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The Tyranny of Localism: Indigenous Participation in Community-Based Environmental Management

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the claim that community-based environmental management is fairer and more democratic than so-called 'top-down' approaches. The paper examines the experience of Australian indigenous peoples with a national, community-based environmental management programme. The analysis of the programme reveals systemic marginalization of indigenous peoples. The paper suggests that 'bottom-up' governance serves to magnify the importance of local material and symbolic contests in which indigenous groups are engaged. Community-based environmental management can fail precisely because of what many of its advocates take to be its more democratic quality: its localism.*

KEY WORDS: Environmental management, localism, community-based environmental management, indigenous peoples

Introduction

This paper is concerned with Australian indigenous involvement with community-based environmental management (henceforth CBEM). 'Bottom-up' approaches to environmental planning and management have been widely advocated as being both more functional and more democratic than 'top-down' approaches (Gray *et al.*, 2001; Kellert *et al.*, 2000; Li, 2002). CBEM is an idea that is associated closely with a widespread trend towards the decentralization of governmental functions as a means of promoting both democratic and developmental objectives (Hutchcroft, 2001). 'Bottom-up' environmental management is said to be more democratic because it is sensitive to local circumstances, facilitates the deployment in management of indigenous knowledge, and provides for the direct participation of local actors (Kapoor, 2001; Leach *et al.*, 1999; Scott, 1998). This paper challenges these democratic claims by examining Australian indigenous participation in bottom-up environmental management as facilitated by nation-wide CBEM programme.

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In 1995, Australian Federal government environmental programmes were radically restructured to provide for bottom-up environmental management. The new programme, the Natural Heritage Trust (henceforth NHT), operated under CBEM principles and has since provided the conceptual and operational framework for the bulk of Federal expenditures on issues relating to environmental management on both private and public lands. In accordance with CBEM principles and assumptions, NHT programmes involve a process of providing financial resources to self-defined community groups who are thus, according to the logic of the model, able to respond effectively to self-defined environmental management problems in their locality.

The analysis of indigenous participation in NHT programmes presented in this paper reveals the potential for 'bottom-up' environmental management to further marginalize minorities. The case study will show that indigenous participation in the NHT was highly constrained. In seeking to explain this outcome, the results of interviews with those Aboriginal people hired to 'facilitate' applications and proposals from indigenous groups are presented. These data show that CBEM serves to magnify the importance of (local) material and symbolic contests in which indigenous groups are engaged. Power relations at the local level become a crucial determinant of CBEM outcomes. This case shows that bottom-up environmental management can fail precisely because of what many of its advocates take to be its most democratic quality: its localism.

The paper has the following structure. The next section introduces the rationale and concept of CBEM. In doing so, the analysis is situated in the broader discourse and practice of decentralization of governmental functions. This review is focused on the potential of CBEM to fashion equitable or democratic environmental management outcomes and the potential sources of inequality in the practice of CBEM. The subsequent section introduces environmental management in Australia, the geography of indigenous Australia, and considers indigenous participation in environmental policy and management. A case analysis of indigenous participation in a national, community-based environmental management programme (the NHT) is then presented.

Community-Based Environmental Management

Contrary to contemporary rhetoric, community-based planning is a tried and tested response to complex planning problems and has been developing momentum since the late 1960s (Kapoor, 2001). In the early 1970s (and just as participatory approaches were losing favour in urban planning), the community-based model for environmental management gathered momentum. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Brundtland Commission, the 1992 Earth Summit, and Agenda 21 all gave significant intellectual and political support to this model. It is now evident in the programmes of national governments all over the world, and it is advocated by donor agencies and non-governmental organizations (Kapoor, 2001; Leach *et al.*, 1999). While the focus of community-based planning varies widely, from cross-cultural planning (Lane & Dale, 1995), to the urban problems of large cities (Hassan & Khan, 1999; Leavitt, 1994), to development contexts (Beard, 2002; Brosius *et al.*, 1998), it now appears most widely used in environmental planning (Gray *et al.*, 2001; Kapoor, 2001; Western *et al.*, 1994).

The essence of the community-based model of land management is: (i) government decentralization of authority and resources; (ii) devolution to local

communities of responsibility for natural resources; and (iii) community participation. This is sometimes expressed as 'co-management'; that is, as the appropriate sharing of responsibilities for natural resource management between national and local governments, civic organizations and local communities (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Kapoor, 2001; Leach *et al.*, 1999). A typical operational model of community-based land management is to devolve financial and other resources as well responsibility to the local communities. Following the decentralization of both authority and resources, community groups are, according to the logic of this approach, enabled to respond effectively to environmental management problems manifest locally.

The concept of community-based land management emerges from three key hypotheses. First, the community-based approach is said to enable sensitivity and deployment of local, experiential knowledge in planning. As a result, CBEM overcomes a major problem associated with rational, top-down or state-directed planning. An important failing of the 'top-down' model, with its modernist epistemology, is the failure to recognize, respect and utilize local knowledge (Scott, 1998). Sensitivity to local knowledge has, in turn, been associated with minimizing the social impacts of plans, reducing unintended consequences and sources of failure, and with more equitable planning processes (Scott, 1998; Young, 2000).

