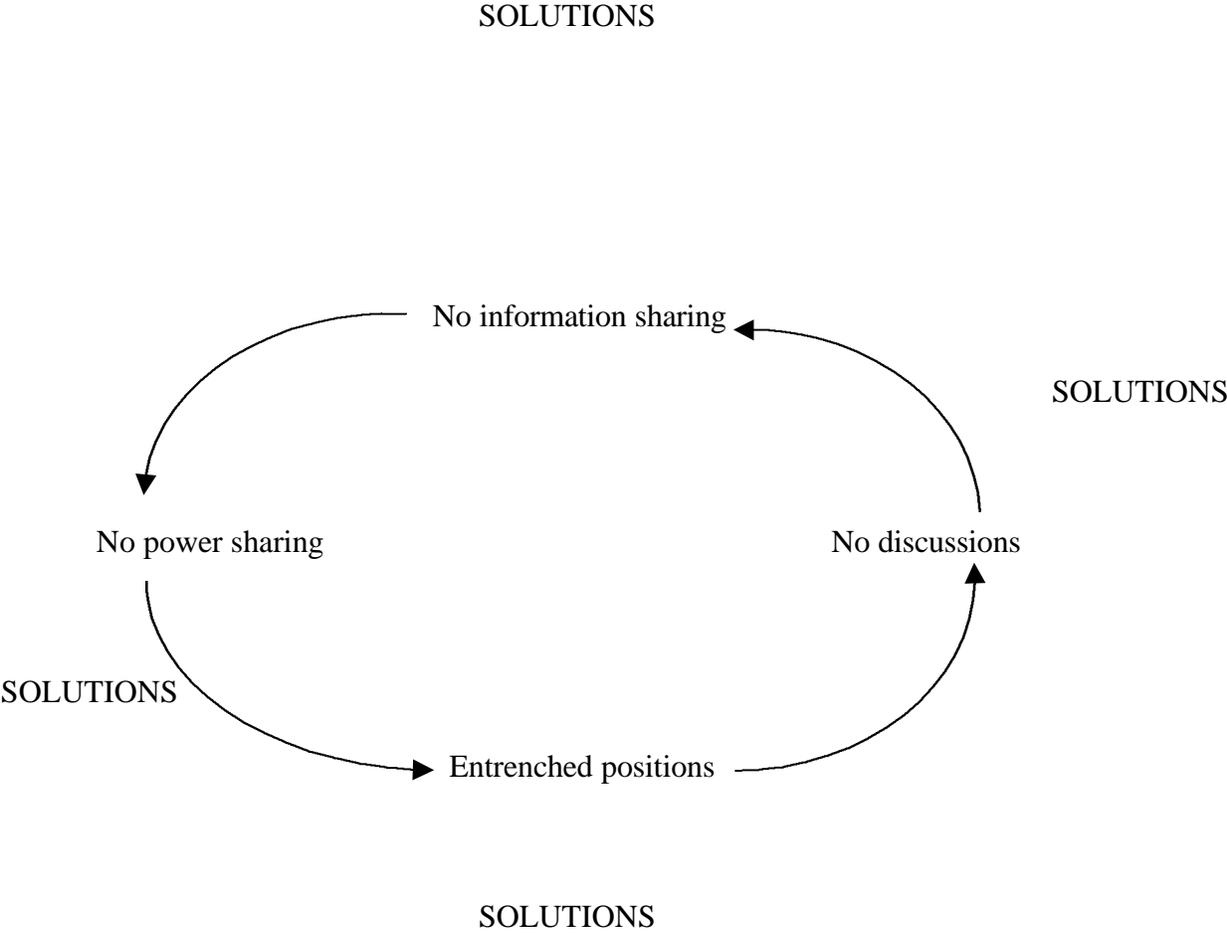
Besides the fact that the successful process was local and the other arose from high levels of government, there may be other reasons for the different results. The government-initiated process attempted to include affected parties and obtain local input from a 64,000 square mile

area. The grassroots one addressed the problems of a 200 square mile watershed. The large, regional effort failed to include many of the affected parties. As geographic scale increases, the openness of a process and the extent of the collaboration are likely to decline simply for logistical reasons. However, geographic size is not necessarily a deterrent. As geographic scale increases, authority is often concentrated. This may lead to the ability to more readily resolve issues -- less layers and higher authority. Further, multiple meetings in multiple locations can be used to overcome the negative effects of working on a large, regional scale. However, at a more basic level, the failure of the Workgroup to share power removed it from the realm of collaborative processes. The lack of this fundamental element of collaborative environmental decisionmaking may have doomed the effort to failure.

