

Collaborative Environmental Governance Down Under, in Theory and in Practice

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During the summer months, Dr Ann Brower supervised two summer research students, Shaun Coffey and Bailey Peryman, as a part of the 2009/10 Lincoln University Summer Research Scholarship. Together they looked at the promise and peril of collaborative environmental governance through the lenses of economic and political theory, and a programme of natural resource management in Australia. The paper is still in draft form, any and all suggestions for improvement are welcome. If you would like a copy, please contact Ann Brower, senior lecturer of public policy at Lincoln University, at ann.brower@lincoln.ac.nz.

Collaborative governance is a relatively new form of environmental governance heralded as delivering outcomes which are more democratic, less overtly political, and better for the environment. Collaborative governance can be appealing to several competing interests: to business interests, it offers more flexible and cheaper regulations than centralized legislation; to divided local communities, it offers greater awareness, understanding, and peace while arriving at some form of economic sustainability; and to battle-worn environmentalists, it offers environmental outcomes that are as good or better, and less painful to achieve.

In the US, collaborative environmental governance has emerged in the wake of perceived failures in both managerial and adversarial modes of policymaking and implementation. Australia has practiced regional collaborative environmental governance since 1990 in its Natural Resource Management programme. New Zealand has practiced collaborative environmental governance informally here and there, but is now proposing to delegate water management in the Canterbury region to sub-regional collaborative groups.

Within political and economic theory, there is scope for optimism or pessimism about what collaborative governance has to offer environmental policy. Public choice theory and the rational actor model of politics give reason to doubt that rational and self-interested actors will ever cooperate in an altruistic manner capable of delivering good environmental, democratic, and collaborative outcomes. Further, the neopluralist school of political science contends collaborative governance is likely to produce outcomes that are unfair and undemocratic. Finally displacement theory predicts that collaborative governance will only work if participants studiously avoid measuring the environmental outcomes and forfeit their rights of appeal. In other words, collaboration can work socially, but not environmentally.

By contrast, recent Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom has theorised and observed empirically the conditions under which these same admittedly self-interested rational actors will cooperate, behave altruistically, and generally do the right thing in a collaborative environmental governance situation. In other words,

in the right conditions, collaboration can work socially and environmentally.

In this paper, we review the theoretical reasons to be pessimistic and optimistic about collaborative governance, then test both the optimism and pessimism against the Australian experience with collaborative Natural Resource Management (NRM) programme, and finally consider what it all means for collaborative governance and for the competing political theory predictions.

We conclude that the outlook for collaborative environmental governance is bleak, but perhaps not dismal. It seems that there is room for nascent optimism about collaboration's ability to succeed if the structure contains sufficient institutional nestedness, centralised shackles and an effective mix of checks and balances between national and local interests. However we find no compelling reason to discard the pessimistic predictions that collaborative governance will favour development over conservation, and insiders over outsiders.



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