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Telling good stories: engaging in dialogue with communities about flood and coastal erosion risk management in a post-modern society

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TELLING GOOD STORIES: ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE WITH COMMUNITIES ABOUT FLOOD AND COASTAL EROSION RISK MANAGEMENT IN A POST-MODERN SOCIETY

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Key words: community, storytelling, dialogue

Abstract

This paper suggests that new approaches are required to communicate with communities affected by flooding and coastal erosion. In post-modern society, communities question the validity of the message. They have expectations of the medium of the message. They receive the message through the frameworks of their multiple stories and identities. The personal narratives and experiences within a local community seek recognition and voice alongside the official statements and claims of the engineering and scientific community. Objectivity and reliability are challenged.

The authority of the formal written word, communicating at a cognitive and rational level, takes its place alongside new oral and visual traditions. Technology allows individual stories to reach a wider and more immediate audience. A single, general story is replaced by a multiplicity of particular stories from local communities and individuals. NGOs have followed the media in becoming adept at using all these aspects of communication.

Effective approaches to communication acknowledge the different cultures of the professional and citizen communities (e.g. residential, fishing farming sailing) involved in interacting with FCERM. The paper will examine the way in which stories and storytelling can be used as a bridge between different cultures, creating communities of practice in which knowledge may be shared and sense made of common problems. It suggests some devices which can be used in effective storytelling to help us put our own messages across. Drawing on recent experiences (for example during recent major disasters such as Boscastle), the paper also explains how stories can work for us as we uncover the information buried in the stories of others.

Story telling may also be important in establishing shared fields of experience with communities. This needs to be in the context of effective dialogue that seeks to hear and understand what each community is trying to communicate, based on mutual respect or humility. This humility recognises the value of both the practical knowledge, lodged in the experiences and stories within communities, and the analysis and judgement of professionals as they reflect on and contextualise that experience for future decision making.

Introduction

Much has been spoken, written and attempted in recent years within the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) professional community in the area stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder engagement or "citizen participation" is now

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recognised at the European Level for example in the Aarhus Convention (UNECE, 1998) and in the guidance for the Water Framework Directive (European Communities, 2003). It is part of declared national policy, for example as part of the Sustainable Development Strategy (HM Government, 2005), and forms some of the streams of thinking being developed within Defra's Making Space for Water strategy. At a strategic level the approach is now firmly part of the process for developing Shoreline Management Plans (Defra, 2006) and Catchment Flood Management Plans, as well as BAPS, CHAMPS etc. At a local level, no authority promoting a scheme would proceed with that without consulting with local communities, whether or not formally required by the policy or statute associated with the planning and/or environmental assessment processes.

However, as a professional community, engaging with the public communities may be viewed (with something of a 'siege mentality') just as a means of delivering our vision of FCERM. The opportunity to help communities simultaneously to achieve their vision and objectives may thereby be lost. We have the feeling that we have the "real" understanding of what is required to achieve flood risk management in the context of an understanding and respect for natural processes and environments. We do not want to ride roughshod over communities' desires, feelings and aspirations, but if difficult decisions have to be taken, then so be it. It is thus commendable that, after many years of not being able to address the associated

social justice issues, Defra is now starting to tackle these head-on within Making Space for Water.

To engage effectively in two-way conversation with local communities, there has to be a level of *participation* reached which exceeds that of conventional "consultation". Finger-Stich & Finger (2003) define participation as:

> "*the voluntary involvement of people who individually or through organised groups deliberate about their respective knowledge, interests and values while collaboratively defining issues, developing solutions, and taking or influencing decisions*."

Sherry Arnstein (1969), a researcher in town planning from the USA, is generally seen as the first to have developed the concept of a ladder of citizen participation (see Figure 1), a concept which is receiving a lot more practical attention and further development in recent years (Carr, 2002; Alflatt, 2005). This attention is exemplified by Bush *et al* (2005) in their paper presented to CIWEM on the preparation of the "right to roam" maps of England for the Countryside Agency.

Participation should ideally be more than symbolic, but the "top" of the ladder of citizen participation is not necessarily the best place to be, as it may imply (Figure 2) a degree of abrogation of responsibility by government.

8	Citizen control (or self-governance)	Degrees of citizen power (or participation)
7	Delegated power	
6	Partnership (or co-operation)	
5	Placation	Degrees of tokenism (or symbolic participation)
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Levels of non-participation "contrived to substitute for genuine participation"
1	Manipulation	

Figure 1   Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (after Arnstein, 1969)

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4	Governments abrogate responsibility	Individuals encouraged to DIY
3	Governments devolve responsibility	Community takes major responsibility
2	Governments take reduced responsibility	Significant community involvement
1	Governments take major responsibility	Minimal community involvement

Figure 2   Levels of community and government involvement in environmental management (after Carr, 2002) – sequence reversed to match Arnstein.

