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COMMUNITY, CONSERVATION, AND THE COMMONS: RETHINKING LOCAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

The idea that local communities can and should manage their own natural resources has moved from heresy to orthodoxy, displacing an older faith in centralised state control. This paper examines that shift and sounds a note of caution. It argues that while the case for community management of shared resources is sound, resting on strong evidence that communities can govern commons sustainably, the enthusiasm for it has often rested on a romantic and unexamined notion of community that invites disappointment. Drawing on the scholarship of common-property resources and on the critical analysis of the concept of community in conservation, the paper distinguishes the genuine insight, that collective local institutions can sustain shared resources under specifiable conditions, from the sentimental error, that any small, rural, or traditional group is a harmonious community naturally disposed to conserve. It argues that communities are internally differentiated by wealth, power, and interest, that this differentiation shapes who governs the commons and in whose favour, and that successful community management depends not on the mere existence of community but on the specific institutions through which collective choice is exercised. Seeing community clearly, rather than romantically, is the condition of managing resources well.

Keywords: *common-property resources; community; conservation; collective action; local institutions*

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1. Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the management of natural resources was thought to require the firm hand of the state or the discipline of private property, on the assumption that resources

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held in common would inevitably be overused and ruined, each user taking what he could before others did. Against this assumption a counter-movement arose, arguing that communities could and did manage their shared resources sustainably through their own institutions, and that local, community-based management was often superior to control by a distant state. This view has become the new orthodoxy of conservation and resource policy. This paper examines it, affirming its core insight while cautioning against the romantic excess that has often accompanied it, and argues that the key to good resource management lies not in community as such but in the institutions through which communities govern.

The paper first recovers the genuine insight that communities can govern commons, then examines the romantic notion of community that has distorted its application, then analyses the internal differentiation that the romance ignores, and finally argues for an institutional rather than a sentimental understanding of community management. The treatment is conceptual, drawing on the commons and conservation scholarship.

2. The insight: communities can govern commons

The sound foundation of the community-management movement is the demonstration that the pessimistic assumption about shared resources is false. Communities around the world have, in fact, governed common resources, pastures, forests, fisheries, irrigation waters, sustainably over long periods, through institutions of their own devising. The study of these cases established both that such self-governance is possible and the conditions under which it succeeds: where the group of users is clearly bounded, where the rules of use are fitted to local conditions and devised by those who must follow them, where use is monitored and violations are met with graduated sanctions, and where means exist to resolve disputes, communities can and do sustain their commons indefinitely (Ostrom, 1990). A detailed study of collective action over irrigation and grazing in South Indian villages showed, likewise, that whether a village succeeds in managing its common resources depends on identifiable material and institutional conditions rather than on culture or goodwill alone (Wade, 1988). The insight is genuine and important: the commons need not be a tragedy, and local communities can be effective governors of their shared resources.

3. The romance of community

The trouble is that this genuine insight has often been carried into practice on the back of a romantic and unexamined notion of community (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). In the enthusiasm

for community management, community has frequently been imagined as a small, spatially bounded, culturally homogeneous group, bound by shared norms and a common interest in conserving the resources on which all depend, and therefore naturally disposed to sustainable management if only the state would step aside. This image is appealing but misleading. It assumes a harmony of interest within the community that often does not exist, and it treats community as a given essence rather than as something constituted by particular institutions and relations. Where policy has acted on this romantic image, devolving resource management to communities imagined as homogeneous and harmonious, the results have frequently disappointed, because the communities to which management was devolved did not match the image, and the institutions needed to govern were assumed to exist rather than built (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

4. The differentiation the romance ignores

What the romantic image ignores is that communities are internally differentiated, divided by wealth, caste, gender, and power, and that these divisions shape how shared resources are governed and in whose favour (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). Within a village, the powerful and the wealthy may capture the benefits of a common resource and shift its costs onto the weak; the rules of use may be written by and for the dominant; and the voice of the poor, the low-caste, or the female in the governance of the commons may be slight or absent. The analysis of collective action in South Indian villages made plain that the capacity and the willingness to cooperate over common resources are conditioned by the material situation and the internal structure of the village, not given by its mere existence as a community (Wade, 1988). To treat the community as an undifferentiated whole is therefore to miss the distributive politics internal to it, and to risk handing control of a resource to a local elite in the name of community empowerment. Seeing the differentiation within community is essential to understanding who actually governs a devolved commons and whom that governance serves (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Wade, 1988).

5. From community to institutions

The resolution of this difficulty is to shift the focus from community as an essence to the institutions through which collective choice is exercised. What makes community management succeed is not the presence of a harmonious community, which is often a fiction, but the presence of effective institutions, the bounded membership, the locally fitted rules, the monitoring, the collective choice, and the conflict resolution that the commons scholarship

identifies, and, crucially, institutions that give the weaker members of the community a genuine voice rather than ratifying the dominance of the strong (Ostrom, 1990; Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). On this understanding, devolving management to a community is not a matter of stepping aside and trusting to communal harmony, but of attending to whether the institutions of collective choice exist, whether they are inclusive, and whether they must be built or reformed. This institutional focus retains the genuine insight of the community-management movement, that collective local governance of commons can work, while discarding the romantic error that invited disappointment, and it directs effort to the thing that actually determines success: not community in the abstract, but the specific, and often contested, institutions through which a community governs.

6. Conclusion

The movement to entrust natural resources to the communities that depend on them rests on a sound insight, that communities can govern commons sustainably through institutions of their own, but it has too often been carried on a romantic notion of community that invites failure. Communities are internally differentiated by wealth and power, and this differentiation shapes who governs a shared resource and in whose favour; a management devolved to an imagined harmonious community may in practice empower a local elite. The remedy is to see community clearly rather than sentimentally, and to focus on the institutions through which collective choice is exercised and on whether those institutions include the weak as well as the strong. Managing the commons well depends not on the romance of community but on the hard institutional work that genuine collective governance requires.

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