

Mike Gismondi 20/20 Research Blog

My thoughts on books, articles, ideas, related to my research passions, which social and ecological sustainability, critical sociology, democracy, public del

Wednesday, March 14, 2012

Athabasca River Basin Research Institute (ARBRI) - My View

For the last few years we have been collecting the [ARBRI bibliography](#), thousands of references to research conducted in the Athabasca River Basin, by thousands of researchers from many, many fields of the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. Important works, but works that will only be helpful going forward if we change our methodological and theoretical approach to a more holistic understanding of the river basin watershed as a dynamic complex ecological and social system.

This will require us to engage in a new kind of scholarship, a collaborative interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research program, with an emphasis upon synthesis and integration of the social and the ecological.

Such a future will not be without challenges. From within the university, one of the challenges we face, ironically, is something that we value as a strength, that is, the specialized research of disciplines themselves. Basarab Nicolescu, a physicist, tells us that as recently as the 1950s, there were 54 disciplines; yet by the year 2000 that number exploded to over 8000 (and no doubt even more today). As he says "over 8000 ways to look at reality."

The implications are clear that specialization, whatever its merits for careers, publishing, and data collection, brings with it a huge problem of communication across disciplines and among researchers, and frankly this causes fragmentation of our understanding of complexity. Fortunately there are some good examples, of clusters of researchers across the natural sciences and social sciences and the humanities, doing the kind of work that we need going forward. I am thinking of Elinor Ostrom and the many researchers inspired by her who are examining commons issues; or the groups at the [Stockholm Centre for Resilience](#) examining governance of social and ecological systems.

Resilience is an old [ecological concept](#). But it has emerged as a symbol for using multiple methods and interdisciplinary work to overcome the divides in "cultures" and methodological practices and helps us imagine ways to integrate a wide range of research into fuller understandings of governing complex social ecological systems.

Blog Archive

▼ [2012](#) (1)

▼ [March](#) (1)

[Athabasca River Basin Research Institute \(ARBRI\) -...](#)

Researcher Guy



Gismondi
Athabasca, Alberta,
Canada

Social Scientist

[View my complete profile](#)

In part, this also requires more thinking about how to integrate other ways of valuing nature, different ethical systems, different notions of justice, and different ideas about managing our intergenerational obligations to the future, as we discuss river basin research and governance.

Questions arising include: How to balance and integrate those sometimes competing values into Basin management design and decision-making in a transparent way: how to integrate the uses of our knowledge in public life in ways that are just and fair.

The good news is that river basin management is an international field, and we are not alone in grappling with complexity. No doubt some good examples have also come up in the other talks here today.

One special area that Athabasca University might contribute to in a unique way, and I am not even sure if they know it yet, is research into modeling. But here I am not simply meaning the modeling of ecosystems and user impacts, but more importantly, the modeling around complex decision-making concerning rules and governance about uses of the basin.

I am talking about how to integrate the data from field research and building outcome scenarios; the kind of scenario building that projects the future implications of our decisions.

This modeling, sometimes called agent based modeling, can be designed to help the public envisage, imagine and deliberate on alternative futures.

Despite the complexity of the computer modeling, some researchers have been talking about democratizing of modeling itself, that means exploiting the democratic opening made available by the Internet and user friendly web technologies, to allow citizens to use and contribute to the models.

My dream for ARBRI is a place where people can come in person or via the web to facilitate that democratic process of the co-construction of a research agenda, to construct collaborative visions of possible alternative futures, in order to assist public deliberation and decision-making into our future prospects and that of the Athabasca River Basin.

Works Cited

Basarab Nicolescu. "Transdisciplinarity: Basarab Nicolescu Talks with Russ Volckmann." 2007. http://basarab.nicolescu.perso.sfr.fr/Basarab/Docs_articles/VolckmannReview2007.pdf

Amy Poteete, Marco Jansen, Elinor Ostrom, *Working Together: Collective Action, the Commons and Multiple Methods in Practice*. 2010.

The Stockholm Resilience Centre
<http://www.stockholmresilience.org/>

Posted by Gismondi at 12:30 PM 1 comments

Recommend this on Google

Labels: <http://www.blogger.com/img/blank.gif>

Home

Subscribe to: [Posts \(Atom\)](#)

Watermark template. Powered by Blogger.