Understanding and communicating in post-modern culture

To achieve the ideal levels of participation involving a genuine partnership between FCERM professionals and local communities, it is essential that we understand the scepticism towards professionalism that pervades the society in which we now live. There is a new attitude towards knowledge in our post-modern era, which reflects economic, technological and cultural change. Uncertainty and incredulity characterise this era (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997). The assertions of the validity of the professional and scientific community are no longer taken at face value or indeed considered to be valid at all. 'Trust me, I'm a doctor,' is no longer a message which will be accepted in the way it was in the middle of the last century. The 'doctor's' message may only be taken to be valid if it can be seen to have 'worked' in the situation of other individuals.

Zygmunt Bauman (1992, p. ix, x) said that "the post modern mind seems to condemn everything, propose nothing." Usher, Bryant and Johnston suggest that postmodernism "enables a questioning of the scientific attitude and scientific method…. and of the stance of objectivity and value-neutrality in the making of knowledge claims" (1997, p. 7). They indicate that as different sources and types of knowledge are valued, the discipline based, specialist knowledge, located in academic and professional bodies, texts and discourses are devalued. Gabriel reinforces this point, saying that: "When the knowledge of experts is routinely devalued and … facts become infinitely accommodating of diverse interpretations… we are left with knowledge and truth from authentic personal experience and the different voices that it takes" (2005, p. 67).

As a result, story has re-emerged in the West as a vital way of knowing after having been eclipsed since the rise of the 'modern' scientific method in the seventeenth century (Bradt ,1997 as cited in Quicke, 2003) The power of individuals' stories has increased as what were once regarded as truths have become accepted as only claims. The "grand narratives" of modernism (i.e. what would previously have been viewed as scientific or official facts) have ceased to be "true accounts" and become "interesting stories" (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p. 6). Thus the concept of multiple stories is now taking hold.

Another dimension of this change has been identified by Walter Ong (1982). Ong has identified three eras in the known history of communication: primary orality, print and writing and secondary orality. In the period before writing, stories played a significant role in transmitting ideas and culture, news and history. Even before printing was invented the majority of the population relied on oral/aural communication and thinking (Ong, cited in Quicke, 2003). In the era of writing and print different texts were used for different purposes of communication and for different audiences. Some acquired a higher status and value, such as conceptual and analytical writing and thinking. In the second (post-modern) era of orality in which we now live and triggered by the electronic age, stories, images, experiences and participation have again acquired value and co-exist alongside abstract and conceptual thinking and writing.

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The significance of 'story' and how and where it operates

We see the significance of personal story reinforced by multi-media images frequently on the television. The cult of the personality in TV shows and the significance of the individual story on the News are given a weight that they never had before. And such stories can bring significant political pressure to bear. A topical example is the women who have succeeded by pressurising via the media to persuade government and health trusts to make the apparently effective but also highly expensive Herceptin drug available to treat their breast cancer. In that debate, the relative merits of their case did not seem to be publicly weighed against the many other demands on the health service; instead their story and their perspective on the issue reigned supreme. Individual experience and perspective on issues often seems to form the hub of such stories (Boxes 1 and 2)

Box 1: Recent story about coastal erosion

Beneath the cheery veneer of beach huts and holiday makers, Southwold is home to a modern-day King Canute and the story of one man's personal battle with the sea. Unlike the famous misguided king, retired engineer Peter Boggis is taking things rather more into his own hands.
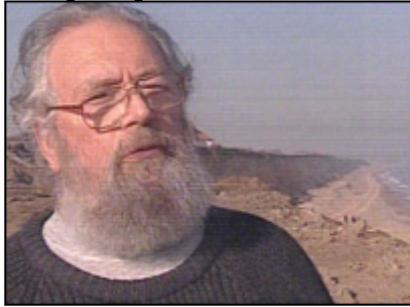
Text from BBC website on "Coast" programme

Over the past two years, he's almost singlehandedly been building his own sea defences to prevent his and neighbouring homes from falling into the sea. The defences are now 500 metres long and incorporate 100,000 tonnes of soil.

Individual and particular stories are now woven together to create the whole, general picture of events. Generality may come from abstractions but it can also be built inductively through particular cases, examples, stories and events (Seeley Brown *et al*., 2005). In these multiple stories different perspectives are seen. Each has its own pattern of storytelling, its different examples presented to provide evidence and reinforcement of the message. The storytellers narrate their tales from their points of view, in their own language. Their stories will be permeated with their personal, professional and cultural values. Each story is constructed, its different elements reflecting what the storyteller has identified to be significant.