Secondly, the community-based model is said to be more responsive to context and local priorities and imperatives—partly for the reasons described above (Gray *et al.*, 2001; Kapoor, 2001). This, in turn, helps fashion context-sensitive plans. An important source of failure in modernist planning was problems caused by the crude simplification of the local social and physical environment that state (or top-down) vision and action often entailed (Scott, 1998; Li, 2002). Addressing problems manifest at the local scale requires, in other words, a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the local social and physical environment.

Thirdly, the community-based model, with its emphasis on the 'co-management' of natural resources, is said to provide greater efficiency in plan implementation by recruiting local communities. This rationale for and benefit of CBEM has been particularly prominent in the sub-field of environmental conservation. Instead of top-down planners working to keep an unsympathetic public at bay, the CBEM model emphasizes harnessing local agency in implementation efforts (Brosius *et al.*, 1998; Leach *et al.*, 1999; Western *et al.*, 1994). Enhanced implementation is, of course, partially dependent on the development of approaches that are responsive to the local context, and partially dependent on harnessing local agency as the primary means of implementation. These attributes of CBEM also make it politically palatable. Instead of environmental management being undertaken by a coercive state apparatus, CBEM (like other civic approaches to governance) is implemented through voluntarism rather than regulation (Lane & McDonald, 2005).

The advantages of the community-based model, therefore, are that (i) it improves levels of local control over the land management agenda and process and (ii) it avoids or reduces some of the sources of failure associated with so-called 'command and control' approaches. In other words, the community-based mode of planning has been advocated because it is more democratic (Kapoor, 2001; Sandercock, 1998; Scott, 1998) and more functional (Gibson *et al.*, 2000).

It is this former claim that is the focus of this paper. The centralized state, in this discourse, is accused of being insensitive to local actors and dismissive of their (indigenous) knowledge of local landscapes and problems (Cortner & Moote,

1999; Scott, 1998). The prevailing wisdom says that customization and client-sensitivity come to non-government more easily than to government (Tendler, 1997). This assumes either that 'community' is a distinct, relatively homogeneous, spatially-fixed social group which is characterized by consensus and solidarity or that the process of facilitating the participation of local actors and developing a 'community' position is a democratic process and free of the exercise of power. Let each of these assumptions be examined in turn.

The first of these assumptions ignores the issue of 'difference'. Diverse disciplinary approaches across the social sciences have demonstrated the importance of difference within social entities at multiple scales—revealing how gender, ethnicity, class, age and other forms of social identity divide so-called communities (Agrawal & Gibson, 2001; see also Brosius *et al.*, 1998). If CBEM is to be democratic, then the diverse actors in a given community need to be represented in the development and implementation of an environmental management agenda. There are, however, a significant number of reports of social groups being excluded from CBEM activities, while the interests of others are favoured (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Ribot, 1999; Sarin, 1995). The 'community' invoked in the name of CBEM is not one that has respected difference and diversity. David Harvey (1997, p. 69) argued that this problem is pervasive: "community has ever been one of the key sites of social control and surveillance ...".

In terms of the second assumption, if community is multidimensional, both in terms of meaning and scale (Talen, 2000), and potentially comprises communities of place, identity and interest (Duane, 1997), then participation and consensus must be constructed (Bauman, 2001). How robust is the carefully constructed community? Bauman (2001, p. 14) argued "[A]ll homogeneity must be hand-picked from a tangled mess of variety through selection, separation and exclusion; all unity needs to be made; concord 'artificially produced' is the soul form of unity available".

For CBEM to offer enhanced democratic prospects, therefore, this process of constructing community policy or consensus must be fair and democratic. Nursey-Bray (1999, p. 173) argued that:

> the politics of representation is the key to understanding the complexities of the community response ... the outcome of any environmental consultation process actually depends on the dominant interests present within a given community management framework and not necessarily best environmental practice.

The suggestion that only 'bottom-up' processes can ensure respect for and utilization of local knowledge also deserves critical examination. Scott (1998) has argued in elaborate, empirical detail that the 'high modernist' approach of the state fails, in part, because of its failure to both respect and use indigenous knowledge in policy and decision making. Scott's argument builds on a well-accepted notion that environmental management and policy can be improved by incorporating other forms of knowledge—by drawing on the ideas and wisdom of local people (see, for example, Berkes *et al.*, 1998; Robertson & McGee, 2003). Is CBEM epistemically democratic? Williams & Matheny (1995) suggested that instead of indigenous and scientific knowledge being integrated into policy, a chasm exists between two the competing epistemologies.

If CBEM is more democratic, one might also expect to see an effort to ensure that the powers and (financial) resources that are devolved to local groups are

equitably distributed. Agrawal & Gibson (1999, p. 47) suggested that the decentralization of natural resource management:

> is especially intricate because it is not only about providing services efficiently, but it also requires the devolution of real powers over the disposition of productive resources. In addition, it requires the resolution of divergent interests among a host of actors so that externalities associated with natural resource management are not disproportionately borne by any subgroup.

