



# Building a community of practice for sustainability: Strengthening learning and collective action of Canadian biosphere reserves through a national partnership



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## ABSTRACT

Deliberation, dialogue and systematic learning are now considered attributes of good practice for organizations seeking to advance sustainability. Yet we do not know whether organizations that span spatial scales and governance responsibilities can establish effective communities of practice to facilitate learning and action. The purpose of this paper is to generate a framework that specifies actions and processes of a community of practice designed to instill collective learning and action strategies across a multi-level, multi-partner network. The framework is then used to describe and analyze a partnership among practitioners of Canada's 16 UNESCO biosphere reserves, and additional researchers and government representatives from across Canada. The framework is a cycle of seven action steps, beginning and ending with reflecting on and evaluating present practice. It is supported by seven characteristics of collaborative environmental management that are used to gauge the success of the partnership. Our results show that the partnership successfully built trust, established shared norms and common interest, created incentives to participate, generated value in information sharing and willingness to engage, demonstrated effective flow of information, and provided leadership and facilitation. Key to success was the presence of a multi-lingual facilitator who could bridge cultural differences across regions and academia-practitioner expectations. The project succeeded in establishing common goals, setting mutual expectations and building relations of trust and respect, and co-creating knowledge. It is too soon to determine whether changes in practices that support sustainability will be maintained over the long term and without the help of an outside facilitator.

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## 1. Introduction

Deliberation, dialogue and systematic learning through reflection, evaluation and feedback have become significant attributes of good practice for organizations advancing sustainability (Berkes, 2010; Cundill, 2010; Cundill and Rodela, 2012; Diduck, 2010a,b; Plummer and Armitage, 2010; Wildemeersch, 2007). Yet, while “the value of learning as a normative goal and process is

recognized ... greater specificity with respect to learning goals, approaches and outcomes is needed” (Armitage et al., 2008: 87). Cundill and Rodela's (2012) literature review revealed that social learning requires establishing a trusting environment in which sustained interaction among participants, on-going deliberation and knowledge sharing can take place. To date, documented cases of learning in sustainability organizations have focused on smaller-scale case studies (for examples, see Armitage et al., 2008; Cundill, 2010). There has been relatively less attention given to partnerships in which social groups span spatial scales, governance responsibilities and scales of influence. Furthermore, communities of practice have been identified as potentially valuable components of social learning and action processes, but how to build them to facilitate learning and action across a network of organizations has not been described. No one has fully addressed the challenge of how to intentionally build network-level capacity using collective

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learning strategies in a geographically-dispersed community with shared interests and challenges, but without a concrete platform from which to collaborate.

To address this gap, we explored how theories of collective learning and communities of practice could be combined to facilitate intentional network development and collaboration between organizations promoting sustainability. This paper introduces a new framework established to investigate intentional social learning partnership development across organizational boundaries and over large geographic distances. The purpose of the framework is to help identify specific actions and processes that support a community of practice designed to instill collective learning and action strategies across a multi-level, multi-partner network. This framework was used to describe and assess the efforts of a partnership composed of UNESCO biosphere reserve (BR) practitioners, researchers, and government representatives in Canada.

UNESCO BRs are geographic areas and civil society organizations of local residents, government representatives, and researchers who seek to learn about and take action to make transformational change to advance sustainability. Officially, UNESCO BRs are mandated to carry out three functions: conserve biological and cultural diversity; advance sustainability; and support scientific research, learning, and public education. Local BR partnerships are often referred to as “living laboratories” and “sites of excellence” for their efforts to facilitate dialogue between practitioners and researchers, and encourage learning through deliberation, networking and experimentation (Batisse, 1982; Ishwaran et al., 2008; Schultz and Lundholm, 2010; Price, 1996). Canada is home to 16 BRs. Together, they form a national network of BRs, the Canadian BRs Association (CBRA), that is intended to serve as a mechanism for sharing lessons and advocating for collective action to support their mandate. However, because of uneven and limited funding, large geographic distances and socio-cultural differences between sites, and a lack of experience with collective learning strategies, Canadian BR practitioners have tended to work alone, thereby restricting their potential to advance sustainability through transformational change. The project documented here was designed to address this disconnection by strengthening the capacity of BRs to work within their regional spheres of influence and, more significantly, as members of a national network. The focus of this research was on the operational level of the BR organizations and was limited to the individuals each BR had chosen to represent their respective organizations in the national partnership project.