9.4 The Social Learning Spiral

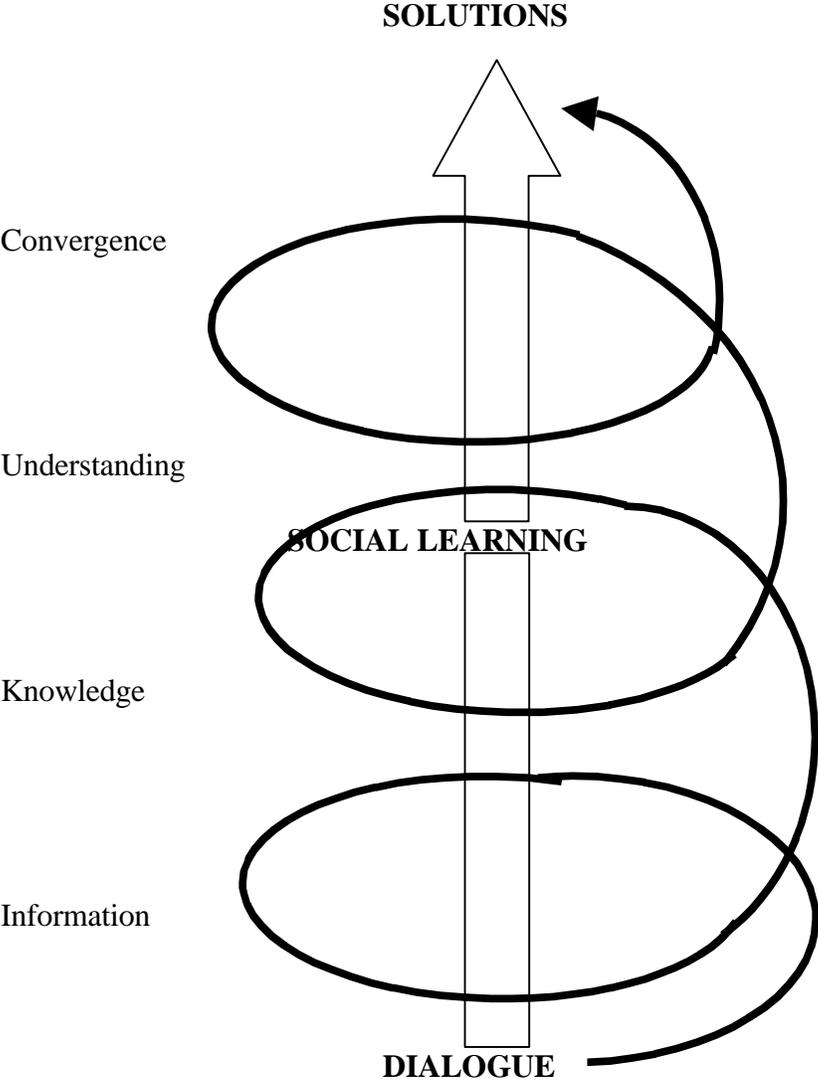
In a decisionmaking process where the elements of collaboration are not extensive and do not influence positions, or vice versa, social learning is not likely to occur. The process becomes a “closed loop” where positions remain entrenched, consensus cannot occur, and solutions cannot be reached (Figure Seventeen). Collaboration can be thought of as a social learning situation that enables groups to break free of closed loop processes by creating the means for participants to change positions and begin an upward spiraling process towards mutually acceptable solutions.

Figure Seventeen. Closed loop process lacking elements of collaboration.



The case studies demonstrate that the process of collaborative environmental decisionmaking creates a situation where participant positions can converge on a consensual agreement and formulate creative solutions without reverting to compromise. This happens through social learning. Participants learn by sharing knowledge and obtaining information. As that learning occurs, it gives rise to greater understanding of the problems, the issues, and the personalities among the participants. This results in a “social learning spiral.” Information creates more opportunities to increase knowledge, which in turn provides more understanding and a convergence of knowledge, information, and understanding about the issues until the participants are finally able to reach consensus on mutually satisfactory solutions (Figure Eighteen).

Figure Eighteen. The Social Learning Spiral.



8.5 The Role of Values

With few exceptions, people live as members of groups. Groups can be described by their culture, their beliefs, and the values around which they organize and act. (Norgaard, 1994). In relatively recent times, people have begun to question the values used to rationalize the human actions that have negatively impacted the environment. This set of values, centered around exploitative, utilitarian, homocentric worth, may be attributable to the instrumental rationality and objectivism that had its genesis in the Enlightenment. These values have led to the abuse of nature through the maximization of human benefits. An alternative set of values is now being expressed and is making its way into environmental decisionmaking. This set of values recognizes humanity's deep connections to nature and acknowledges aesthetic and ethical views. They reflect humanity's role as a part of nature and the need of a healthy environment for human physical, mental, and spiritual health. The President's Council on Sustainable Development (1996) has indicated that these kinds of values should be considered along with science and economics when environmental decisions are made.

Hajer (1995) refers to Sabatier's statement that people do not hold stable values, but have vague contradictory unstable value positions that are influenced by discourse. This study reveals the potential for an inclusive decisionmaking process to affect participants in a manner that changes the way they consider issues. This may lead to a convergence of positions. If positions can be considered as external reflections of core attitudes or characteristics that are deeply held by people, then values can be recognized in the positions taken by participants in a group decisionmaking setting. In this manner, through a consensual agreement, a collaborative process has the potential to integrate values into an environmental decision.

Where a dialogue is used to reach creative solutions, local knowledge, expert knowledge, aesthetics, spirituality, and other concepts are all open for discussion as participants express their positions and concerns, and listen to the positions and concerns of others. The scientist listens to the environmental activist, the developer, and the government official – and vice versa. No one is excluded from the conversation and no one is subservient. Over time, understanding and respect can develop for others' values. If a level of respect for each other's values is able to develop, admittedly a key concept and no easy accomplishment, inclusion of those values in a solution becomes a natural result of that respect. Thus, collaborative environmental decisionmaking can become a means of integrating values, building consensus, and developing creative solutions.