On this point, the empirical record for CBEM is unconvincing. Some have reported a tendency for decentralized programmes to effectively funnel resources into the hands of local elites (e.g. farmers) while providing a convenient means of maintaining central control (Blair, 1996; Li, 1996). Other reports show that CBEM programmes can entail significant inequalities of resource distribution (Leach *et al.*, 1999; Sarin, 1995).

This paper investigates indigenous participation in the NHT, a national CBEM programme. If CBEM has the potential to overcome some of the undemocratic tendencies of so-called 'top-down' approaches to environmental management, the participation of Australian Indigenes in this programme is a relevant test. Before considering indigenous participation in the NHT, it is first necessary to provide some background on indigenous peoples and environmental management in Australia.

Environmental Management and Indigenous Peoples in Australia

Background

As in other parts of the 'new world', colonial processes of territorial acquisition, resource appropriation and state formation have had profound consequences for indigenous Australians, including massive depopulation through frontier violence and the introduction of new pathogens, as well as widespread territorial dispossession and dislocation (Howitt, 2001). Indigenous Australians can now be said to represent a "fourth world" (i.e. an indigenous cultural minority in a nation-state over which they exercise little political control (following Dyck, 1992)). In recent decades, the so-called post-colonial period, indigenous peoples residing in post-settler societies such as Australia, have made consistently powerful claims for self-determination and (natural) resource sovereignty. These claims have posed considerable legal and political challenges for post-settler states that assume sovereign status and a mandate to represent the totality of its citizens (Perry, 1996).

In the Australian context, indigenous claims have complicated the increasingly politicized and contested terrain of environmental management and policy. Environmental policy, particularly as it relates to public lands and natural resources, has been a major, even dominant national political issue for more than two decades (Doyle & Kellow, 1995). A concatenation of factors explains this.

Of fundamental importance is the fact that public tenures dominate much of rural Australia. As a result, a diversified primary production industry is dependent, to a significant degree, on access to public lands and resources for production. Over the past two decades, as the modern environmental movement grew to maturity, public lands and resources became central to the agenda of this increasingly sophisticated social movement. Since alienated (privately held) lands have

largely been cleared for agriculture and urban development, biodiversity protection was equated with the creation of government conservation regimes over public lands, including National Parks and World Heritage Areas (Herath, 2002).

These dynamics caused public lands to be the subject of major public policy conflicts throughout the 1980s and 1990s (see, for example, Dargavel, 1995; Mercer, 1995; Toyne, 1994). As the conservation movement demanded biodiversity protection on lands and resources held in the public domain, the forestry, cattle ranching and other primary industries increasingly sought guaranteed access to the resource (see Economou, 1992). These disputes catalysed a variety of institutional responses concerned with reducing the frequency and severity of local resource conflicts and their propensity to develop into national political contests.[1] Initially, these institutional responses were focused on measures to provide more authoritative assessments of the issue. These responses included the more widespread use of environmental impact assessment procedures, the development of new agencies and the conduct of public inquires. Mercer (1995) estimated that there were more than 79 specialist public inquiries during this period, most of which were focused at particular spatial scales.

In the mid-1990s, government responses to the frequency and intensity of environmental conflict began to be increasingly concerned with the institutional architecture of environmental governance. These responses included an effort to enhance intergovernmental co-operation on environmental policy matters (see Lane, 1999), Federal resource security legislation (Economou, 1992) and, in 1995, the implementation of a decentralized approach to environmental management—the Natural Heritage Trust. This most recent change reflects seismic shifts in thinking about how to pursue environmental management in Australia: state-based regulatory approaches are giving way to decentralized approaches emphasizing local participation and ownership of both environmental policy development and implementation (see Lane *et al.*, 2004).[2]

A diversified conservation movement was integral to these contests and deeply involved in subsequent institutional responses. The movement was dominated by a few national organizations staffed by full-time, professional personnel.[3] In terms of the conservation agenda, this movement was overwhelmingly concerned with the protection of specific places. Although a range of arguments was used to prosecute their agenda, including, from time to time, recreation and indigenous rights, biodiversity conservation dominated their rationale and agenda (Hall, 1992; Papadakis, 1992).

Nature conservation in Australia has long been focused on the creation of National Parks modelled after the widely used US Yellowstone model[4] (Lane, 2001). As has occurred in other parts of the world, the slavish adherence to concept of wilderness in nature conservation has often had profound effects on local indigenous groups in Australia, causing, among other things, dispossession of traditional lands and disruption to subsistence hunting and other customary practices (Guy, 1996; Toyne & Johnson, 1991). Echoing trends in other parts of the world, a "kinder, gentler conservation" (Neumann, 1997, p. 563) has emerged in Australia in recent years, emphasizing local participation and co-management of protected areas (Lane, 2001). It should be noted, however, that the vigorous and consistent agitation of indigenous organizations has had much to do with the emergence of a gentler conservation in Australia in recent years (Corbett *et al.*, 1998). This new conservation agenda is the focus of this paper: a decentralized approach to environmental management that broadly seeks to integrate

conservation and production and, in so doing, achieve improved environmental management across a range of tenures without requiring dedicated reserves.

