Is There a Place for Private Conversation in Public Dialogue? Comparing Stakeholder Assessments of Informal Communication in Collaborative Regional Planning[1]

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This study contests the universalism of public engagement models by comparing reports of informal communication in two state-centered participation processes for regional conservation planning. Through interviews with stakeholders, the author finds that both elites and nonelites deployed informal communication to amplify and to defuse pressure for consensus. Much of the power of informal communication derived from its relation to local knowledge and place-based networking that was irrelevant in principle to formal process activities—and this was welcomed in one community and resisted in another. These differences highlight the overlooked role of regional-scale political cultures in light of the increasing formalization of participatory best practices. The article suggests that the study of democratic engagement can gain by exploring the contextual implementation of abstract deliberative ideals such as inclusion, publicity, and transparency.

> San Diego's history is littered with the skulls of bureaucratic brain-picking sessions that invited people from the neighborhoods to contribute, then discarded their ideas.—Richard Louv (2005)

Do public participation projects improve the decision-making landscape in local communities? Researchers of deliberative democracy and civic engagement might find this question ridiculous. Including stakeholders in planning and increasing their access to local officials is generally un-

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derstood to represent a significant improvement over less transparent, elite-dominated politics—and at the very least, a salutary exercise, whatever the current state of local political affairs. Indeed, participatory planning processes have become both big business and best practice, with a wide range of competing models intended to include as many community members as possible, to build consensus through thoughtful discussion, and to generate public trust in local governance (Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004).[2] Given the expensive and time-consuming nature of these processes for participants and communities, however, the general assumption of positive benefits to be gained from proliferating participation processes deserves further consideration—especially in light of the cynicism and participatory fatigue suggested by *San Diego Union-Tribune* columnist Richard Louv (above). This study questions whether formal public participation processes, however oriented toward local interests, are indeed a one-size-fits-all solution for improving communication and deliberation in communities.

Whereas most studies of participatory process implementation have focused on describing the relationship between increased inclusion of diverse viewpoints and more widespread community satisfaction with process outcomes, this article compares reports of the role of informal communication in two state-centered, regional-scale conservation planning processes in the United States. Through intensive interviews, I investigate how community members thought informal communication related to procedural legitimacy and collaboration in their respective regions. In one region, the process emphasized formal inclusion, transparent deliberations, and group consensus on policy provisions, while the process in the other emphasized more limited forms of participation, private solicitation of resistant stakeholders, and community mobilization against development. Informal communication was largely understood as a backstage subversion of the former process, while the lack of transparency in the latter process was actively advertised as an indication of elite actors' and

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[2] These models can range from deliberative polling to collaborative planning to citizen juries, working groups, or advisory committees, and are proffered by a range of actors, from foundations to private for-profit consultants. A useful index of demand for participation training is the increase in training revenue of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), which reported 185% growth from 2003 to 2005 (Twyford 2004, p. 2; Kyriss 2005, p. 2).

conservation interest groups' good faith and public-spiritedness. Most important for those interested in the social capital participants are presumed to gain through collaborative planning, stakeholders in both regions ultimately claimed to value informal networking over additional formal collaborations as a result of their experience.

My ambitions are twofold: to challenge the idea that institutionalized participation is an exclusive means to community empowerment and to explain why increasing formalization of participation may not improve stakeholder assessments of the quality of decision making in local communities. The article contributes to theoretical debates on how to enhance civic engagement by foregrounding the relevance of informal communication to formal engagement processes implemented in very different contexts. Critics of participatory institutions in the developing world have paid particular attention to the ways in which local political cultures and histories of prior institutional interventions are ignored in the implementation of community participation processes (Bastian, Bastian, and Nivaran 1996; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Kothari and Minogue 2002). Social theorists in the United States have recognized that informal communication can be strategically useful in a variety of contexts, but have tended to make their own moral judgments on informal communication depending on whether it involves oppositional social movement actors or elites in entrenched urban regimes.