The importance of stories and storytelling is being recognised in different fields of work and for different purposes. English Nature is using stories to encourage participation with local communities and for community building with stakeholders (Donaldson, 2003 and 2005). Gabriel (2004) and Weick (1995) explore the power of stories in sense making. Revill and Seymour (2000) explore the use of narrative in research, in particular in relation to a research project examining issues of dairy farm pollution in Devon. Knowledge management is another area where stories and storytelling are making an impact. Orr's research (1990, 1996, cited in Linde, 2001) with copier repair technicians shows that narrative plays an important part in their working lives. It is through sharing stories

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about problems they have encountered and solutions they have tried that the knowledge of the whole community of repair technicians is increased. A secure system for sharing their stories enabled that knowledge to spread throughout the company worldwide. English Nature have identified that stories are an effective way to learn from local knowledge (Donaldson, 2003). Research by Mosia and Ngulube (2005, p. 175) into "Managing the collective intelligence of local communities for the sustainable utilisation of estuaries in the Eastern cape, South Africa" revealed that storytelling was a way to facilitate the sharing of knowledge.

The power of stories lies partly in their use in everyday life. Gabriel highlights this by describing storytelling as "an endemic feature of human sociality" (2000, p. 242). Stories have been used over time to pass on news, give instructions, explain mysteries, pass on core values to succeeding generations, create a sense of identity and community, entertain and make sense of what has happened and may still happen. Stories do this (Reville & Seymour, 2000) by reproducing the narrative flow of everyday life, emphasising the spatiality of knowledge and can help explicate the relationship between power and knowledge.

Use of story

Stories as part of knowledge management

These examples exemplify the role of stories in knowledge management. Denning (2006) suggests that there are two dimensions in knowledge management, connecting and collecting. Connecting involves bringing people into contact who have knowledge and need knowledge. Orr's research shows that technicians do not solve problems by consulting manuals but by using their experience from previous repairs and the experiences of colleagues. As these experiences are shared the practical knowledge of the community grows.

Practical knowledge has not always been valued in society either because it is not written down or because the nature of the writing, for example informal and non-technical, does not give the knowledge status. Unofficial stories have not been equated with official records and the people who know those stories may not recognise the need to share them. However, for us as a flood risk management community, stories, particularly of historic extreme and therefore rarely occurring events, are an important way of helping people to remember why we are doing what we are doing (see Box 2). We need to more formally recognise the value of using stories to enrich, in a two-way communication process, our understanding of events and the public perception of them. Ways of connecting people outside of formal structures may create opportunities for such stories to be told. Seeley Brown et al. (2005) comment on the places where storytelling happens, often in what they call "thresholds" (p. 78). These may be in doorways, in hallways, in social areas, in places where people gather from different parts of an organisation. This leads to communication across working networks. Organisations have two parts, the formal processes, structures and relationships and the social networks and activities. Work happens in both (Seeley Brown et al., 2005). Stories and exchanges of ideas about problems and solutions may be exchanged in the social areas because they are outside the formal structures and neutral ground. The knowledge exchanged may be practical knowledge, knowing how, that is based in action and practice. This knowledge can be tacit, not recorded and shared in formal documents and made explicit when triggered and remembered by the exchange.

Collecting requires organisations to store that knowledge and enable others to access it. This may not be as straightforward as it sounds. It implies that knowledge is a commodity which can be passed from one person to another. When people and communities are connected each will need to understand and make sense of the others' stories. Acts of interpretation or sensemaking will be required as we discuss below. These processes construct and create, rather than pass on knowledge. Building trust at the connecting stage will be essential for this to happen.

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Box 2: Story from the 1953 floods

Horror of the floods undimmed	

Violet and the house where she saved her children

Dick Meadows
BBC features producer | **The 1953 floods devastated many communities dotted around the East Anglian coast. A handful of survivors recall their struggle to survive**

Few communities suffered more grievously than Felixstowe in Suffolk when the seas engulfed the East Coast on the night of 31 January 1953.
Thirty-eight people died in one small area when their wooden prefabricated homes in the West End area were swamped.
As with most of the communities swallowed by the sea that night, there had been no warning … |