A Political Geography of Indigenous Australia

Before turning to the issue of indigenous participation in environmental management, a 'geography' of indigenous Australia needs to be provided. The history of 'contact' between Australian indigenes and European colonizers, land and resource appropriation, and state formation had profound implications for indigenous societies in Australia. This is a story that cannot obviously be re-told here. Instead, the contemporary geography of indigenous Australia needs to be introduced. Following the cessation of most frontier violence and indigenous resistance, the disparate Australian colonies began a process of concentrating dispersed Aboriginal populations. Reserves, often administered by the churches, were created for the purpose of providing refuge from frontier violence and for allowing (European) settlement across the rest of the landscape. Colonial policy as administered by the churches would thus 'smooth the dying pillow' of a race that was destined to die out.

These processes created a distinct Aboriginal geography in which multi-ethnic populations were concentrated on Reserves in remote areas and in landscapes that were unpalatable for European consumption.[5] Although troubled by a plethora of social problems common to colonized indigenes the world over,[6] Australia's diverse indigenous populations never died out or surrendered their claims and attachments to their custodial lands. The indigenous land rights movement has been an important part of the political landscape in Australia, particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century (Libby, 1989). Contests between indigenous groups asserting customary land rights and seeking to protect culturally significant lands, on the one hand, and the mining, ranching, forestry and tourism industries, on the other, have became commonplace during this period (see, for example, Dixon & Dillon, 1990; Hawke & Gallagher, 1989; Howitt *et al.*, 1996). While the land rights movements forced some hard-won concessions from resource-dependent state governments,[7] the real change was won in the High Court, by a determined Torres Strait Islander, Eddie Mabo, in 1992.

In that year, the High Court rejected the fallacious doctrine of *terra nullius*, or empty land, that had been widely invoked as a rationalization for colonial appropriation of indigenous lands and held that indigenous (native) title survived colonization (see Stephenson & Ratnapala, 1993). Recognition of native title was immediately seen to have significant implications for planning and environmental management and for systems of resource production and extraction (Rogers, 1995). Institutional responses included a process for indigenous groups to have their rights verified and a fund to purchase lands for those whose rights had been lost by land development.[8] The impact of these changes, which have been described as both inspirational (Ross *et al.*, 1994) and revolutionary (Stephenson & Ratnapala, 1993), has been resisted bitterly by conservative elements to such an extent as to create a legal quagmire that has paralysed efforts to achieve reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

The indigenous estate now comprises approximately 15 per cent of the Australian continent (Altman & Pollack, 2001). Much of this land lies in remote areas far from the concentrations of white settlement and the fertile lands of the south-east. Indeed, a significant proportion of the estate is found in what

Australians call 'the rangelands'—marginal, unimproved lands held under pastoral leasehold tenure (ILC, 1998). Much of this land has been environmentally degraded as a result of past pastoral practices. Importantly, for the analysis to follow, the level of funding of government programmes dedicated to assisting indigenous landowners with environmental management is insufficient, given the magnitude of the management task. One recent analysis suggests that the total funds available for assisting indigenous land owners to manage their lands is less than $\$A40/km^2$ of indigenous land (Altman & Pollack, 2001). The responsiveness of other institutions to the environmental management agenda of indigenous peoples is therefore a crucial consideration.

Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Management

Processes of environmental management and the institutional framework in which they are embedded have generally failed to understand, respect and accommodate indigenous interests in land and resource use (Howitt, 2001; Lane, 2002). While there have indeed been some important instances where just and innovative accommodations have been made, the central tendency of Australian institutions of environmental management has been to overlook, ignore, or misinterpret indigenous perspectives. In the politics of land and resource development, the particular cultural perspectives of indigenous peoples are often rendered invisible. Indeed, the 'invisibility' of Aboriginal interests is a major theme of the literature in this field (Howitt, 2001; Lane, 2002). In broad terms, this circumstance is an artefact, first, of the failure of the institutions to tolerate and accommodate indigenous perspectives and, secondly, of limitations to indigenous agency (Lane, 2002).

The institutional framework for environmental management has remained steadfastly loyal to its modernist foundations and its positivist epistemology. In the search for scientifically rational and justifiable solutions and strategies, indigenous perspectives have often been discarded as irrational relics of an earlier age[9] (Sandercock, 1998). In addition to marginalizing other forms of knowledge, the modernist apparatus tends to empower a technocratic elite and obscure the value-based dimensions of environmental policy. This constitutes the epistemic barrier to accommodation of indigenous perspectives (Sandercock, 1998). In addition, the modern state governs for the totality of its citizens, and finds the particular political claims of indigenous peoples problematic. Respecting the particular rights of indigenous peoples in governance is commonly resisted. As Kingsbury (1998, p. 425) noted:

> the view of indigenous peoples as long-existing nations, as ancient collectives with special entitlements arising from distant historical priority may receive endorsement by the judiciary and be accepted in principle by states, but can be actively resisted or challenged by other social groups committed to the idea of a singular state-associated national identity.

Another dimension to the exclusion of indigenous perspectives concerns the power of European–Australian notions of progress and development as part of the discourse and practice of land and resource planning. This 'ideology of developmentalism' can be a powerful force in justifying natural resource policies that have negative implications for indigenous peoples (Howitt, 2001; Lane, 2002).

