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The Case for Grassroots Collaboration: Social Capital and Ecosystem Restoration at the Local Level by John Charles Morris, William Allen Gibson, William Marshall Leavitt, and Shana Campbell Jones

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Case for Grassroots Collaboration: Social Capital and Ecosystem Restoration at the Local Level by John Charles Morris, William Allen Gibson, William Marshall Leavitt, and Shana Campbell Jones (Lexington Books; 284 pages; 2013)

The Case for Grassroots Collaboration: Social Capital and Ecosystem Restoration at the Local Level is a theoretical analysis of a common environmental trope: a community comes together to save beloved habitat. In the authors' view, grassroots efforts succeed in cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay due to community involvement and commitment to place. Cooperatives have long been observed among neighbors, and otherwise unlikely environmentalists resistant to the contamination of their own backyards. *Grassroots Collaboration* proposes that citizens' efforts in the Chesapeake are successful precisely because such change is taking place in their backyard.

The water quality of the Chesapeake Bay suffers from centuries of pollution, the alleviation of which is extremely complex. Man-made pollutants, and natural run-off from six states plus the District of Columbia, continue to afflict the Bay. While government regulation has effectively targeted "point sources" of contamination such as factories and sewage plants, the reduction of "nonpoint source" pollution presents a more difficult task. Top-down solutions simply lack the flexibility needed to address the myriad sources of pollution. Grassroots efforts are more effective in carrying out targeted local fixes and regional collaboration, critical strategies in cleaning up the Bay.

Among these grassroots efforts are the Nansemond River Preservation Alliance (NRPA), focused on shoreline restoration in Suffolk, Virginia; Lynnhaven River 2007, a group that aimed to revive oystering in Virginia Beach by 2007; and the Elizabeth River Project, formed to prevent the declaration of the Elizabeth River as an officially-designated "industrial river"—in other words, a dumping ground. Common to all these groups are their informal roots: each germinated from conversations among concerned citizens. The NRPA, for instance, came to be when one founding participant approached another at a local gas station and asked, "Karla, let me talk to you a minute. I'm interested in starting an environmental group for the river. Would you help?"

Not surprisingly, these groups' strategies run precisely opposite to "command-and-control" mechanisms that failed to address nonpoint-source pollution in the Chesapeake. Grassroots groups employ local, non-confrontational, collaborative means to achieve their goals. By

initiating local solutions and building on the social capital of established communities, each has achieved small victories that evaded “command-and-control” methods.

The authors’ greatest insight lies not in their study of strategy, but rather in their focus on the importance of place and community as driving forces behind grassroots collaboration. The first animating principle shared among these groups is a commitment to place. Citizens are motivated to protect their surroundings because the problems are local and salient. In the Chesapeake Bay region, they are motivated by watching herons feed on the stretch of water visible from the back porch; preserving recreational areas along regional watersheds; viewing the river as the economic lifeblood of their community; and childhood memories of grilling oysters, freshly plucked from a favorite creek, over an open fire. Personal connection to a watershed spurs participation among even the least likely environmental advocates.

Place also matters in that it determines the context of collaboration, both in terms of the problems to be fixed and the means of fixing them. Differences in political culture are not lost on the authors. NRPA, based in a prototypical farming community, thrives on folksy cooperation, while the Elizabeth River Project, seeking to unite powerful industry forces and the U.S. Navy, defers to more technical authorities and formal processes.

The second animating principle shared by all these groups is a communitarian spirit that the authors relate to French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation that “Americans are forever forming associations.” In the words of one NRPA participant, spoken after a “River Talk” on the importance of engaging children in wetlands restoration: “we’re all friends and neighbors; it’s like getting together at someone’s house—but with a purpose.” At times, the rosy projection of Tocquevillian cooperation comes across as dubious, or at the very least quaint. One can only imagine that an association’s reaction to a load of toxic waste getting dumped in their favorite stream would be less than hopeful and cooperative. While the authors reference de Tocqueville, I liken them to him: bright-eyed observers who seem to have dropped in at all the right moments.

But the contrast to regulatory and litigious strategies is clear. Grassroots collaboration both nourishes community and depends on community for its success. It thrives on commitment to place. And if the successes of the Chesapeake Bay are any indication, the collaborative

model may be a hopeful one for citizens seeking to solve complex environmental issues in many regions.

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