… Fred and Lucy have never forgotten the terror of that night.
Naked clamber
They watched helplessly as neighbours were swept to their deaths in the raging waters.
Not far away Violet Sparrow was battling to save the lives of her three children as the waters swept into their home close by the Gas Works.
She had been awoken as the furniture below began bumping the ceiling as the waters poured in.
Daughter Margaret Learmouth has never forgotten her mother's courage.
"Mum saved all our lives. She was calm, never let on to us children how scared she must have been."
After smashing a hole in the wall to allow their terrified neighbours to join them, Violet somehow got them all up into the loft.
She remembers with amusement that she had to put aside her own modesty to clamber naked up into the loft before wrapping herself with a blanket.
And there the three adults and three children stayed, frozen and frightened, until they were rescued the next morning as the flood waters began to recede.
Ironically Violet's husband had been away on coastguard duty that night.
Margaret Learmouth vividly remembers their rescue: "We were looking out of the window and saw dad approaching.
"Mum had saved our lives and now here was dad, we were going to be okay."

> **"Mum had saved our lives and now here was dad, we were going to be okay"**
>
> Violet Sparrow's daughter Margaret Learmouth

Extract from story posted on BBC website: Thursday, 23 January, 2003, 16:34 GMT

Stories in communities of practice
Denning argues that communities of practice are essential to knowledge management. He says: "knowledge sharing is often essential to organisational survival, and communities of practice are usually essential to any effective knowledge sharing." It is interesting to notice that Brown and Duguid (1991, cited in Boud *et al*., 2006) suggest that communities were not so much an invention of the 1990s as a discovery "when it was observed that learning takes place through informal social interaction anchored in the context of problem solving" (p. 71). They highlight the way joint action can help "a shared repetoire" to develop between everyone involved in the community. This might also be described as a group culture and is closely linked to Schramm's (1973) concept of shared fields of experience, discussed below. The three communication processes that Brown and Duguid (1991, cited in Boud *et al*., 2006)

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associate with communities of practice: "narration, collaboration and social construction". (p. 71), demonstrate the link between stories, knowledge management and communities of practice. They are also closely associated with sensemaking.

Using stories for sensemaking

Stories lend themselves to sense making. Telling a story requires the storyteller to select the characters, places, predicaments and key actions in the plot and sequence them to show relationships consequences, cause and effect. The sequencing and relationships turn pieces of information or facts into a story. Sensemaking is a way of interpreting events so that explanations and predictions can be made. It is not an analytical approach and has closer links to reflection. Weick (1995) describes the difference between interpretation and sensemaking. Sensemaking is an inductive process and generate what it then interprets. Interpretation works on data that has already been produced. It is a process, whereas interpretation may be process or product. Sensemaking is a reflective an intuitive process, whereas interpretation is more analytical. It is reflexive. Those engaged in sensemaking are doing so from inside the process, they are not standing back to take a more objective view. Their own frames of reference, ways of understanding and perceiving the world are enabling them to make sense of cues that they notice and link together. Noticing, sharing and constructing patterns are key parts of sensemaking and always with the purpose of finding plausible explanations. Weick (1995) identifies the elements of sensemaking and it is significant that these match the elements of story telling. The three elements are a cue, a frame and a connection. Weick cites Upton (1961) who said that "for something to be meaningful, you must have three: a thing, a relation and another thing." (1995, p. 110). Earlier we identified that a story needs something that makes a relationship between events to be more than a list. Gabriel (2004, p. 66) lists six ways in which events in stories can be moulded: "framing", "focusing", "filtering", "fading", "fusing" and "fitting". These words could be applied equally to sensemaking.

A final difference between sensemaking and interpretation is the point at which each is used in relation to the problem. Weick (1995) suggests that sensemaking starts to work on the problem at an earlier stage, putting forward tentative and plausible explanations. It is an appropriate approach to use in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity. This again shows a link between sensemaking and reflective thinking and practice, which Schön (1983, p42) associates with professions that occupy "swampy lowlands".

At this point we return to Brown and Duguid's (1991, cited in Boud *et al.*, 2006) "shared repertoire". This is something they associate with communities of practice. It is also a necessary part of a sensemaking community and a storytelling community. Each participant has their own frame of reference, comprising values, experiences, beliefs, language, ways of perceiving and interpreting the world. Schramm (1973) describes this as a field of experience. In each act of communication the sender sends the message through the filter of his or her field of experience, which has shaped that message and the way it is being sent. The receiver receives the message through his or her filter. If there is no connection between the fields of experience, no area that is "a shared repertoire" communication may be blocked or distorted.

Linde (2001, p.520) gives an example from Frankel (1983) and Todd (1981) who demonstrate "conflict between the narrative form in which patients prefer to offer information about their condition and the question and answer forms which physicians prefer."

