

BACKYARD ANTHROPOLOGY AND COMMUNITY-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION: LESSONS FROM THE SFAA ENVIRONMENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY PROJECT

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This issue of *Practicing Anthropology* communicates some lessons emerging from a unique praxis project that attempted to strengthen the meaning and presence of environmental anthropology in U.S. communities. We include articles authored by some of the SfAA Environmental Anthropology Project interns and fellows. David Driscoll's work in South Florida on The Brownfields/Eastward Ho! Project involved developing and testing a participatory approach to environmental risk and brownfields redevelopment planning in an urban neighborhood, and advising public officials on methodologies for profiling and assessing the range of communities affected by brownfields issues. Johnelle Lamarque's internship with Philadelphia residents and property owners involved documenting their awareness of lead hazards and assessing the efficacy of existing lead hazards outreach. Her work demonstrates how cultural values are embedded in outreach materials, suggesting that environmental health information may be communicated in ways that discourage behavioral change. John Stone's fellowship involved demonstrating the utility of Risk Perception Mapping (RPM) to planning staff at the Great Lakes Commission by developing case study data in ways that demonstrated RPM methodology and planning process contributions. Aaron Scrol's fellowship with the Lower Elwha Tribe supported tribal efforts to define and shape political mechanisms that protect the reservation community water system. And, Kreg Ettenger worked with the Haudensaunee Environmental



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Task Force and the Tuscarora Nation Nations to support efforts to produce culturally relevant information about source water threats and protection needs.

This sampling of Environmental Anthropology Project technical assistance work is complemented by a series of articles representing broader efforts to assert and strengthen the role of anthropology in environmental protection efforts. Theresa Trainor's documents efforts to apply anthropology within the Environmental Protection Agency. Lenora Bohren's describes how anthropology was included in an air quality education outreach program developed by an interdisciplinary applied research institute. Michael Paolisso and Shawn Maloney strengthened links between university and environmental policy communities, as illustrated by activities and outcomes of the University of Maryland's Anthropology of *Pfiesteria* project.

These varied efforts to build a "backyard" environmental anthropology

are contextualized by the comments and observations of John Young in his endnote essay and, by my overview essay below.

Backyard Anthropology

The Environmental Anthropology Project (EAP) was created in 1996 as the means to implement a Cooperative Agreement between the Society for Applied Anthropology and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. I served as one of the Cooperative Agreement co-authors and the Director of the EAP from 1996-2000. In December 2000, Robert Winthrop took over as EAP Director, while I completed a project-wide evaluation of EAP activities.

The Environmental Anthropology Project was consciously shaped to encourage a "backyard" anthropology—stimulating interest and creating opportunities to assert anthropological methods and engagement in community-based environmental protection

efforts. This “backyard anthropology” approach was a reflection of the rapidly growing interest in a problem-focused, public service-oriented environmental anthropology (as outlined in “Human Rights and the Environment: Anthropological Discourse, Policy and Praxis” *Practicing Anthropology*, 16 [1]1994; and, “Towards an Environmental Anthropology” *Practicing Anthropology* 16[4] 1995). The “backyard anthropology” approach also reflected a keen awareness of the need for disciplinary support mechanisms that strengthen our ability to act effectively in the communities we call home (see “Notes and Reflections on Life in the Margins” in *Practicing Anthropology* 17[1-2]: 46-48, 1995).

Initial efforts to structure the SfAA Environmental Anthropology Project were funded through a \$25,000 start up grant from EPA. One of my first activities as Project Director was to identify anthropologists working in environmental social science fields, and assess practitioner strengths and needs. In the fall of 1996, I compiled network mailing lists and reviewed practitioner and membership directories, conference abstracts, and professional publications to identify 746 currently active anthropologists who were members of the SfAA and/or American Anthropological Association with interests and expertise in environmental issues. In followup interviews with anthropologists working on environmental issues, it became clear that the largest segment of the environment anthropology work force, involved those working on community-based, national and international environmental quality and social justice issues with local institutions, grassroots and nongovernmental organizations. In interviews, colleagues described problem-focused, action-oriented, public service anthropology conducted in hometown or longterm fieldwork communities. Anthropological engagement occurred in the role of advisor, consultant, participant, organizer, or supporter who typically provided assistance to community groups and organizations involved in planning and problem solving activities. Typically,

they operated as the only anthropologists or even scientists and they frequently became involved for personal reasons. This work often took place in a temporary or unpaid capacity. Many of those interviewed did not necessarily define these engagements as “anthropological work.” In short, while anthropologists were working in great numbers on community-based environmental problems, their work was not necessarily recognized by the discipline or the actors involved as “anthropology.” And, such work rarely was a means to making a living

These observations significantly influenced the shape of the Environmental Anthropology project and its goal of stimulating disciplinary interest and employment opportunities in “backyard anthropology” —work that involves the application of anthropological skills and knowledge to problems and needs in the towns and communities we call home. The initial review suggested distinct roles that a professional membership organization might play. The SfAA could encourage community-based employment opportunities. The SfAA could develop practices that strengthen employability skills. And, the SfAA could facilitate the communication of environmental anthropology concerns, opportunities, and applied research methods, findings and outcomes.