At the operational level, it is clear that there is also confusion around conceptions of indigenous (particularly Australian Aboriginal) social organization—conceptions that underlie many of the attempts to involve indigenous people in management. In any given resource management activity, differing social entities may be involved. For example, traditional owners, whose rights and interests are *custodial*, may need to be involved along with nearby indigenous residents, whose interests are *locational*. It is apparent that, in some cases, environmental managers fail to differentiate between these social entities (Lane, 1997). Furthermore, due to the intensely localized nature of traditional land interests, there is much diversity among the groups expressing "traditional" interests in land and natural resources. The implication of the highly localized nature of indigenous systems of land ownership is that environmental managers working across a large area may need to work with multiple Aboriginal groups. In short, managers must ensure that "the right people are talking for the right country".[10]

In part, these problems can be attributed to the frequent and ill-considered use of the term 'community' in indigenous contexts. The widespread use of 'community' as an organizing concept is problematic because it fails to acknowledge the historical forces that gave rise to concentrated multi-ethnic Aboriginal settlements in many parts of the country (as discussed earlier). Failure to acknowledge the plurality of Aboriginal interests can render invisible the particular interests of certain groups. Operationally, the intensely localized character of indigenous social and territorial organization renders European notions of representative governance problematic and at odds with an indigenous politics based on direct involvement (Lane, 1997).

Indigenous communities are not, of course, passive in the face of change nor are they ineffective political participants. As Davies & Young (1996) and O'Faircheallaigh (1996) have shown, given the forum and adequate organizational and financial resources, indigenous groups are capable of negotiating outcomes with resource management agencies and with private sector firms. Their agency is, however, constrained by three factors. First, the efficacy of Indigenous participation is limited by language and cultural barriers, geographical isolation, lack of resources and lack of familiarity with European–Australian planning and decision-making processes. Secondly, there is a tenurial factor. The widespread dispossession of indigenous groups means that their participation in environmental policy inevitably involves the assertion of custodial, cultural and other interests in lands now designated as publicly- or privately-owned. Their participation and claims are therefore contested by other social groups. Thirdly, research into indigenous participation in biodiversity conservation has shown that insufficient access to organizational resources has impeded indigenous participation (Gillespie *et al.*, 1998).

Case Analysis: Indigenous Participation in 'Bottom-Up' Environmental Management

Introduction

The NHT was established in 1996 by the Australian Federal Government as its most significant environmental endeavour. By virtue of the resources at its disposal, the NHT dominates environmental management activities in Australia today. The Trust actually comprises 16 programmes across five environmental

themes: land, vegetation, rivers, coasts and marine, and biodiversity. In terms of its design, the NHT borrowed heavily from the 'Landcare' soil conservation movement that operated throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (see Campbell, 1994). Landcare, which dominated restoration efforts on agricultural lands in rural Australia during this period, was a widely celebrated but poorly evaluated community-based land management programme (Curtis & Lockwood, 2000). Landcare is now a programme located and funded under the NHT.

A key feature of the NHT is the decision-making structure. In keeping with its communitarian and democratic ethos, community-generated proposals (for financial and other support) are assessed by a Regional Assessment Panel (RAP), which is comprised of citizens, representatives of key civic organizations, and staff from State and Federal land management agencies. Proposals that are positively evaluated by the relevant RAP are then passed on to the State Assessment Panel that makes the final decision about funding within the parameters of the budget for that state. The RAPs, according to Curtis & Lockwood (2000), are responsible for the majority of funding support and programmatic administration. In other words, a committee dominated by local and regional (non-government) actors largely determines the provision of funding and other support for local or community projects.

An interest in pursuing the question of indigenous participation in the NHT was aroused in 1997, when the Indigenous Land Management Facilitators Network (ILMF) was created "in response to concerns expressed by Indigenous and other stakeholders about the low level of access by indigenous groups to mainstream land management programmes" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, p. 15). Funding for the management of indigenous-owned lands had decreased with the introduction of the NHT (Orchard *et al.*, 2001). The response to this problem was to appoint 11 (mostly indigenous) persons across the continent that were to "act as a practical two-way link between Indigenous land managers and other individuals and organizations promoting sustainable land management and nature conservation" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, p. 16). Each of these Facilitators was assigned to a given region and required to assist indigenous groups develop proposals for funding under the NHT.[11]

The creation of the ILMF was a remedial measure designed to ensure that environmental management under the new community paradigm was as equitable as promised. This research pursued the question of how the NHT, as an example of CBEM, failed the equity test by (i) reviewing available documentation of NHT funding and operations, and (ii) interviewing the majority of the indigenous facilitators. These interviews, in particular, reveal what Harvey (1997, p. 69) has called "the darker side of communitarianism".

