Forests and communities: Idealization or solution?

Why was it that millenary practices for forest use, now known as “Community Forest Management” arose in traditional communities? Why have these practices been so natural for them?

Perhaps we should start by talking about the ecosystem. Fritjof Capra, in “Ecology, Community and Agriculture,” http://www.ecoliteracy.org/pdf/ecology.pdf , defines it very clearly: “An ecosystem . . . is not just a collection of species but a community, which means that its members all depend on one another. They are all interconnected in a vast network of relationships, the web of life."

The following concepts -summarized from Capra's work- allow for a better understanding of the issue.

For the community to perpetuate itself –says Capra- the relations it maintains must be sustainable. Since its introduction in the early 1980s, the concept of sustainability has often been distorted, co-opted, and even trivialized by being used without the ecological context that gives it its proper meaning. What is sustained in a sustainable community is not economic growth, development, market share, or competitive advantage, but the entire web of life on which our long-term survival depends. In other words, a sustainable community is designed in such a way that its ways of life, businesses, economy, physical structures, and technologies do not interfere with nature’s inherent potential to sustain life.

Furthermore, when we begin to understand the principles of ecology at a deep level, we see that they can also be understood as principles of community. Indeed, you could say that ecosystems are sustainable because they are living communities. So, community, sustainability, and ecology are inseparably connected.

This is taken up by western science in the new systemic theory, in the recognition that there is a basic pattern of life that is common to all living systems. That basic pattern is the network. There is a web of relationships among all the components of a living organism, just as there is a network of relationships among the plants, animals, and microorganisms in an ecosystem, or among people in a human community.

Systems theory is not needed for this understanding. Throughout the ages without developing a scientific framework in our sense of the term, Indigenous cultures have had an ancestral systemic understanding of nature and of their place in it — an understanding in terms of relationships, connectedness, and context —what some have called 'systemic wisdom.' They based their relationships on this knowledge, following a model of cooperation, partnership and networking that made the beginning of life possible three billion years ago.

The above concepts developed by Capra serve to establish a theoretical framework for the concept of “Community forest management” and to dissipate doubts that it originates from a romantic vision – that presently would not be “politically correct.”

The world has changed. Globalization has reached nearly all the corners of the planet to convert

nature into just another merchandise, forests have been invaded, altered and deteriorated – if not destroyed – and traditional cultures run the risk of being demolished. This cannot be ignored.

Many of us watch this process with alarm and put our efforts into identifying the causes of this state of things. Delving deeply into the underlying causes enables us to reflect on the path we must take to find a way out. We know that situations are diverse and all have their complexities, but it is also true that along the path with its many branches, a point is finally reached where a simple and dramatic option is faced: this way or the other, yes or no. We say this to explain positions that may sometimes seem Manichaean or simplistic.

Our point of reference is forest defence in the broad sense, with a political and social vision, integrated to the peoples who have belonged to the forests, who have depended on them. These peoples forged the diversity of their cultures around the forests, they achieved their livelihoods conserving them, and they hoisted up their identity and dignity. Now, still in a common destiny with the forests, they are persecuted, displaced, robbed.

It is now these communities that, in preparing strategies for forest conservation or restoration, can contribute with their traditional knowledge, their culture, their sustainable practices for the use of nature. WRM does no more than follow them, support them, and amplify their voices. We are not demanding that the communities continue living in the same way as their ancestors did – it is possible that some now no longer want to. There is no doubt that modern life has brought amenities to which an equitable access would be valid. But although we are conscious that at this point in many cases the proposals for community forest management will only be partial solutions to totally deteriorated situations, this does not prevent us from highlighting – and a theoretical framework is useful for this purpose – what we consider to be the ultimate causes of destruction, thus tracing a generic referent in the search for solutions.

It is not a question of goodies and baddies. Applying a systemic analysis makes it possible to analyze the relationships established by the actors in our planetary community. In this respect, at the root of the processes of forest and culture destruction, time and time again we have identified the artifices of globalization with all its ingredients: large-scale production, uniformisation, loss of diversity, market monopolization, capital accumulation, mega-projects, profit and commercialization invading all spheres of life, together with all the impacts we endeavour to denounce in our bulletins, publications and information material.

Likewise, the intention is not to dictate solutions (each case will search for its own) but to identify what we consider to be the ingredients of these solutions: the establishment of structural conditions to recreate the values of cooperation and partnership that enable communities to exist, redefining relationships between individuals in conformity with those values (this is where equity, inclusion and participation come in) and with the environment (which is equivalent to evicting commercialism from nature with its corollary of exploitation and degradation on the one hand, and to restoring cycles, exchanges, interrelationships and diversity, on the other).

This is what we are working on.