Technical Assistance Partnerships

In early 1997, I developed EAP goals, objectives, priorities, and procedures with the assistance of an Environmental Anthropology Advisory Committee that included Bonnie McCay, Miki Crespi, Ed Liebow, Miguel Vasquez, then SfAA President Jay Schensul, and incoming President John Young. We collaborated with EPA Project Officer Theresa Trainor to identify specific activities and develop grant proposals that might expand the social relevance of anthropology in environmental policy and problem solving settings, and strengthen the presence and efficacy of anthropological work in the environmental labor market.

Developing activities of equal interest to the EPA and the SfAA required establishing a unique, collaborative partnership that sharply contrasted with other disciplinary/agency relationships. Funded activities were not the product of client/consultant relationships—where ultimate power and authority in defining the problems, approaches, and intended outcome rests in the contracting agency hands. Nor, were funded activities the product of federal research awards—where questions, methods, and outcomes are defined and shaped by the scholars who produce scientific knowledge for the benefit, first and foremost, of the scientific community. Rather, Environmental Anthropology Project activities were consciously framed as “technical assistance” efforts identified, shaped, and implemented through partnership negotiations. Framing anthropological engagement as technical assistance created an emphasis on problem-focused applied work, with scientific tools and techniques used to address specific public interest needs and produce concrete outcomes. “Partnerships” not only involved the SfAA and interests of the discipline; the EPA and the interests of a federal regulatory agency, but, also, the interests and concerns of towns, communities and tribes in the United States; and, the many agencies and civic organizations involved in environmental protection efforts. Thus, all activities funded under the SfAA/EPA Cooperative Agreement reflected the environmental protection mission of the agency, the ethical concerns of the discipline, and the issue specific interests of the SfAA membership. They were products of a grants development and project management process that was both collaborative and transparent, and they supported participatory public service projects with agencies, organizations, tribes and civic groups involved in environmental protection efforts.

Environmental Anthropology Project Activities and Outcomes

Between 1996 and 2000, the SfAA Environmental Anthropology Project

was awarded eighteen grants through the SfAA/EPA Cooperative Agreement, providing over \$500,000 to support a student internship program, a post-graduate (MA or PhD) fellowship program, a small grant program providing technical assistance to communities, and a series of workshops, seminars, conference presentations, and project publications. The EAP placed more than thirty interns, fellows, and consultants in environmental policy and community based technical assistance projects in California, North Carolina, Vermont, New York, Tennessee, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon, Oklahoma, Ohio, Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania. These anthropologists provided technical expertise to groups involved in watershed planning and restoration, source water protection, farming practices, environmental equity and state of the environment assessments, sustainable development planning, and lead exposure and environmental risk outreach. They played key roles in efforts to assert social science in Everglades restoration, build public participation in environmental planning and remediation projects, and support American Indian efforts to develop culturally appropriate environmental protection policies and programs.

While some projects represented long-term efforts to assist community based environmental planning and problem solving processes, with technical assistance undertaken by applied consultants or fellows engaged in long-term research, the majority of projects were short-term internships or fellowships. Interns were undergraduate or graduate students with training in applied anthropology and an interest in or experience with environmental issues and culturally diverse settings. Internship proposals were developed in response to need statements supplied by communities, organizations, or the EPA. Applications were reviewed by the SfAA, and the SfAA Project Director worked with the EPA to place interns in appropriate settings (where they live, or

communities where they have experience and interest in working). Each internship took place over three month periods, and was supervised by an academic advisor, the SfAA Project Director, and an EPA or community based host. Fellows were applied anthropologists (with an MA or PhD) who typically worked on self defined projects reviewed and approved by the SfAA and agreed to by the EPA host. Projects were structured in collaborative fashion with activities and outcome identified by the anthropologist and the host community, organization or agency. Fellowships were supervised by an SfAA mentor, an EPA sponsor, and a community host. Fellowships generally ran for a three to six month period, with time frames tied to the level of part-time or full-time involvement.

All projects incorporated a number of reporting requirements, with interns, fellows and consultants producing a revised work plan once their project was underway, developing and distributing periodic updates for project sponsors and community hosts, and drafting a final report that was reviewed and revised with comment from SfAA, EPA, and community-based partners. Many participants gave community based public presentations on their work. Some presented their work at regional, national, and international environmental conferences. Final reports were also published on the SfAA Environmental Anthropology Project website, and a number of participants subsequently developed articles for publication in applied anthropology and interdisciplinary environmental journals.