As cases of place-based implementation involving both kinds of actors and blended forms of social action (Sampson et al. 2005), these illustrations of how informal communication can become important in formal processes are particularly useful for demonstrating the dynamic regional perspectives neglected in idealized models. For deliberative theory, these stories highlight the ahistoricism in contemporary aspirations for participatory governance as a perpetual phenomenon (Fung and Wright 2003). The claim that participation in public deliberation is a universal democratic good must be contextualized as growing out of its own historical moment; that is, one riven by the current anxiety over declining civic engagement and superficial political discourse.

THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL DELIBERATION

> This formal route potentially harnesses the power and resources of the state to deliberation and popular participation thus making these practices more durable and widely accessible. These experiments generally seek to transform the mechanisms of state power into permanently mobilized deliberative-democratic, grassroots forms. (Fung and Wright 2003, p. 22)

Many who study public dialogue claim that grassroots participatory projects are most effective when they are formally tied to state policy making. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright have developed a clearly articulated model along these lines for what they describe as empowered participatory governance, or EPG.[3] Fung and Wright understand EPG as a promising alternative to top-down governance by bureaucrats, strategic negotiation among elites, or ideological struggles of traditional social movements or parties. The three principles of EPG are practical orientation, bottom-up participation, and deliberative solution generation (Fung and Wright 2003, pp. 16–17). Fung and Wright's admittedly "optimistic expectations" are that EPG processes will produce "effective problem solving," equity, and "broad and deep participation" (2003, pp. 25–27). The fact that participation is both a principle and a result in Fung and Wright's EPG model rests on their assumption that the sustained quality of participation in these processes is "an independent desiderata of democratic politics" (2003, p. 27) in the vein of John Stuart Mill.

To be effective, the authors claim that participation in EPG must be formally constituted within state institutions. Fung and Wright believe that EPG may actually be more radical than traditional collective action inasmuch as it requires citizens to involve themselves in the continuing administrative mechanisms of the state:

> These transformations attempt to institutionalize the ongoing participation of ordinary citizens, most often in their role as consumers of public goods, in the direct determination of what those goods are and how they should be best provided. This perpetual participation stands in contrast, for example, to the relatively brief democratic moments in both outcome-oriented, campaign-based social movements and electoral competitions in ordinary politics in which leaders or elites mobilize popular participation for specific outcomes. (Fung and Wright 2003, pp. 22–23)

While "perpetual participation" requires a substantial ongoing commitment from ordinary citizens, Fung and Wright assert that reorganizing participation in this way is worthwhile because participants can assume the authority invested in their roles as empowered decision makers: "They need not spend the bulk of their energy fighting for power (or against it)" (2003, p. 24).

Environmental decision making is an ideal policy area for comparing formal civic engagement methods. Enhanced citizen participation in combination with a shift to greater devolution of environmental decision mak-

[3] Despite this formulation, I have retained the language of "empowered deliberative democracy" (EDD) when referring to the larger school of theory because this terminology is more common.

ing to state and local governments has been heralded as a promising new era of "civic environmentalism"—and a needed antidote to federal regulatory approaches (John 1994; Sabel, Fung, and Karkkainen 2000). The presumption of the positive results to be gained from participatory models of state-centered deliberation is also reflected in the sociological literature on resource management and environmental decision making, which is overwhelmingly concerned with enhancing public involvement and trust in state-run processes (Gericke and Sullivan 1994; Gill 1996; Hunt and Haider 2001; Josiah 2001; Landre and Knuth 1993; Lauber and Knuth 1999; Lawrence, Daniels, and Stankey 1997; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Smith and McDonough 2001).

