

Citizens, Experts, and Anthropologists: Finding Paths in Environmental Policy

Nora Haenn and David G. Casagrande

The papers in this special section address anthropology's relationship to the creation and implementation of environmental policy. The authors describe anthropologists attempting to flatten hierarchical decision making by acting as cultural brokers who must navigate public advocacy, multidisciplinary research and collaborations with environmental managers, natural resource exploiters, or government agencies. The essay describes how an anthropology that builds trust via holistic ethnography, ethics, and credibility contributes to policy success and allows for policy collaboration to enhance anthropology as a discipline. Involving students in policy will help them build skills and confidence necessary to engage policy throughout their careers.

Key words: environmental anthropology, policy, advocacy, politics, ethnography

The papers in this special issue were inspired by the "Environment, Resources, and Sustainability" conference held at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia in the fall of 2002. The conference and these papers represent moments in an ongoing conversation regarding anthropology's relationship to policy creation and implementation. Inga Treitler and Douglas Midgett provide a succinct overview of the conference in their contribution to this collection. In this introduction, we discuss the papers in light of two questions intended to strengthen the links among anthropology, policy, and sustainable environmental management. The first question considers what kinds of political coalitions will be necessary to gain the broad-based consensus necessary for environmental change. The second asks what kind of anthropology works best in these settings. The individual papers offer distinct answers to these questions, and this introductory essay attempts to juxtapose those distinctions to establish a broader framework from which we might pursue connections between anthropology and policy. The papers share an ambitious quality: a persistent desire that anthropology's relevance

be translated into government action. Here we explore the broader theoretical framework implicit in the papers and suggest ways anthropologists might help to clear paths toward equitable environmental policy solutions.

Political Coalitions for Environmental Change

As these papers relate, anthropologists committed to matters of policy are anthropologists committed to teamwork. The teams themselves vary from local environmental justice groups (Checker) to multidisciplinary research projects (Casagrande et al.) to policy arenas that combine environmental managers, natural resource exploiters, state agents, academics, and lay citizens (see Blount and Pitchon; Treitler and Midgett). Teams may be highly localized (as Checker's work suggests) or, as Treitler and Midgett advocate, anthropologists may be at the center of attempts to leverage global policy initiatives toward sustainable ends. Altogether, these papers support a growing awareness that coalitions for environmental change must encompass a series of identity differences, including class, race, ethnic, national, and professional differences. (We would add gender to this list, an identity difference relatively unexplored in this collection.) Phrased in this way, anthropological skills in delineating and negotiating across identity differences would place the discipline at the heart of environmental policymaking.

What role would anthropologists play in these coalitions? The papers collected here suggest a few well-considered (and sometimes contested) roles, including translator, advocate, researcher, knowledgeable authority, coalition builder, and activist. In short, the anthropologists in these papers often find themselves in the position of cultural broker. As past explorations of the topic convey, the role of broker in policy settings is not always an easy position for anthropologists

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(Okongwu and Mencher 2000; Shore and Wright 1997). For example, in their recent article "Toward an Anthropology of Public Policy," Janine Wedel and coauthors (2005) demarcate public policy as simultaneously a research topic and an action arena. Part of their approach stands squarely within anthropological tradition, as in its emphasis on the constructed quality of policy and the ability of anthropology to act as a corrective to hegemonic ideas (e.g., globalization and privatization). But these authors also point out that policy research and action require rethinking some anthropological tenets. The ethical commitment that Checker and Casagrande et al. display is emblematic of one of these tenets, a "responsibility to those whose lives and cultures we study" (AAA 1998). Wedel et al. (2005:42) argue that, given the powerful position of policy makers, anthropologists working in policy settings might better adopt an ethical code of conduct akin to that of journalists, in which "informants," "research subjects," or "research collaborators" are thought of as "sources." This approach might simultaneously provide a guide for anthropologists working in rigidly hierarchical professional settings of the sort described by Blount and Pitchon and aid anthropologists in undermining these hierarchies. When anthropology is marginalized or subsumed under a more generic social science category (e.g., "socioeconomics," as in Blount and Pitchon's account), anthropologists can begin to subtly alter these political domains by approaching colleagues as "confidential sources" whose insider knowledge may provide clues to level existing hierarchies.

In a different field, the political theorist Frank Fischer (2003) delineates a new role for social and physical scientists in coalitions that bring together policymakers, scientists, and the lay public (of the sort described by Casagrande et al. and Checker). He argues that the lay public fundamentally distrusts science as a source of solutions to environmental problems. Checker's article provides some explanation for why this might be the case. In Fischer's estimation, citizens view science and other forms of expertise as themselves responsible for environmental degradation. For example, scientific knowledge was necessary to create chemicals that later proved toxic. Thus, he argues, scientists need to regain a lost public trust and one way to do this is to level any hierarchies that may exist between scientists and the lay public. Trust can be gained when scientists recognize the validity of local knowledge, and when scientists act as citizen experts, a position which sits on a continuum with lay citizens.