Understanding how stories work

Understanding of stories may be a way to build a common language of dialogue. For FCERM professionals this will involve two components: interpreting the stories and conveying our own message in story form

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Interpreting the stories emanating from communities to use the embedded information

This interpretation will include:

- Distillation of the facts, of the loadings and the damages. For example in HR Wallingford's analysis of the Boscastle flood event (see Box 3), it was very useful to be able to establish, using personal testimony supported by physical evidence and photographs, the timings of particular events and estimates of the height of the flood water. In the case of Boscastle there was a concerted effort to gather this information soon after the event. In cases where this has not been carried out, useful local knowledge can still be accessed by later investigation.

- Assessing the emotional impact and loss during flooding or erosion events

- Identifying key features requiring consideration in future action

Carr (2002) in discussing environmental stewardship groups and their role in eliciting local knowledge identifies the importance of knowledge networks in sharing knowledge rather than hierarchical structures. Participation is another key part of these groups.

Box 3: Example story from the Boscastle floods: "The water was a blooming nuisance"

"The first building the flood hit when it reached Boscastle village was the visitor centre in the car park. The single story, barn-like building, owned and run by North Cornwall District Council, attracted as many as 1,000 visitors a day. … When the river was rapidly rising, Rebecca David, the centre manager, was busy trying to help an Australian who needed a visa to go home via Russia. The problem was, lightening strikes kept cutting the power and each time it came on again she had to reboot the computer.

At about 3.45 pm Rebecca noticed water coming into the porch of the centre and rang the Environment Agency and the Fire Brigades. With the doors now shut against the rising water inside the centre were 12 people … The six children were becoming increasingly anxious and some were tearful. Rebecca said: 'Inside we had a childrens play area with a little low wall of about 18 inches high. The families were standing on the wall. I thought the water was a blooming nuisance. One of the first things I did as to turn off the power.'
…
[They then describe how they got everyone up into the loft space via a pull-down ladder and then] Melanie was disturbed by the sound of debris thudding into the building. "It was a banging noise. A horrendous noise. Like somebody bashing the door down.'

)

Visitor centre before flood …

… and after

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| At about 4.15 a second wave of flood water rammed into the centre and smashed open the doors. Water rushed in and over the four-feet high counter. …

Extracts from the Visitor Centre story, as recorded in Rowe (2004) | |

Conveying our own messages in story form.

Stories are associated with an Oral Culture rather than a written one and may well be formulaic and emotional in much of their presentation, using what Ong (p38) calls aggregative rather than analytical phrases. Examples of such phrases taken from the stories in the boxes might include "sudden deluge", "absolutely horrified", "the terror of the night", "watching helplessly", "disaster struck",   "unbelievable   destruction", "pounding waves" and so on.

Coming from a scientific background we tend to eschew such emotive language, but we could build up vocabulary and phrases which enable us to communicate in terms that people will understand more clearly. In fact, although not drawn together yet in a very coherent way, there are good examples of phrases we could use more regularly. In a recently re-broadcast BBC programme on managed realignment at Abbots Hall, Mark Dixon of the Environment Agency demonstrated a good example of such communication.   Alluding to the well-understood concept of loans and loan repayment, Mark used what ought to become a classic line: "We have borrowed this land from the sea for many years. it is time to give it back." This was a powerful communication to the public of concept of the sea calling in the loan of land.   Similarly the communicative power of phrases like "making space for water" should not be lost in their regular use.

Note that the language used in stories is often the everyday language of the community in which the story is being told. In the past this has separated stories from the formal workplace and the written texts associated with that workplace. Professions and workplaces have their own language, which may be technical, academic, specialist, analytical and discipline related. Multiple stories will reflect the languages of the different communities involved. When they want to bring their stories together, there may be misunderstanding or unwillingness to listen to and learn from others.

Building on other features identified by Ong (1982) of effective orality in story telling, we have identified some other aspects of effective story telling that might be of use to FCERM professionals:

- Simplicity of language structure using short additive sentences rather than complex sentences with many subordinate clauses such as are commonly found in writing
- Redundancy – the necessity to repeat and summarise all the time in order to ensure that key messages are conveyed.
- Making use of history and tradition in conveying messages – coping with change is more palatable if we can understand that things were not always like this
- Explaining 'how to do *it*', not in dry manuals but in the form of stories in which *it* is done
- Describing concepts in situational rather than abstract terms
- Understanding the colloquial meaning of words and phrases and not using these words and phrases in senses which are reserved to the professional community.
- Not being afraid to add what Ong calls "agonistic" colour to the stories, describing personal struggles of individuals, emphasising interpersonal relations and even including phrases of

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- praise (e.g. the 'brave' fireman) or condemnation (the 'relentless' sea). Clearly care has to be taken to avoid criticism of real people in this case!
- Being empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced

Similarly, Reville & Seymour (2000) suggest that useful characteristics of story might include: contextual introduction; details of places, events and people; chronology; directly and indirectly reported speech; the use of the present tense; an absent [independent] researcher.