Nevertheless, researchers of deliberative democracy and environmental decision making acknowledge that indigenous factors might constrain the implementation of idealized models of participation, and so they direct their attention to overcoming practical limitations to participation. Deliberative theorists denote this problem as the "Kaufman paradox": "Although participation in democracies helps people increase their capacities, those who have not yet had the experience of participation will sometimes not have sufficient capacity to bring off a successful democracy. What they need is precisely what, because of their need, they cannot get" (Mansbridge 2003, p. 177). Since formal participation requires knowledge of meeting times and locations, familiarity with local issues, facility in talking about them, personal investment in the community, and time and resources to attend repeated meetings, much of this literature is oriented toward overcoming capacity limitations in order to jump-start the recursive benefits of participation (Chaskin et al. 2001). Nevertheless, a shared "culture of political avoidance" (Eliasoph 1998) frustrates many attempting to construct formal participatory efforts at the community level, particularly for the potentially exhausting perpetual participation that Fung and Wright advocate. Irvin and Stansbury question whether participation is worth the effort by describing their own involvement in a heroic effort to attract participants for a watershed management initiative where only one soul actually showed to the scheduled meeting. The authors conclude that, despite the fact that "it is difficult to imagine anything but positive outcomes from citizens joining the policy process . . . community participation may be costly and ineffective" (Irvin and Stansbury 2004, p. 55). When formal deliberation does not work as predicted, deliberative proponents blame its susceptibility to "pathologies" and "abuses" (Button and Ryfe 2005, p. 29), presumably introduced at the community level. As Karpowitz and Mansbridge describe in their account of a participatory process that produced a "backlash of anger and frustration, . . . the dream of unity dies hard" (2005, p. 247).

Researchers typically respond to these limitations by attempting to re-

fine procedures and correct technical flaws of timing or approach (Walker and Hurley 2004). More frequently, they describe successful small-scale "model processes" on which to formulate "best practices" to serve as "lessons and inspiration" in other communities (Gastil and Levine 2005; see also Halvorsen 2001; Lauber and Knuth 1998; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). In their focus on the upbeat, most researchers emphasize that deliberation has a self-reinforcing educative function: "Deliberation may have a number of positive outcomes, but it is more important to understand deliberation as a powerful socialization experience that reminds participants what it means to be a true citizen in a democratic society" (Button and Ryfe 2005, p. iv). The flip side of the Kaufman paradox is that those who have participated in deliberative processes will become less reluctant to participate in future processes and will get better at collaborating with others by doing so. Despite acknowledging the challenges of formal participation, proponents of collaborative planning processes continually emphasize that participation in state-centered deliberation is worthwhile for its own sake—not only a means to higher-quality governance but also a civically invigorating end in itself.[4]

Several critiques of formal participation claim that a focus on increasing inclusion by enhancing motivation and capacity obscures problems with the premises on which formal participation is based—most notably, the idea that state-centered participation creates a space free of negotiations for authority or power (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Amy 1987; Gibson and Koontz 1998; Singleton 2000; Walker and Hurley 2004). These critics point out that both administrators and participants may use their involvement for ends external to substantive process goals. The strongest critique of institutionalized participation comes from the resource management literature on the developing world and builds on postcolonial and feminist critiques of development theory (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Kothari 2002; Kothari and Minogue 2002). These critics claim that participation is frequently used as a means to local consent rather than a transformative end for the community and is often irrelevant to locals inured to coping with fickle foreign aid regimes (Bastian, Bastian, and Nivaran 1996; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). Uma Kothari (2002, p. 139) argues that participation is "a new grand narrative of development," deployed through fundamentally dishonest rhetoric that romanticizes community power relations and essentializes local knowledge. Participatory practice is preoccupied with formal models such that it exhibits "blindness to context, leading to mechanistic applications of participatory

[4] Coglianese (2003, p. 73) points out that the elision of stakeholder satisfaction with decision-making quality has a number of problems, despite researchers' frequent assertion that decisions in which interests are satisfied are higher quality by definition.

techniques" (McGee 2002, p. 107). As critics of these critics note, many of these complaints hit home, but the "participation as tyranny" camp rarely offers alternatives or compares participatory outcomes with those achieved by other means (McGee 2002, p. 108).

Critics within the field of deliberative democracy have also attempted to dampen unchecked enthusiasm for formal participation by elaborating on the pressures its underlying value paradigm places on actors of varying social positions. Chief among these complaints are the assumption of transparency and rationality as preconditions for deliberation. Daniel Naurin tests the idea that transparency has a purifying or civilizing effect on political discourse by comparing the behavior of business lobbyists in Europe in transparent and closed systems. Naurin points out that, according to negotiation and corporatist theory, publicity may cause "inefficiency, politicization, and fluffy rhetoric" because "the audience gets in the way": "If deliberation is about transforming preferences, and publicity forces you to know what you want and stand by your position, then 'public deliberation,' it seems to me, is something of a contradiction in terms" (2002, pp. 18–19).[5] The "increased temptations to use passionate rhetoric" (Naurin 2002, p. 18) when deliberations are made public can actually inhibit the search for public-spirited common ground among collaborators. In this vein, Walker and Hurley (2004) describe the case of one California county in which a public collaborative planning process provided unique opportunities for some participants to unseat political rivals. The authors find that, rather than focusing on procedural refinement, practitioners must ask "whether a collaborative approach might actually create a more contentious management climate inimical to finding mutually agreeable and effective solutions" (Walker and Hurley 2004, p. 748).

