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Commentary

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CARLOS NAGEL*

Commentary

The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) is sufficiently complex that I cannot adequately comment on its public participation component. However, from the vantage point of a representative of a nongovernmental organization (NGO), Friends of PRONATURA, I am acutely aware of the problems that arise as governmental institutions and other long-standing hierarchically constituted organizations are overwhelmed by the exponential growth and the accelerating rate of change that characterizes our times. It is evident that new mechanisms are emerging to fulfill the needs of communities and nations as a vacuum develops in the wake of inefficient bureaucracies.

Mimi Becker and Roberto Sanchez provided a point of departure with their comments about the role of NGOs as alternative mechanisms that are paralleling existing organizations and providing certain services in a non-adversarial context. And here I speak of the almost countless small NGOs that are emerging in quiet but very effective ways.

I am in a unique position to speak about this important process. As a volunteer with Friends of PRONATURA, devoting as I do about 30 percent of my time to an alternative approach to transboundary natural resource conservation, I know the efficiency, flexibility and the quasi-family relationships that allow for accomplishing tasks that formal institutions cannot do.

Friends of PRONATURA, a nonprofit organization in the United States, is an example of a kind of reverse imperialism: it was created to serve conservation needs in the transboundary area and to serve as a representative of the organization PRONATURA, A.C. in Mexico. PRONATURA, A.C. has been successful in establishing a dialogue among public, private, academic, scientific and community sectors in Mexico that are concerned or responsible for preservation of habitats and species diversity.

Friends of PRONATURA, in its four years of existence, with a board of four scientists and two intercultural specialists, has received membership contributions as well as contracts from the National Park Service and the Department of State that have furthered the goals of PRONATURA in Mexico and led to a strengthening of Friends. As well, PRONATURA, A.C. has negotiated a Debt for Nature Swap for over one and one-half million dollars.

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NGOs add diversity to the potential for natural resource conservation; however, they are most important as a vehicle for individuals to assume responsibility and manifest fundamental values of integrity, trust, honesty, affection, and good faith that are the foundations of a healthy community.

In Mexico, 33 NGOs have emerged since 1985—an indication that this process can work in cultural environments that lack a strong tradition of NGOs so common in the United States.

Given that environmental/ecological questions are fundamentally moral and ethical—our relationship to the planet, responsibility to the future (we might say that we have not inherited the Earth from our forebears we have borrowed it from our children) it is essential that we assume our individual responsibility for what is happening. There is no place to hide within institutional structures, consequently we must dare to risk at a personal level.

Thus, we need to change our perceptions and our frame of reference about the mechanisms that are available for solutions to contemporary environmental, as well as other, problems. An anecdote comes to mind: A man appeared in a doctor's office and he had a frog growing out of his head. The doctor was aghast: "My God," he exclaimed, "How did this happen?"

"Well, it all started with a wart on my backside," said the frog. We need to develop the ability to accept talking frogs . . . Ribbet, Ribbet.