Seeley Brown *et al.* (2005) also highlight the difference between stories that are written down and storytelling. Written stories may be seen as part of the system and formal communication in the organisation. Written stories lack the authority that a storyteller can give to the story. The authenticity of the message may be questioned if the story is separated from the storyteller. Storytelling brings an immediacy to the story and allows for interaction with the storyteller responding to listeners, adding further examples, elaborating on points.

In the multi-media culture in which we now live, Quicke (2003) also identifies that combining the spoken word with music and picture has become vital. Citing Sample (1998) he notes the dominance of the moving visual, quoting a 10-year old who said: "Have you *seen* the latest Michael Jackson song?" (so dominant have music videos become). The power of musical beat was encapsulated by the teenager who rephrased Descartes as "I vibrate, therefore I am." In this new age, we need to learn the lessons of effective communication from NGO's who, for example, combine their verbal messages with beautiful pictures of scenery or wildlife (See example in Box 4)

Box 4: Example news release from RSPB

Stonehenge re-think threatens recovery of endangered bird
Plans to build a road tunnel to ease congestion near Stonehenge could soon be scrapped, threatening the government-backed recovery of one of Britain's most endangered birds.
Two over-ground alternatives to the tunnel - set to be detailed in consultation documents due today - would destroy nesting and roosting sites of the secretive stone-curlew. The bird has two UK strongholds, one of which is the area surrounding the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. The new road plans would also harm prospects for more than 25 other bird species and at least 14 types of butterfly. …

From *RSPB Public Relations Department* statement dated 23 January 2006

Bridging the gap between fields of experience

Whilst the local knowledge may reside in individuals' stories and our knowledge and viewpoints can be put across by storytelling, when we come together with communities to collate our experience and views, we still need to overcome the barriers highlighted by Schramm (1973) that different fields of experience present to communication. The sender and receiver of a message each have their own field of experience that influences the way they encode and send a message and the way they receive and decode a message. Culture, vocabularies, patterns of communication, expectations, ways of knowing are examples of differences seen in fields of experience. Where there is no overlap, no common language, communication, consultation and sharing of

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knowledge will be impeded. Dialogue seeks to build the bridge and create shared fields of experience. From this we can build a common vision and a language for expressing it.

Dialogue

Dialogue is defined in several different ways. Isaacs (1993, p.25) describes it as "a sustained collective inquiry". Bohm, writing in 1996 (cited in Gergen *et al*, 2004, p.41) defines dialogue as "a form of communication from which something new emerges". Grudin (1996, cited in Gergen *et al*, 2004, p.41) draws attention to the "reciprocal exchange of meaning" that happens in dialogue. Putnam & Fairhurst (2001, cited in Gergen *et al*, 2004, p.41) describe dialogue as "a mode of communication that builds mutuality through awareness of others".

The key characteristics of dialogue that emerge from these definitions are a search for meaning as the basis for action and the reciprocal relationship between those involved in the dialogue. There is an active attempt to hear not only the words spoken but the message conveyed by those words. Gergen *et al* (2004, p.46) identify the importance of both "affirmation" and "productive difference" in the creation of dialogue. Affirmation requires attentive listening and a desire to understand what the other is communicating. It does not necessarily require agreement with differing views but values and acknowledges their meaning. Productive difference highlights the importance of different views and voices to the collaborative creation of new meaning and action.

Thus dialogue values multiple voices, stories and experiences and encourages us to search for understanding of these to bridge the gap between groups and people.

The concept of *humility* in dialogue was perhaps revived first by O'Riordan (1994) in discussing how the precautionary principle of sustainability should be understood and promulgated. Stirling *et al* (1999) summarise the humble approach as: "Maintain a culture of humility in the face of many sources of uncertainty and ignorance in appraisal as well as to subjectivity in framing assumptions. Avoid claims to complete or otherwise definitive knowledge."