In this respect, Fischer's approach is not that different from activist anthropologists who advocate political engagement (Hale 2006). However, Fischer suggests that a different approach to politics may be necessary for environmental research. He warns against a kind of dueling science in which environmentalists and their opponents predictably occupy opposing positions on matters of data and data interpretation. Checker's article demonstrates anthropology's ability to deconstruct this dueling science. Sharing Checker's primary interest with environmental justice and toxic pollution, Fischer finds this oppositional science alienates a lay

public and further undermines public confidence in science as a source of solutions to environmental problems. Instead, following Fischer's reasoning, anthropologists can position themselves as bridges between scientific oppositions. Hints of this approach can be found in this collection's articles by Blount and Pitchon, Treitler and Midgett, and Casagrande et al. In Fischer's assessment, lay citizens chart a course through contradictory data and scientific doubt by employing skepticism, ambivalence, and alienation, ultimately seeking trustworthy people and participatory processes. The more uncertainty an environmental setting presents, the more lay people turn to cultural rationality rather than formal science to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. One can imagine that citizen participation in the forums described by Blount and Pitchon and Treitler and Midgett would entail a good deal of uncertainty given the size of these groups, their emphasis on professional expertise, and their particular norms and social relations. In cases such as these and in multicultural environmental coalitions more broadly, the scientist's role would be to connect to the lay public by emphasizing personal integrity, amiability, and accessibility over political affiliation or intellectual authority. In this way, researchers clear a policy path by making their expertise widely available while tacitly allying themselves with the lay public who Fischer views as key to successful policy implementation.

The two paths elucidated in this collection of papers—one connecting anthropology to policymakers and one that connects anthropology to the local citizens—raise a number of questions for the discipline itself. In particular, what kind of anthropology will work best in these settings?

A New Anthropology, A World Anthropology?

This broader question encompasses a few more specific areas of concern, as well as critical reflection on what constitutes anthropology. We address the specifics first. On the one hand, questions of professionalization and training arise. How do we train students to act effectively in policy settings, given the unique norms and forms of social relations that characterize these places? Can we simultaneously socialize students into the discipline and into policy settings (as a few graduate programs currently attempt)? Given the extent to which personal networks currently shape anthropology's presence in policy realms, can the discipline provide entrée for new practitioners in ways that offer a more transparent career path?

Frustrated as many anthropologists are regarding the discipline's short reach, this reach could easily be extended by new practitioners seeking to establish themselves in the field. As the papers here suggest, one way the question of how academic anthropologists might get involved can be answered by local research. Colleges and universities already have ties to local governing bodies, and local research allows for the continued physical presence that makes any actor a highly valuable contributor to policy discussions. Anthropological research already inserts anthropology in policy settings to

various degrees. Getting to the table is just the beginning, yet an important one. Local research can help get students and mentors to the table early in their careers to develop skills and confidence applicable to other policy arenas

On the other hand, a more explicit awareness of anthropologists as cultural brokers suggests the need for new skills which, formalized and presented as part of the overall package of anthropological expertise, may ameliorate Blount and Pitchon's fear that anthropology's distinctiveness is lost in a sea of social science expertise. The skills of a cultural broker that come to mind include negotiation, cross-cultural communication, and conflict management. The challenge here for anthropologists is not only to formalize these skills but also to apply them in ways that acknowledge rather than attempt to smooth over cultural differences in an effort to create consensus. Furthermore, if Fischer is correct, anthropologists must be ready to set aside any insistence that policymakers and the public value this expertise when the role of anthropologist-as-authority-figure proves counterproductive. In either case, the multicultural quality of environmental settings means that anthropology's strongest contribution to policy may be the field's keen attention to ways that opposing meaning structures contribute to environmental conflicts. This approach has always been the stock in trade of anthropologists and, as we show below, is a perspective that helps knit together diverse anthropologies.

Researchers who focus on policy as a cultural category already argue that an emphasis on meaning can act as a hallmark of an anthropology of policy (Wedel et al. 2005). But are there larger implications for an anthropology that aims toward working in policy settings whose very meaning foundations anthropologists bring into a critical framework? It is worth pausing a moment to consider two separate examinations of anthropology's engagement with diverse audiences. Together, these examinations suggest the outcome of bolstering anthropology's contribution to policy—in ways described in the papers collected here—requires careful navigation in order to retain anthropology's long-standing interests in ethical obligation, holism, and situated knowledge.

The first examination comes from Marilyn Strathern. Strathern (2004) views the movement toward (a broadly defined) relevance and accompanying promises to solve societal problems as posing unique challenges and opportunities for anthropology. By making promises academics may find difficult to fulfill, researchers must then engage in a kind of public relations effort aimed at stemming any public disaffection with academic products. Checker's paper shows this process at work with public expectations of government action. Setting aside for the moment the implications of this challenge for anthropologists' relations with the people among whom we conduct research, Strathern notes how the hazards of policy work are heightened when such endeavors relate to some societal crisis. (For an analysis of ideas of "crisis" in environmental discourses, see Mühlhäusler and Peace 2006.) In other words, attempts at greater policy relevance place anthropologists in the awkward position of culpability if we

fail to deliver on matters of great concern to the public. Given their sense of anthropology's marginalization, the authors in this collection may view Strathern's fears as premature. Nonetheless, she proposes a response to this challenge that simultaneously strengthens anthropology's position within policy.