Iris Marion Young (2000), Jane Mansbridge (1980), and Lynn Sanders (1997) consider deliberation in terms of its repressive potential on self-expression, such that the pressure on nonelite participants *not* to use passionate rhetoric constitutes a mechanism of exclusion that disadvantages those unable to frame their arguments according to prevailing norms of "rational" deliberation.[6] For Young, formal deliberation risks marginalizing those with substantive differences of opinion (Fung, Young, and Mansbridge 2004, p. 49).[7] Mansbridge finds that even in small, local par-

[5] Many deliberative democracy theorists implicitly recognize this problematic by insisting that deliberation take place in small groups.

[6] Michael Schudson (1997) confirms that such norms exist but argues that they are, in fact, the condition for democratic self-government, not the conversation itself.

[7] This source is a transcription of an interview led by Fung of Young and Mansbridge, so I identify the speakers separately.

ticipatory institutions where common interests are most likely, the "attempt to apply the procedure of consensus in moments of genuine conflict as well as in unity reveal the diverse ends consensus can serve" (1980, p. 268). Mansbridge and Young do not abandon hope for formal deliberation but suggest that it is most useful in combination with other forms of collective action and protest. Maarten Hajer (2005) explores the dramaturgical elements in public deliberation further by studying the mixed signals communicated in varied setting and staging contexts for participatory planning in the Netherlands. According to Hajer, "participation changes face because of the settings in which it takes place" (2005, p. 631), so formal reforms undertaken in standard municipal forums may be perceived by community members as yet another top-down administrative mechanism. In spite of practitioners' intentions, state-centered collaborative planning was often "locally understood in terms of the very practices it aimed to criticize" (Hajer 2005, p. 637).

Evaluations of federal efforts to implement ambitious grassroots participatory programs in the United States emphasize unanticipated consequences and unforeseen factors of institutional implementation and practice that frustrate theorists' and practitioners' recurrent enthusiasm for citizen participation in policy making. Philip Selznick's analysis of grassroots participation in the Tennessee Valley Authority warns against linking formal inclusion with the redistribution of power: "Cooptation which results in an actual sharing of power will tend to operate informally, and correlatively, cooptation oriented toward legitimization or accessibility will tend to be effected through formal devices" (1949, p. 260). Selznick is skeptical of formal participation precisely because power in state-centered processes tends to be redistributed informally. Tracing a more recent adoption of participation at the federal level, Wendy Espeland (2000) describes the democratization of decision making within the Bureau of Reclamation following the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. More citizens were included in the process; nevertheless, the deployment of participation within the institution privileged certain voices and groups over others.

The above researchers claim that formal organization and local political contexts affected the implementation of participation in different ways for different stakeholder groups. The common theme underlying these critiques revolves around the unique challenges of trying to implement a formal model of citizen participation from above. Development theorists Bastian and Luckham sum up these challenges of formal design:

> There is a kind of hubris in the idea that constitutional experts, political scientists, donor agencies or even national decision makers can assure democracy or solve conflicts by designing institutions. Indeed institutional

> design is an apparent oxymoron. Institutions in the sense that many political thinkers use the term evolve, grow, become rooted or become "institutionalised"—the metaphors are organic—and are not designed. And where attempts are made to design them, history, "accident and force" and political manipulation may turn them on their heads and produce perverse and unforeseen outcomes. (Bastian and Luckham 2003, p. 304)

Many factors can frustrate top-down design of participation. But place-based contingencies are not unmeasurable or unknowable—and it is also possible that they may reinforce rather than destabilize institutions. Fung acknowledges that "far from being the result of masterful design," participatory institutions "arose haphazardly" in his own case studies (2003, p. 115). The preceding criticisms urge a measured approach when assessing the democratic potential of formal participation in varying contexts, but they also suggest the variety of meanings and intentions that can be ascribed to participants and administrators in formal participatory institutions. Formal participatory institutions are not simply neutral vehicles for soliciting local input. Inasmuch as they make claims to redistribute policy-making power among publicly recognized conferees, the institutions themselves can become controversial objects of local negotiation and favorite subjects of community dialogue.