One of the reasons for humility is that any individual's or organisation's experience, views and perspectives are necessarily limited. This generates a wide range of potential approaches, all of which have their merits, but the securest place to move forwards is in strategies that humbly take the best from each of these approaches. This is the ideal of sustainable development which treats the economic, environmental and social pillars of sustainability equally. Grizzle and Barratt (1998) suggest that humble anthropocentrism – "recognising that humans have legitimate needs for survival but that we should behave in ways that minimise our impacts on the earth and its non-human inhabitants" – is a way of characterising this centre ground as expressed in Figure 3 below.

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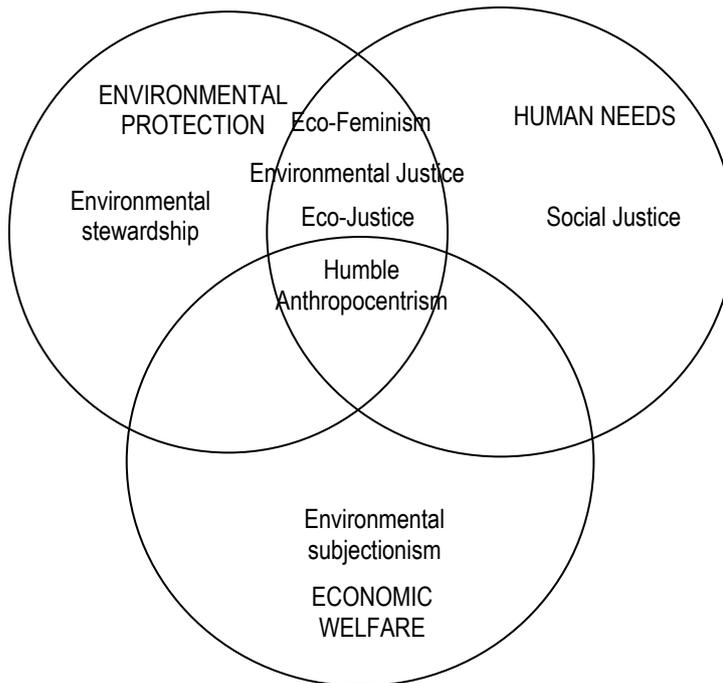
Figure 3   A view of approaches to managing the environment (after Grizzle & Barrett, 1998)

Gaining agreed vision, principles, objectives and indicators

During the recently completed Defra research project FD 2015 on Sustainable Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management, an agreed vision, principles, objectives and indicators was developed across the range of issues relevant to FCERM. The same will apply at the local scale when working to develop an agreed strategy with a community.

Common vocabulary and understanding of words.

We have already mentioned above, extending Ong's thinking on Oral cultures, the need to stick to colloquial meaning of words and phrases and not using these words and phrases in senses which are reserved to the professional community.   However, if professional and other communities are to work together they must find common vocabulary and language with which to express the ideas and physical concepts about which they are debating.

As an example of seeking a common language, reference must be made to the development of the Performance-based Asset Management System (PAMS) for the Environment Agency. As part of PAMS, a new condition indexing system is being developed (Sayers *et al*, 2006). Under the new system, the condition index of an asset will be built up from a combination of failure mode indices. These failure mode indices are in turn built up from a weighted combination of visually assessed performance features. The assessment of the performance features is guided by flow chart based question and answer responses. As indicated in Figure 4, this FCERM condition index is eventually envisaged to be supplemented by other condition indices, some of which will be of significant interest to communities. The first author is expecting to work with local communities on a pilot basis to find ways of expressing these indices and the supporting objectives and performance features. It may well be that some of the performance features will be similar to those required for FCERM.