Indigenous Marginality in CBEM

This examination begins with Landcare—a long-running community-based resource management programme that has had a particular focus on rural resources management and which continues under the auspices of the NHT. The National Landcare Programme (NLP) was unique, at the time of its inception, in its use of a community-based approach to project assessment. This approach involved the establishment of regional and state/territory assessment panels (mostly comprised of community representatives) to adjudicate applications for

Table 1. Indigenous participation in the National Landcare Programme (Community Component) 1996/7

	Indigenous projects	Funds on indigenous projects $A(000s)	Total projects	Total funds $A(000s)	Indigenous % of projects	Indigenous % of funds
New South Wales	3	239.0	158	5678.0	1.9	4.2
Queensland	0	0.0	120	3298.2	0.0	0.0
Victoria	0	0.0	121	2144.6	0.0	0.0
Tasmania	0	0.0	69	1650.2	0.0	0.0
South Australia	2	146.4	69	1870.9	2.9	7.8
Western Australia	3	100.7	110	3535.7	2.7	2.8
Northern Territory	8	295.1	25	790.9	32.0	37.3
ACT	0	0.0	5	112.8	0.0	0.0
Australia	15	781.2	676	19 076	2.4	4.1

Source: Taylor (1998).

funding (Taylor, 1998). This model of decision-making was later adopted more widely in all NHT programmes.

Table 1 presents data on NLP expenditures. It shows that nationally, indigenous projects accounted for only 2.4 per cent of total spending and 4.1 per cent of community component spending. Taylor (1998) speculated that the low-levels of spending in relation to indigenous interests may be the result of the programme's focus on agricultural lands. However, given the significant Aboriginal holdings in all states in the pastoral rangelands, this does not appear to be a sufficient explanation. Reviews and evaluations of the NLP movement and NLP policy (as summarized in Campbell, 1994) suggest that existing arrangements have not been able to overcome the middle-class bias that has bedevilled participation in planning since the 1960s. Those involved in the NLP have tended to be young, affluent and relatively well educated and, therefore, probably not Aboriginal. The data in Table 1 reveal that even in states such as Queensland (13 per cent of which is indigenous owned and which involves a considerable indigenous-owned and management cattle industry), indigenous participation in the NLP was non-existent.

The appointment of the 'indigenous facilitators', according to Government reports "led to increased participation by Indigenous communities ... [and] funding to Indigenous communities has increased from $4.6 million in 1998 to $5.9 million in 1999–2000" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p. 19). This assertion needs to be put into wider perspective, however. About $A1 million of the $A1.3 million increased spending on indigenous projects from 1998–1999 to 1999–2000 was spent on the maintenance of the 13-person indigenous facilitator network. In addition, it should be noted that while the 13 indigenous facilitators did marginally improve indigenous participation, a network of 800 non-indigenous facilitators and co-ordinators funded by NHT programmes was busy ensuring the participation of non-indigenous communities. Moreover, in the financial year 1999–2000 total indigenous expenditures comprised a mere 1.8 per cent of total expenditure under the NHT (approximately $A300 million). These funds, less than two per cent of the national total, were allocated to the management of the indigenous estate which comprises approximately 15 per cent of the total land

mass and which, according to some analyses, is some of the more fragile, degraded lands in the country (Altman & Pollack, 2001; Orchard *et al.*, 2001). In the 2001 Annual Report, the Commonwealth admitted to its persistent failure to involve indigenous groups when it reported that "indigenous access to the suite of NHT programmes remains relatively low" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001, p. 52).

There is, indeed, other evidence that the impact of the facilitators on support for indigenous proposals was minimal. The state of Queensland provides an apposite example. Aboriginal participation in NHT programmes in Queensland, as in some other states, has been low. The Queensland Government's proposal for NHT funding in 1999 expounds on this problem and is worth quoting at length:

> Following the final appointment of two Indigenous Landcare facilitators in Queensland in late 1998, considerable improvement has been made in Indigenous participation and hence access to NHT. [However] the responsibility on the shoulders of only two Indigenous facilitators, one of whom is allocated to Cape York exclusively, is not sufficient resources for the indigenous communities to receive the level of support needed to develop NHT proposals which will have a high priority of recommendation for funding (Queensland Government, 1999, p. 58).

In Queensland, it seems, the competitive nature of applications for NHT funding, combined with the barriers to indigenous access already described, continued to impede indigenous access. What was the impact of the appointment of two indigenous facilitators? To quote again from the Queensland Government's proposal: "Unfortunately, *only one new* NHT proposal with Indigenous involvement has been recommended at a priority to ensure funding [in 1999]" (Queensland Government, 1999, p. 58 [emphasis added]). To put this (official) finding into perspective, 17 new indigenous project applications were processed in time for the 1999 Queensland proposal. These projects sought a total of $A1 241 000 of NHT funding (Queensland Government, 1999, p. 58). Of these 17 applications, one was recommended. The reason for this, according to the Queensland government, relates to the complexity of the application process and the need for community groups to receive appropriate advice. To refer again to the Queensland proposal: "If the proponents could have been provided with the level of culturally appropriate advice, then more of these proposals would have rated more highly and would be included in the ... projects being recommended for funding this year" (Queensland Government, 1999, p. 58).

To understand the reasons for continuing indigenous marginalization from the NHT programme, those at the coalface—the indigenous facilitators—were interviewed.[12] Their stories provide insights into how indigenous marginality was maintained and thus reveal some of the problems with the decentralized approach.

Some of the problems reported reflect themes identified in the literature above. One facilitator also observed that environmental management was an insignificant priority compared with the challenge indigenous people face coping with the cumulative impacts of contact, colonization and dislocation: "Priorities for a lot of communities are just to survive. Don't even think about rehabilitating country".