In addition to project-specific reporting, the Environmental Anthropology Project created a conference travel grant fund. All project participants were eligible to apply for a \$500 travel grant to present a paper based on their technical assistance work at the SfAA (or other professional organization) annual meetings. Between 1997 and 2000, the SfAA awarded 27 conference travel grants to student interns and professional practitioners to present their work at professional

conferences. This post-project reporting opportunity encouraged the analysis and synthesis of applied work, and as a result, produced more sophisticated articulations of project findings and outcomes, and communicated this work to broader social science audiences.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

In developing, managing, and evaluating this project, a number of important outcomes and lessons emerged. One of the strongest disciplinary lessons confirmed the critical need for apprenticeship opportunities in applied anthropology. Interpersonal and political dynamics, technical challenges, and problem solving methods cannot be adequately understood simply through classroom experience. Opportunities to employ methods and techniques in practical, problem solving settings are essential. Environmental internships are especially important because, in contrast with other applied fields such as health and education, environmental social science is emerging and the methods, organizational approaches, and institutional relationships are still evolving. Environmental anthropology provides students the opportunity to work in their own backyard. And, as one intern noted in her post-project evaluation, this type of community-based work may well become the primary employment option for students in the future. This was because of the geographic scope of the project; the inclusiveness, vastness, and diversity of populations involved; the relative lack of formal agencies or institutions dedicated to addressing these problems; the emphasis on non institutional or grassroots action and issues; and, the political nature of many environmental issues.

The SfAA Environmental Anthropology Project supported a nationwide environmental anthropology internship program in 1997 and 1998, and project specific internships in 1999 and 2000. The SfAA sponsored fourteen internship projects, and received well over 300 inquiries from students interested in internship opportunities. Evaluation of internship work and outcomes found

that nine of the fourteen internship project achieved all of their technical assistance goals, and all internships achieved educational goals. Post-project evaluation comments offered by interns, project hosts, and project mentors suggest that the central elements of a successful internship include:

- Prior training, understanding, and experience with environmental issues, community characteristics and dynamics, and applied social science methods and techniques.
- Access to information and advice from applied social science mentors and agency or organization-based environmental mentors before and during the internship period.
- Internship goals and anticipated outcomes of mutual interest and benefit to the intern and project hosts.
- Internship projects should be structured with activities and expectations that meet both the educational and employment training needs of the intern, as well as the project specific technical needs of sponsoring agencies or organizational hosts.
- Scope of the work negotiated by the interns, their academic advisors, and the internship sponsors before the start of the internship identifying internship goals, responsibilities, activities, timelines, reporting requirements and anticipated outcomes. The scope of work should reflect ethical concerns and human subject requirements, and demonstrate project feasibility within a given timeframe, with reference to economic support or constraints, and with reference to academic course credit or program requirements.
- Strong supervision by place-based internship sponsors and academic advisors, and a flexible approach to internship work plan and outcomes. Adjustments to original scope of work should be incorporated as conditions change or new informa-

tion or needs become apparent, with work plan changes clearly articulated and agreed to by the interns, their project supervisors, and their academic mentors.

- Systematic efforts to document and interpret internship activities. Keeping a journal with a daily record of activities, notes from formal and informal interviews, and related observations and thoughts provides the means to write internship project reports, subsequent papers or presentation materials, and forms the basis of future research opportunities.

A second significant set of lessons emerging from Environmental Anthropology Project is the successful demonstration of strategies that a professional organization can employ to improve membership employment opportunities and employability skills. Framing anthropological engagement as SfAA-sponsored technical assistance proved to be a significant factor in strengthening anthropological presence in the environmental labor market. Technical assistance projects provided anthropologists with the opportunity to refine and employ technical skills; understand and develop a formal role in policy formation; expand their network of environmental contacts; and, demonstrate the unique contributions of disciplinary methods and techniques in environmental planning and problem solving processes. In many cases, project participants noted that their status and credibility in the ecopolitical community was significantly enhanced after assuming the "SfAA Environmental Anthropology Fellow" title, negotiating collaborative and cooperative project goals, and performing technical assistance duties. All seventeen fellows and consultants participating in this program reported improved technical skills and expanded professional networks as a result of their fellowship experience. Twelve fellows and consultants, and seven interns, reported that their technical assistance experience directly contributed to subsequent professional employment opportunities.