Telling good stories: engaging in dialogue with communities about flood and coastal erosion risk
management in a post-modern society
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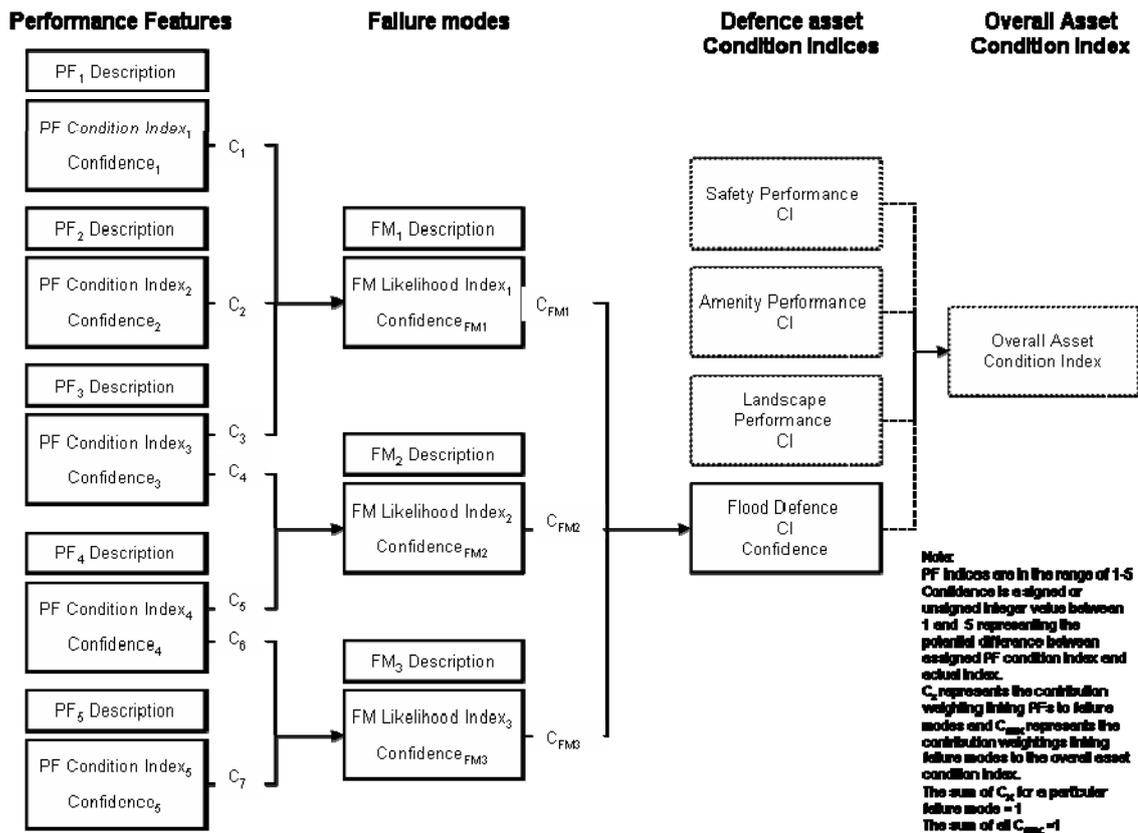
Figure 4   Condition indexing system for PAMS

Conclusions

1. Understanding the way in which communication happens in post-modern society is vital if we are to be effective communicators and to succeed in genuine stakeholder participation.
2. Personal story now occupies a central place in our society and our technical and professional stories have to compete with many other voices and stories. Given the level of uncertainty in our work and potential ignorance of issues in appraisal as well as to subjectivity in framing assumptions we should promulgate our own stories with due humility.
3. Learning how story operates gives many clues as to how we should communicate, even if we decide not to use this approach.
4. Identifying common fields of experience and a common language in which to communicate is vital for effective dialogue.

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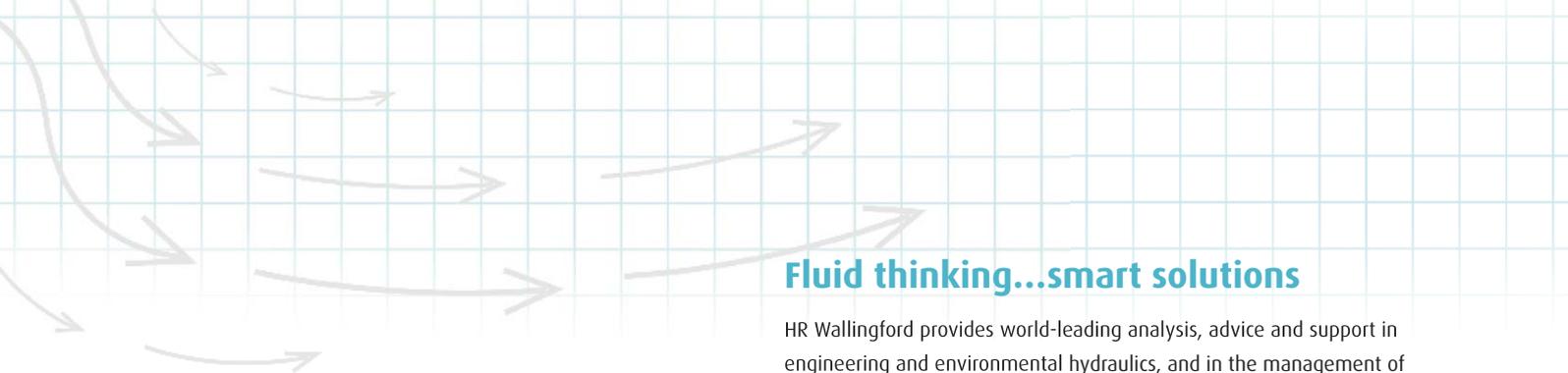
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