

Learning to think like a watershed

BY OLIVER BRANDES, DAVID MARSHALL AND ANNA WARRICK SEARS, SPECIAL TO THE SUN FEBRUARY 5, 2012



Whether we like it or not, the British Columbia economy currently relies on resource development — from forestry to fishing, to energy and mineral extraction, to tourism. Our communities would like to move on the good projects, and leave the others behind.

Photograph by: Joufflas, MCT

Whether we like it or not, the British Columbia economy currently relies on resource development — from forestry to fishing, to energy and mineral extraction, to tourism. Our communities would like to move on the good projects, and leave the others behind. How do we go from conflict to agreement? Last week, people from across Canada gathered in Vancouver to talk about using collaboration to solve resource conflicts in watersheds, and move to new “solutions” that better engage citizens, first nations, governments, the resource sector and environmental organizations.

The need for collaboration is especially clear for water. Few things are so intimately linked with life and prosperity. In the past it's been easy to take it for granted, but as soon as there are problems — too much, too little, scarcity and drought, pollution — we feel the pain right away.

Everyone in B.C. agrees that we want to keep our lakes and rivers clean and flowing, and that we have to share it between different uses and different kinds of users: for the environment, for washing and drinking, for farms and for fish, for economic opportunities and, most fundamentally, to ensure ecological function. It seems sensible to sort through competing interests and potential conflicts by getting those interests — and those affected — to talk together.

The ability to take action requires more than just decision-makers; the community has to be on board, and industry has a crucial role to play. Having the right people in the room has always been a recipe for good governance — well before the Romans and Greeks.

What may be new is formally using collaboration to improve how water is managed in B.C. watersheds.

Tight government budgets are another stark reality across Canada and increasingly in B.C. Sometimes partnerships — between the province, local governments, first nations, the private sector and community groups — are the only way to solve problems like logjams on the Fraser River, or droughts in the Nicola Valley. Pooling funding, pooling expertise, and using the capacity that already exists in local communities: this is the wave of the future.

B.C. has wildly varied geography. What works for Nanaimo's water planning might not be right for Dawson Creek. But government, with its limited resources, doesn't necessarily have the capacity to know what will work for each community, and which local values need protecting. Instead, communities have to learn how to structure collaborations, communicate between resource sectors, and identify shared solutions for their regions and watersheds.

We've created a few strong, regional institutions that have brought collaboration into the mainstream: the Fraser Basin Council, the Columbia Basin and Gulf Islands Trusts, and the Okanagan Basin Water Board, and many smaller regional groups that are making great progress.

There are other examples in Alberta and Ontario that we can learn from. More than a decade into the 21st century, the idea of collaborative watershed management has come of age, and watershed groups across the province are eager to participate.

How can we foster this collaboration in B.C.?

The gathering last week was a catalyst, to develop networks of groups with shared interests in watershed health. Delegates included government, industry, first nations, and citizen groups, learning about what's working and how to collaborate within and between their communities.

The timing is significant.

The government of British Columbia is contemplating significant changes — a long-overdue update — to our water laws, and to put their visionary “Living Water Smart” water plan into action.

Some of the provisions, like groundwater regulation, are widely supported but still need extensive negotiation and public dialogue before they can be passed into law. The plan also calls for more grassroots contributions from local citizens, governments, and industry.

Dialogue is always a precursor to action in a healthy democracy. The challenge is to include a broader cast of characters so that more than just the “usual” suspects are involved in decisions. This forum was designed with the belief that collaborative solutions are within reach, calling on successful stories of change.

The future is now. The success of our economy and the health of the environment depend on us getting this right.

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