

Organizational Ecology: Adapting Principles of Network Ecology to Scale Up Large Landscape Conservation

Session 1A – Trafalgar
2017 RCP Network Gathering

Presenter: Prentice Zinn (PZ)

Interactive Workshop

Prentice draws parallels between ecological networks and the human networks within RCPs. Using systems thinking and visual representations of their networks, RCPs can cultivate and make use of their connections. This is a strategy that is widely used among ecologists and business analysts.

Ecosystem

Nodes = Species

Links = Flow of energy (food) or symbiotic relationship

RCP

Nodes = People or Organizations

Links = Sharing of information or resources (time, space, expertise, etc.)

First Exercise

There are 5 general categories of people outside our spheres of influence: Active Opposition, Passive Opposition, Neutral Parties, Passive Allies, and Active Allies. Think of two people who are “outside the circle” of your RCP, and write down ways you could bring them closer to the “core” of your RCP. Share your ideas and brainstorm in groups of 4.

Responses:

- Meet people where they are, don't begin the process with your own agenda
- Frank Mand: There are more neutral people than those in opposition, and great effort should be spent on them. These are homeowners who may not have interest yet, it's probably just a matter of getting the proper message across and getting their comprehension correct.
- One RCP took groups of homeowners on bus tours to show land and communicate their message.
- We should specifically define groups of people who fall into the categories on our sheets (active allies, passive allies, neutrals, passive opposition, active opp)
- Hiker and paddler networks are examples of neutral groups. There is potential for connection, and we should find out how to reach them.

PZ: Challenge: how do we change our messaging to reach these new people?

Responses:

- Marilyn Castriotta: Preaching to the choir can have value because it energizes them.
- PZ: More network connections can work like a tool; more collaboration with groups different than your own is like using a hammer instead of a rock

- Prentice wants to get away from individualistic leadership and move towards “group leadership”, not discarding hierarchy totally, but making the leadership structure more “flat” (referencing the keynote)

Core vs Periphery

Ecosystem (defined by Marilyn Castriotta and the ecologists)

Core Habitat = Where vital processes happen, resilient, holds habitat together

Peripheral Habitat = Where exchange happens, degraded, could not persist on its own

RCP (defined by PZ and the RCP Coordinators)

Core = Key partners, working groups, and people who hold the RCP together

Periphery = Associated groups and people who have “weak ties” or impermanent links to the RCP

Prentice: We focus on core because it is more key. In the core, all the pieces are in place. Focusing on the core allows us to define boundaries, goals, and get on track to achieve tangible and measurable results. Systems are too complex to visualize in the mind’s eye. Engineers and ecologists don’t attempt to do this, so we should map out our human networks as they do with other types of networks.

Second Exercise

Define your RCP’s Core and Periphery by placing names either inside or outside a circle on your sheet, and think about the following questions:

What are the relationships/linkages in your network?

Are there blind spots (unseen forces/important people), and where are they?

Responses:

- This makes us more accountable for our own networks. PZ agrees and says this is very important. Why does the core/periphery matter? Identification, acknowledgement, discrepancy analysis, who is core vs who should be core.
- The periphery represents the organizational capacity. It shows how many people could be in the core.
- The contents of the core/periphery should be organic and variable based on needs.
- Jill Weiss: RCPs use ephemeral collaboration, and this increases the value of the periphery because they bring ideas in from a different perspective.
- This makes me think about whose core and periphery I’m in.
- Marilyn Castriotta: Leadership in the cores of RCPs exist based on need, they are dynamic and adaptive. This is how the immune system of bodies work. We are like the immune system of the planet.

PZ: RCPs have a superpower, and it is not the formal structure of the group. It is the loose groups within that hold this power. The weak ties are what make RCPs strong.

Jill Weiss: The weak-tie person is someone who can show up, share knowledge on a shared problem despite differences in the system they operate in. The common problem is solved, and they may separate from the RCP, but both parties learn by thinking about the new system they were exposed to. The next time a problem comes up, this exchange happens faster and easier. So you don't have to be permanently connected to see big benefits from the periphery.

Third Exercise

RCPs are trying to be polycentric leadership systems as opposed to hub-and-spoke networks. How do you communicate in a polycentric system and ensure that there is good information/resource flow? How does your RCP function as a...

Toolbox? Responses = Mapping/GIS capacities, plant/animal ID training,

Attractor? Responses = Maps, Funding, grants, citizen science, the land (places people have personal connections to)

Connector? Responses = Creating connections across political lines

PZ: You don't have to do or provide everything. People in the periphery can help you, and you can help others by being really good at the few things that you are doing.

RCP Structures:

- Formal: The RCP proper
- Informal: your core and periphery
- Value: "Keystone" or value-creation structure.

Suggestions for Moving Forward:

- Map your social system
- Look for outsiders' jargon, watch your use of "eco-jargon" (translate your language)
- Ask others questions first, keep your interactions simple