In 2011, the CBRA and Canadian academic researchers formed a partnership to determine if they could jointly develop a “community of practice” dedicated to improving BR effectiveness through social learning and networking strategies. Funded by a three-year grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the partnership also involved the national governing bodies of the Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) of UNESCO (i.e., the Canada-MAB committee and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO [CCU]). Using participatory action research as a methodology and an inductive approach to our analysis, we offer our experience in developing the community of practice. Conceptually, the research is rooted in two key concepts: “community of practice” and “collective learning and action”. First, we explain these concepts and describe the framework that characterized our efforts to build a community of practice. Next, we describe the methodology of participatory action research and our steps in data collection and analysis. Then, using the actions identified in the framework, we explain the activities and outcomes of the first 30 months of the partnership. Analysis of multiple workshops, two sets of questionnaires, one set of interviews with participants, and field notes are presented in these results. Finally, in

the discussion and the conclusion, we reflect on the drivers and challenges in establishing and maintaining a community of practice within a multilevel network.

## 2. Components of a framework

### 2.1. Community of practice

A concrete approach to facilitating collective learning is the notion of a community of practice. Several authors have made passing reference to this approach but few have integrated it into their frameworks (e.g., Cundill, 2010; Diduck, 2010a,b). Etienne Wenger (2003) described communities of practice as building blocks of a collective learning system. They are social groups bound by a common concern or passion and a desire to learn how to improve their practice. According to Wenger (1998), such a community should establish a joint enterprise that seeks to address gaps in knowledge; be organized through mutual engagement and reciprocity that involves sharing, interacting, and supporting one another; and developing a shared repertoire of artifacts (e.g., routines, words, tools, etc.) produced by the community. His general definition was adapted by environmental scholars who described a community of practice as one characterized by participants who seek support and learn from one another by co-creating and exchanging knowledge through transparent discussion processes that embrace diverse knowledge systems and address alternative perspectives (adapted from Sinclair et al., 2008). A community of practice is dynamic, involving learning by novices and more experienced participants (Bacsu and Smith, 2011). Cundill (2010) offered a set of key variables that shape the success of collaboration. After careful review, we selected seven as being most relevant to building a community of practice: trust building; common interest and shared vision; incentives; perceived value in sharing information; willingness to engage in collaborative learning and decision-making; effective information flow; and effective leadership.

### 2.2. Collective learning and action

Different theoretical perspectives influence the learning literature and the debate over whether groups or individuals can learn and whether learning is “transformative”, “social”, and/or “collective” (see Blackmore 2007; Reed et al., 2010; Diduck, 2010a,b for explanations).<sup>4</sup> We hold the view that individuals *and* groups can learn, however, research to date offers little guidance regarding the appropriate size of a social group and by what strategies they might learn. An expansive characterization is implied by Reed et al. (2010: n.p.) who argued that “for a phenomenon to be described as social learning, it must demonstrate a change or understanding that goes beyond individuals or small groups to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice (our emphasis). This characterization opens up the possibility of learning across levels of organization (see also Diduck, 2010a,b).

Nevertheless, whether learning can take place among a multi-level network of institutional partners remains unknown. Reed et al. (2010) argued that social learning is more likely to occur if groups share similar epistemological beliefs. But Brown suggested that epistemologically-similar groups are less likely to resolve problems. Cundill (2010: n.p.) warns of a political challenge:

<sup>4</sup> We recognize that social learning is distinct from transformative learning. Transformative learning deals with learning that is aimed at making change or taking social action, while social learning refers to learning by groups.

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