A third major contribution of the Environmental Anthropology Project is the identification of the "anthropological difference" that particular methods and techniques unique to the discipline bring to environmental planning and problem-solving processes. A number of environmental anthropologists developed and demonstrated the usefulness of sociocultural databases—mapping not only the political actors involved in a given issue, but the broader social and cultural strata that make up "the community" in a given place. Ethnographic analysis of ecopolitical networks—identifying the various people, groups, and organizations involved in environmental quality and social justice issues, conducting interviews, and developing materials in ways that illustrate the complexity of community involvement, interests, and needs—produced tools currently being used by public agencies and community based groups to refine interactions, plans, and agendas. This information is proving to be especially helpful in efforts to remediate environmental hazards in socially sustainable ways. Inserting an awareness of the sociocultural groups, their values, behavior, interests, and needs in the earliest stages of a problem-solving process allows plans to be developed in more appropriate ways. Planning proposals more closely match community need.

A number of environmental anthropology project participants documented cultural values, beliefs, and relationships to various places (e.g., wetlands, watersheds, and forests). Archival research, intensive interviews with key informants, surveys, and other techniques were used to identify and articulate cultural values. In some cases, anthropologists involved in ethnographic fieldwork were able to spark interest in civic participation. In other cases, key informants became active participants in public hearings and other ecopolitical processes. In making a concerted effort to elicit and report community values, behavior, concerns, and priorities, anthropologists asserted community perspectives in ecopolitical processes where problems were defined,

options identified, and response strategies prioritized.

One of the major roles of the anthropologist in these projects has been to analyze the institutional strengths and weaknesses of organizations and coalitions involved in the projects, assess their ability to interact and achieve project goals, and develop and implement strategies that increase functional capacity. Thus, anthropologists have acted as project leaders, served as mentors to volunteers and staff, organized and managed efforts to expand the volunteer base, developed grant applications and assisted program fund development efforts, organized issue-based professional networks, and facilitated communication and decision making processes in a myriad of ways. One positive outcome has been the organization and facilitation of coalition-building processes. The holistic perspective and ethnographic skills of anthropology facilitated efforts to "see the big picture," communicate, and implement measures that improved organizational capacity.

All project participants reported significant actions as "culture brokers" — and overall this appears to be the most common role played by anthropologists in their technical assistance projects. Anthropologists helped to sort out misinterpretations of behavior and action, facilitated discussions that broke down ethnocentric barriers, and occasionally acted as ombudsmen who listened to complaints, mediated conflicts, and supported efforts to come to compromise and build consensus.

Assessing the Efficacy of Technical Assistance Projects

Environmental Anthropology technical assistance projects typically supported ecopolitical processes of one sort or another. While anthropologists played key roles in assessing institutional and organizational weaknesses and facilitating remedial actions, capacity building, in itself, was not a highly prioritized outcome. Evaluation reports and interviews with various project sponsors suggest that "success"

in a technical assistance project—from a funders point of view—was not so much measured on the nature and relative importance of day-to-day activities, but on the concrete evidence of human environmental impact when all was said and done. Reports and interviews with participants and their project-specific hosts typically presented a different perception of "success"—one that was measured in processual terms, gauging contributions as it influenced a planning or problem solving process, rather than generated a specific outcome.

If my office files and bookshelves are any indication, the environmental anthropologists involved in this project proved quite adept at documenting their project-specific assessments, technical contributions, critical insights, and recommendations. Evaluating this project required sifting through the accumulated record for 31 different technical assistance projects, conducting followup interviews with participants, mentors, community-based hosts, and project sponsors. Keeping in mind the varied meaning of "success," I reviewed the memos, reports, publications, and conference presentation papers to find that post-project deliverables were often written with an SfAA target audience in mind, and while they contained interesting insights and documented efforts that may have enhanced protection processes, anthropologists rarely communicated project success in language used by environmental professionals. In a number of cases, reports produced minimal or inconsequential results because authors did not clearly illustrate their successes by providing evidence of improved environmental conditions or protection processes. Overall, technical assistance work clearly succeeded in efforts to assess and improving ecopolitical processes, yet anthropologists had great difficulty demonstrating in concrete terms to project sponsors how their actions produced significant improvement in environment.

To conclude, the SfAA Environmental Anthropology technical assistance projects addressed questions and

concerns that reflected social science and national environmental protection policy agendas, as well as the specific, tangible needs of locally situated groups, organizations and entities struggling to address environmental problems. Framing anthropological engagement as technical assistance created an emphasis on problem-focused applied work, with scientific tools and techniques used to address public interest needs and produce concrete outcomes. Sponsoring this work through a professional organization/public agency agreement increased independent scholar access to federal funds, created "fellowship" opportunities for practitioners with an applied MA degree, increased community access to anthropological expertise, stimulated broader interest in anthropology as significant force in environmental protection efforts, and forged working relationships based on principles of collaborative public service partnership. I believe these are important developments in the evolution of our discipline. It is my hope that the SfAA, and other professional organizations, will continue to develop and support similar mechanisms that strengthen and stimulate the opportunity to work as anthropologists in our own backyard.

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