INFORMAL COMMUNICATION AS AN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY: A PRIVILEGED DOMAIN?

Consensus on the efficacy of informal strategies for deliberation and cooperation is substantial, but literature on informal communication and networking as a companion to state-centered governance focuses almost exclusively on the extent to which informal settings are functional solely for elites. In fact, Stone sees informal arrangements as an inherent part of urban governance: "An urban regime may thus be defined as the informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions" (1989, p. 6). For Stone, informal communication and networking is essential to cooperation:

> Because informal understandings and arrangements provide needed flexibility to cope with nonroutine matters, they facilitate cooperation to a degree that formally defined relationships do not. People who know one another, who have worked together in the past, who have shared in the achievement of a task, and who perhaps have experienced the same crisis are especially likely to develop tacit understandings. If they interact on a continuing basis, they can learn to trust one another and to expect dependability from one another. (Stone 1989, p. 4)

Such sustained interest in cooperation is precisely that advocated by deliberative theorists, but informal regime activity is most often interpreted as inevitably directed toward an inequitable distribution of resources at the expense of broader public benefit and democratic ends; elite cohesiveness is cemented in private, informal settings at public expense (Domhoff 1974).

By contrast, Francesca Polletta has pursued the most thoroughgoing contemporary analysis of the instrumental use of informal practices in sustaining democracy through social movement organizations. Jo Freeman's essay on the "tyranny of structurelessness" in the women's liberation movement famously argues that authentically democratic participation can only be achieved through formal structure, since the alternative is covert, informal structure: "For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities, the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can happen only if they are formalized" (1972, pp. 152–53). Nevertheless, like Stone, Polletta finds that informal relationships are highly effective as an adaptive, voluntary mechanism for stimulating engagement and cooperation among nonelite social movement actors: "Friends are unlikely to suspect each other of cutting corners or cutting deals, and their affection for each other makes the deliberative process tolerable, even pleasurable. . . . The informal and voluntary character of the relationship also means that friends are used to working out the rules as they go along, in ways that best meet their individual and joint needs" (Polletta 2002, p. 153). Informal practices enhance participants' sense of spontaneous, open-ended collaboration and shared interests.

Evidence from the environmental planning literature supports Polletta's claims that intimate, informal groups contribute to enthusiasm for cooperation, despite the fact that "living room meeting" strategies face substantial challenges of consolidating input and scaling up to the regional level (Gericke and Sullivan 1994; Gill 1996). When resource management theorists have examined collaborative regional partnerships like the South Carolina Task Force I study in this article, they have been surprised at their accomplishments but skeptical of their ultimate staying power. In a case study of one such group, Katrina Korfmacher asks, "What can coordination in the context of ecosystem management accomplish without independent funding, political commitment, broad citizen support, and official authority?"

> Ecosystem management theory suggests that it can accomplish little without these resources and structures. The Darby Partnership suggests something else entirely: A loose organizational structure can contribute to voluntary

> efforts to improve ecosystem management that are not otherwise possible. (Korfmacher 2000, p. 549)

Nevertheless, while this watershed partnership demonstrates that "loose coordination is not pointless," Korfmacher asserts that "a stronger institution may be needed" (2000, p. 549).