Strathern's answer entails a return to holistic ethnography. Arguing that knowledge flows underpin the cultural construction of crises as well as their resolutions, Strathern shows how ethnography's broad sweep of data collection allows for an analysis of the role human creativity plays in these settings, creativity that stands as a counterpoint to the predictive bent of other social and physical sciences. Furthermore, crises are often the result of unexpected events and actions. Ethnography's holism allows greater a posteriori assessment of crises precisely because it documents information that may, only later, prove to be historical precedent.

Similarly interested in how professionalization and the micropolitics of academic practice shape anthropological theory, Restrepo and Escobar (2005) respond to what some may see as policy's threat to anthropology. Researchers in the field of the anthropology of policy argue that, in some places, governance has become a key organizing cultural concept, alongside notions of "family" and "society" (Shore and Wright 1997). Thus, anthropological engagements with policy raise the question of whether and to what extent policy as an organizing concept might structure anthropology itself.

Restrepo and Escobar provide steps toward resolving this issue by engaging what, for them, counts as another, potentially totalizing perspective within anthropology: that of "dominant anthropologies." Restrepo and Escobar observe that some anthropological traditions trump others, thereby sidelining anthropological practices and theories taking place outside the United States and Europe as well as outside the academy. Echoing our discussion of the papers collected here, Restrepo and Escobar (2005:111) ask: "How can anthropology both 'see faithfully from another's point of view' (Haraway 1988:583), especially from the margins, on the one hand, and, on the other, enact a politics of translation that fully takes into account the power differential across sites?"

Their tentative answer is to envision "a 'world anthropologies' landscape, which would include looking carefully at other anthropologies, forms of knowledge, modalities of writing, political-intellectual practices, networks and so forth" (Ibid.:101). Included in this framework is a departure from the "hegemony of 'departmental anthropology,'" and a revalorization of nonacademic practice (Ibid.:106). Restrepo and Escobar's world anthropologies framework would emphasize locating knowledge (anthropological and otherwise) within power configurations that stem from the local to the global. Reminiscent of activist anthropology and Fischer's call for citizen experts, Restrepo and Escobar would de-link expertise from political hierarchies and move beyond disciplinary boundaries. This move is not meant to flatten cultural differences but to acknowledge such differences and provide broad latitude in which they might operate (Ibid.:113). Set

alongside Strathern's focus on ethnography, the multiculturalism of environmental politics, and anthropologists' work as cultural brokers, Restrepo and Escobar's emphasis on situated knowledge points to an anthropology that both retains its distinctiveness and responds to the demands of diverse policy settings.

This reconsideration may be necessary to deal with some political tensions that policy work raises. In this collection of papers, we see that tension in papers offered by Checker and Casagrande et al. Checker, working on questions of toxic contamination of the American Southeast, argues that the scientific information utilized by policymakers is both uncertain and exclusive. The basic premise of Checker's article is that anthropologists work with policymakers to bring them around to the viewpoint of local residents who experience environmental problems in localized ways. In contrast, the basic premise of Casagrande et al. is that anthropologists can help policy experts and local people find common ground in defining problems, in this case to affect sustainable water management at the urban scale. Blount and Pitchon, along with Treitler and Midgett, begin with the standpoint of policymakers, although their work is more ambiguous regarding the direction of knowledge flows at larger scales. We might add to this researchers working on the anthropology of policy who argue for an examination of policy settings as cultural constructions, rather than meaning structures to change or accommodate. While we posit these contrasting impulses—speaking truth to power, seeking social change from above, and mining the foundations of policy processes—as tensions within anthropology, for environmental anthropologists the tensions are heightened by the way they resonate and reflect conflicting tendencies within environmentalism itself (Dobson 1998; Milton 1996).

Conclusion

Anthropologists want to have a greater impact on environmental policy, but how do we do this? And what are the consequences of bringing our skills to an arena already dominated by other disciplines? The papers in this collection focus on the first of these questions, while this paper has attempted to provide some thoughts on the second. As the authors of these papers note, the question of how to get involved in policy is actually a relatively easy one. Anthropological research already inserts anthropologists in policy settings to various degrees. One provocative conclusion offered by these authors for academy-based anthropologists is that such insertion is facilitated when anthropologists conduct local research. Writing by authors such as Strathern, Restrepo, and Escobar encourages academy-based anthropologists to revisit how local research and policy-related anthropology might be valued in anthropological careers based on a reconsidered approach to anthropology itself. Combined, these authors, along with the papers included here, point to ways anthropologists might broaden notions of anthropology without setting aside some of the discipline's hallmarks.

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