Enlarged Citizen Skills and Enclosed Coastal Seas

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Even as the processes of nature provide contextual limits and opportunities for the conduct of social, economic, and political life, so do human situations serve as content for the natural environment. More than that, the two are so profoundly interactive that oft-times both nature and humankind blend together into a single causal stream. People consume resources, thereby transforming nature; in turn, nature's transformations alter the conduct of community and world affairs, leading to further consumption, change, and a continuing cycle of interaction.

Late in the twentieth century this cycle is distinguished by its fast pace. The causal stream has become a rushing river, swollen by the melting snows and bursting dams of endlessly dynamic technologies. And as the pace of interactive change accelerates, so do the tasks of governance become ever more delicate and the processes of nature ever more complex. As a result, today people and communities are faced with the tough question of whether the complexities can be brought into sufficient focus to facilitate management of the delicacies of governance.

The fast-paced interaction of the human and natural environments also poses the difficult analytic question of what research strategy would best clarify the dynamics of the causal stream. Should the conduct of individuals and communities then be held constant while the responses and changes of nature are investigated? And if both components thus yield more fully to comprehension, is it possible to recombine them in such a way as to chart more reliably the flow of the causal stream? Or is such a procedure bound to underplay the dynamism of the interaction between the two? Would it be preferable to focus on human and natural affairs as a single, integrated system, treating the changes in each as merely an input for the other? And whichever of these strategies may be adopted, what variables of natural and human systems are most consequential and should thus be the subject of intense and systematic inquiry?

These questions are controversial, important and not easily answered. They involve nothing less than our seeking "to make an exact science out of an inexact nature" and are surely worthy of extended analysis. The paper identifies four types of citizens and four types of environmental issues and then assesses how each type of citizen might respond to the several different types of issues. The central conclusion concerns a bimodal distribution in which the most evocative type of issue attracts the most participation by the most self-centered type of citizens and, conversely, the least immediately ominous type of issue triggers the involvement of those most concerned about human welfare in the long run.