

Making sense of new terms

The Alberta government recently convened a multi-day conference where it promoted its new “strategic systems” approach to environmental management generally and especially in the context of implementing Alberta’s much-touted “Water for Life” strategy (see references below). Do these terms have any real meaning? Or, as some of the conference attendees speculated, is this Orwellian doublespeak intended to mask a lack of government commitment to tackling today’s pressing environmental problems? While the terms are broad enough to provide disturbing wiggle room, my reading of them gives some cause for hope.

At a basic level, Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines a “system” as a “regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole”. It likewise defines “strategy” as a “careful plan or method” for achieving a goal. As applied in the environmental management arena, these definitions suggest that a “strategic system” involves the integration of decision-making by all regulators, land and resource managers, and other government agencies whose decisions have direct and indirect implications for the number and kinds of activities that occur on a given land base. It means breaking down decision-making silos and developing holistic frameworks for addressing the cumulative effects of multiple activities on a given land base for purposes of meeting a clear, quantifiable objective for that land base.

This view of “strategic systems” makes considerable sense in theory, but there is no clear or easy answer to the question of how it should be implemented in practice. At the conference, government speakers addressed this question, in part, by emphasizing “place-based” decision-making as a key component of the new “strategic systems” approach, again, especially in the context of implementing the “Water for Life” strategy. As the speakers explained, the *place* in “place-based decision-making” is defined more by biophysical than political boundaries. In the water management context, the place is a watershed ecosystem or river basin. (The latter is simply a larger scale version of the former — both concepts represent the land area drained by a given water body.) Place-based decision-making is defined, not only by the geographic boundary, but by the decision-makers — the



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people who live and work in the given place play an active role in designing and implementing place-wide plans that provide a context for government decision-making.

Place-based decision-making holds promise for achieving environmental sustainability but, if inappropriately designed or applied, this strategic systems component can hinder rather than promote progress toward sustainability. Design problems can be found in the composition and funding of local decision-making bodies. But perhaps more importantly, there is a danger that the provincial government will download too much of its own decision-making responsibilities to place-based, local decision-making bodies.

What’s wrong with downloading? After all, isn’t it fair that the people most closely connected to a place should be able to decide its fate? While attractive at first blush, this fairness claim fails to account for the often numerous non-local *interests* in a local area. In other words, an area that is local in some respects is really part of or integrally connected to a broader area (or system) in other respects. For example, many local areas support species that migrate across broad regions. But even non-migratory species in an area contribute to regional and global biological diversity that is of tremendous value to people outside of the area. In fact, many people refer to biodiversity as a globally life-sustaining force.

Given the regional, national, and arguably even global values of species, the people who live in a local area should not be able to unilaterally decide the fate of species occurring in that area. Or, in somewhat more practical terms, locals should not be able to unilaterally approve and manage various human activities that individually or cumulatively threaten locally occurring species. Because of these extra-local values or characteristics, the Alberta government should forego downloading responsibility for deciding the acceptable level of risks to species and other resources of regional or provincial significance. (Of course, by this same logic, Alberta itself should not be able to make unilateral decisions about risks to Alberta-based species and ecosystems that have national or global significance. See Michael M. Wenig, “Federal Policy and Alberta’s Oil and Gas: The Challenge of Biodiversity Conservation,” in G. Bruce Doern, ed., *How Ottawa Spends 2004-2005* (McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press; Montreal, 2004); see also Michael M. Wenig

and Nigel Bankes, “Who Should Decide?” *LawNow* 27:4, February/March 2003.

Yet, the tone of most of the conference speakers’ discussions about place-based decision-making implied that the province was not insisting on retaining this backstopping role to protect provincially significant environmental values. This attitude is reflected in the specific context of water management. In that context, the province has empowered (although arguably not adequately funded) local watershed councils to adopt “water conservation objectives” that essentially establish desired levels of river flows for water management purposes. However, the province has not provided a bottom line — i.e., a minimum level of aquatic ecosystem health — for purposes of setting desired river flows in water conservation objectives.

The *Water Act* provides somewhat of a bottom line, by defining water conservation objectives as the amount and quality of water “necessary” for fish and wildlife management, or for protecting a “natural water body or its aquatic environment” or certain water-based human uses (tourism, recreation, transportation, and waste assimilation). While this definition is hardly an unequivocal environmental bottom line (and the Act does not even require the adoption of water conservation objectives for every river or river segment), the province has watered down even this weak-kneed legislative backstop by allowing local watershed councils to adopt in-stream water quantity-based conservation objectives that accommodate activities that withdraw water. In other words, the province is allowing local watershed councils to choose desired river flows that are below those “necessary” for protecting aquatic environments.

To be fair, the province has not completely delegated this objective-setting function to local watershed councils. The government must approve local councils’ water conservation objectives before they have legal effect. While the province may show its mettle through this plenary review function, its failure to provide any up front provincial bottom lines suggests that the province is unlikely to define and enforce those bottom lines at the back end of the objective-setting process.

The value of place-based decision-making is in defining the local-component of socio-economic and environmental objectives for a place, provided these objectives also reflect non-local values that are defined at a provincial or higher level. Local decision-makers are also well suited to developing and implementing tools for achieving those objectives. If the province empowers watershed councils and other place-based bodies to fulfil these roles, while ensuring that relevant objectives appropriately reflect non-local values in biodiversity and other resources, it will make useful headway in implementing its “strategic systems” vision and in achieving environmental sustainability.

References

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