A number of facilitators also reported that another common barrier to indigenous participation was the complexity of the application process. This response is typical: "The [NHT] guidelines are jargonistic. We [the facilitators] act as interpreters. [We] need more user-friendly guidelines and applications forms".

Programmatic requirements, in other words, failed to acknowledge indigenous circumstances:

> The NHT reporting schedules are frustrating from an Aboriginal perspective. Every six months outcomes have to be measured by mainstream NHT [personnel]. For example, how many yards of fence were put up. [There is] no consideration of factors crucial to successful indigenous programmes. The capacity building needed is not considered, [nor is] the travel time to remote communities [or] the commitment required from project workers to get projects up.

However, the most frequent reason given by indigenous Facilitators for limited indigenous participation was the politics of the RAPs. These panels, comprising representatives of local and regional community organizations, are primarily responsible for evaluating and recommending proposals for funding. In one region, the indigenous Facilitator was asked to leave the panel, even though part of the Facilitator's job description was to advise RAPs on indigenous issues. After an embarrassing conflict, the Facilitator was invited back to serve on the RAP. This description of the politics of the RAPs is typical: "[We] need more indigenous representatives on the panels. We are only advisors, they don't take our advice and they scrutinise indigenous projects more than non-indigenous projects".

Some panels go without indigenous representation: "There is a bloke on the state panel, but no Aboriginal representative on the regional panels". Others observed that the politics of the panels went beyond a question of indigenous participation. One suggested that: "Because the NHT is first and foremost an agricultural programme; that is the dominant culture. [With regard to] any Aboriginal projects that are proposed, the protocols aren't followed [and] the right traditional owners aren't contacted most of the time".

Another informant expanded on the notion that the agenda was largely fixed and reflected the cultural priorities of non-indigenous people. He remarked that:

> under Western Australian legislation you have to run stock on pastoral leases no matter how unprofitable it is. Wool is worth nothing now, but you've got to leave the sheep there even if they are stuffing up the country. Can't start things like ecotourism under circumstances like that.

Another, reinforcing this theme, commented: "The NHT is designed as a subsidy for farmers. Any indigenous involvement is an afterthought".

Conclusions

This paper tested the proposition that 'bottom-up' environmental management is more democratic. To do so, indigenous participation in a national community-based environmental management programme in Australia was analysed. Drawing on programme documentation and a series of interviews with indigenous people, the paper shows that this programme largely failed to respond to the environmental management agenda of indigenous landholders, marginalized their participation in key decision-making processes, and systematically denied them access to funds.

The charge that the decentralization of governance can result in the marginalization of minorities is one that has been reported previously in the literature (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Diamond, 1999; Leach *et al.*, 1999; Schroeder, 1999). The relatively recent claim that community-based approaches to resource management represent a more democratic form or natural resource management in fact contradicts both considerable empirical experience and strong theoretical arguments. Political scientists, McConnell (1966) and Mansbridge (1983; see also Ehrenberg, 1999 and Young, 1990) in particular, have demonstrated the equity problems associated with participatory governance and, in particular, with the communitarian approach. Most importantly, McConnell (1966) showed how localized, participatory efforts can serve to buttress the position of local elites, enforce conformity and eliminate difference in political processes. By contrast, the impersonality of centralized bureaucracy enables it to limit arbitrariness and ensure procedural fairness (Ehrenberg, 1999). Locating decision-making at the local or community level, McConnell found, increases homogeneity and increases the importance of the local distribution of power, thereby strengthening inequality. Diamond's (1999) review of the global fashion of decentralization showed that the potential disadvantages include deepening authoritarianism at the local level and promoting intolerance towards minorities.

These ideas are reinforced by Mansbridge's (1983) famous study. The direct dialogues used in localized fora (such as those favoured in community-based resource management processes) inevitably carry with them the possibility of public disagreement that may therefore threaten customary social relations. As a result, localized decision-making tended, Mansbridge (1983) found, to create the imperative for manipulation of agenda and processes so as to avoid conflict and embarrassment (see also Ehrenberg, 1999, p. 242). In other words, "the town meeting failed precisely because of what many theorists of civil society take to be its most democratic quality: its localism" (Ehrenberg, 1999, p. 242).

The highly limited levels of indigenous access to and participation in the environmental management programme described in this case can be explained by their marginality in the localized decision-making fora (the RAPs) that determined project approval and funding. In these fora, indigenous people were under-represented and their proposals and requests for assistance subject to both distributional and ideational politics. In terms of the former, indigenous groups were forced to compete with other 'community' groups for (financial) support; in terms of the latter, indigenous groups confronted starkly different cultural notions about the appropriate use of land as well as a racism in which they were constructed as the 'other'.

The construction and operation of the concept of community is crucial to CBEM. Young (1990) argued that "racism, ethnic chauvinism, and class devaluation ... grow partly from the desire for community" such that "the positive identification of some groups is often achieved by first defining other groups as the other". 'Community' thus becomes a symbolic terrain in which the process of group formation and action necessarily requires defining an oppositional other. This explanation has some purchase in the Australian context where indigenous groups have often been a despised 'other', thus helping to forge and cohere a non-indigenous Australian identity.

David Harvey is sympathetic to the role of identity politics in explaining the repressive potential of community. Community, he argued "has ever been one of the key sites of social control of surveillance, bordering on overt social repression"

(Harvey, 1997, p. 69). He clearly prefers however, a material explanation for what he calls "the communitarian trap". Communitarianism, in his analysis, is used to merely rationalize and buttress class privilege and inequality in the (re)production of spatial form.

Others (e.g. Ehrenberg, 1999; Hutchcroft, 2001), influenced by Weberian concepts of power and authority, suggest that decentralization evicts rule-based bureaucratic decision-making in favour of a decision-making calculus in which the local distribution of power is the primary determinant of policy. More than three decades ago McConnell (1996, p. 6) argued that: "Far from providing guarantees of liberty, equality, and concern for the public interest, organization of political life by small constituencies tends to enforce conformity, discriminate in favour of elites, and eliminate public values from effective political consideration".

The decentralization of natural resource management can serve to magnify the importance of the material and symbolic contests among different actors at the local level. By reducing, even removing, the role of institutional authority in decision-making, community-based approaches lose the means of mediating the effects of material and discursive power that create and reproduce injustice and inequality. In so doing, the position of the privileged can be entrenched. For these reasons, institutional authority needs to be retained in CBEM programmes so that competing claims and interests of different actors can be mediated (Carr, 2002; Lane, 2002). When the context involves a minority, such as Australian indigenous peoples, who face considerable obstacles to effective participation, the need for institutionalized mediation is even greater.

In conclusion, it is found that the claim that CBEM is more democratic is both shallow and pernicious. Shallow because it ignores the operation of power relations at the local level which can serve to reproduce and magnify inequality; pernicious because it mandates 'community-based' decisions as necessarily fairer thus hindering rather than promoting democracy.

Notes

1. Most national environmental conflicts during this period (a) were spatially specific and therefore local in scale, (b) were focused on public lands and resources, and (c) involved diverse actors dominated by industry and civic actors, including environmental groups and indigenous organizations. Notable examples include: the Franklin dam controversy in Tasmania (see Kellow, 1989), a contest of loggers and environmentalists on Fraser Island (Sinclair, 1994), a protracted and bitter conflict over the use of tropical forests in northern Queensland (McDonald & Lane, 2000), a conflict over mining, Aboriginal rights and conservation in Kakadu National Park (Lane & Rickson, 1997) and a conflict over mining and indigenous rights in the Gulf of Carpentaria (Lane & Cowell, 2002).
2. The Australian Federal government has pursued this approach primarily through the NHT and related programmes (Lane *et al.*, 2004), while a number of state governments (which share environmental management responsibility with the Federal government) are currently decentralizing environmental policy to locally- or regionally-scaled non-governmental boards or committees. The third tier of government in Australia, local government, has important land-use planning and development powers but is not deeply involved in the full spectrum of environmental policy and management activities.
3. Doyle (1989) provided a detailed account of one such national organization that demonstrates the role of professional staff in shaping organizational policy and negotiating with government.
4. Yellowstone, the world's first national park, was established in western Wyoming in 1872. The principles upon which the park was founded were widely copied around the world. National parks which followed the 'Yellowstone model' emphasized "public ownership, tourism development, and above all wilderness, and they have had little place in them for indigenous peoples" (Stevens, 1986 quoted in Lane, 2001, p. 662).

5. The history of European colonialism in Australia, and the profound impacts it had on Australian Indigenous societies, has been extensively documented (see, for example, Markus, 1990; Reynolds, 1987; Rowley, 1970, 1974).
6. The problems frequently encountered by indigenous peoples include poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and other dietary problems including substance abuse, as well as high levels of disease and reduced life expectancy (see, for example, Hitchcock & Biesele, 2000; Perry, 1996).
7. Land rights legislation in some Australian states and territories enabled indigenous groups to claim, through a quasi-judicial process, their customary lands (see, for example, Brennan, 1992).
8. The *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)* sought to codify the High Court's judgment, and create an administrative framework for pursuing and settling native title claims while allowing the processes of land development, management and transaction to continue. The Indigenous Land Corporation was established to administer the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Fund. The Fund is used to purchase land for those indigenous groups who cannot pursue rights under the *Native Title Act 1993*.
9. An extensive literature dealing with indigenous peoples and processes of land planning and environmental management confirms this (see, for example, Howitt, 2001; Jackson, 1997; Lane & Cowell, 2002; O'Faircheallaigh & Corbett, in press).
10. Country' is an Aboriginal–English term that refers to one's custodial lands. Environmental management, in this lexicon, is expressed as 'looking after country'.
11. Responding to the obvious problem that Facilitators were being asked to work over enormous regions, the number of indigenous facilitators in the next work was increased to 13 by 2000 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000).
12. The authors interviewed six of the 13 indigenous Facilitators employed nationally as part of a study for the Indigenous Land Corporation in 1999–2000 (Lane, 2000). A further two Facilitators were interviewed for this paper in July 2002. The authors have kept detailed transcripts of these interviews. The interviews were conducted on the basis that the informants would remain anonymous.

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