Many critics have noted that informality of the sort I explore in this study is inherently difficult to institutionalize or expand beyond a limited group. Critics like Elisabeth Clemens argue that Polletta's account of informal practices as effective in shaping social movement group origins does not mitigate the fact that "sometimes 'national or regional organizations' and large-scale mobilizations are precisely what are required to secure results in a large representative democracy" (Clemens 2004, p. 328). Another challenge to the democratic potential of informal communication and networking is suggested by Fishman (2004), who claims that, while informal relationships are essential to political mobilization, they are nevertheless rarely generated instrumentally and arise both within and outside of formal organizations. Despite the importance of intimate ties to expanding public discourse, institutional design of informality is not a solution to the problem: "Public rhetorics that engage or disengage their listeners often rest on microlevel patterns of social connection and conversation on the part of the leaders articulating those rhetorics. . . . institutions alone cannot guarantee the quality of democracy's public sphere of debate" (Fishman 2004, p. 171). How can the potential advantages in informal relationships and settings for dialogue be expanded beyond small group dynamics to community-wide decision making? The analysis to follow explores how informal practices, despite—and in some instances, because of—their inherent limitations and resistance to incorporation in formal models, may become important to larger processes.

INVESTIGATING INFORMAL COMMUNICATION IN FORMAL DELIBERATION

Informality and formality are by no means new areas of exploration for sociology, and can be traced to Weberian theories of bureaucracy and rationality. As a result, they impose especially loaded baggage on the contemporary researcher. Arthur Stinchcombe defines a sociological understanding of informality in terms that are particularly useful for narrowing and differentiating my own analysis of informal communication:

> "Informality" has a strong meaning in sociology, Habermasian philosophy, and much of the humanities: a world of warm personal relations subverting

> formal purposes and rules, a world of feuding and uncontrolled power struggles in the back room, a world of sexual harassment, or of the fraud and force of white collar crime, union busting, and of conspiracies in restraint of trade. By the traditional sociological argument, informality is to formality as machine politics, with its warm personal relations within ethnic neighborhoods and corruption in appointments and contracts, is to "good government." (2001, p. 5)

A few remarks are in order regarding my use of the concept of informality in order to distinguish my approach from one that privileges a particular moral viewpoint of formalization or informalization.[8]

The approach I use in this article involves an exploration of reports of informal communication that took place during state-centered regional planning processes. Rather than idealizing or condemning either formality or informality, my research examines how informal communication within formal processes can produce starkly different interpretations depending on the perspective and social position of particular observers. Determinations about the moral character and power inequalities represented by such communications are critical to observers themselves—so researcher generalizations about smoke-filled rooms versus the sunshine of public meetings do not help us to understand how informal communication becomes politically important to formal processes in different contexts.

What is informal communication and how does one measure it? It is Stinchcombe's classical informality, or "social life that is left out of the governing formality," which I mean to explore in this article. Stinchcombe describes this form of informality as follows:

> Sometimes that can be simple everyday life lived during time at work or influenced by the work setting, irrelevant (in principle) to the activities governed by the formality. Often sociological interest in such informality is to show that it is indeed not irrelevant after all, that friendships can be the basis of a conspiracy to undermine governance by the formality. . . . Sometimes it can be systematically subversive of the formal order, as in informal secrecy about bribery, or a mobilizing conversation for a wildcat strike that looks, from the outside, like friendly conversation . . . in any case, the general point is that the formal system never pretended that it was going to govern the activity in question. (Stinchcombe 2001, p. 8)

Stakeholder recognition and assessment of informal practices within the formal processes that I study is of interest specifically because this type of informality is irrelevant in principle to formally governed deliberative activities. As Stinchcombe points out, sociologists study this activity with

[8] While deliberative democracy theorists tend to favor formality in democratic institutions, Stinchcombe points out that sociologists' "gut reaction" may be to condemn formalization as meaningless ritual or fraud (2001, p. 1).

the understanding that it is indeed relevant to formality, but this sort of informality is highly resistant to incorporation in formal participatory models. Social hours can, of course, be incorporated as weekly rituals that are part of meeting structure, but one cannot mandate after-hours phone calls, the hot topic of local gossip, or the contingent nature of social interconnections through churches, families, schools, and shops.

Given the definition of informal communication above, it would be foolish to attempt to measure the relative amount of informality in each community—informal communication is more the surrounding bath of social life in which formal processes take place than an apposite social activity. This study instead compares stakeholders' understandings of how informal communication affected the formal planning process with their views on process quality. A key difference from the examples cited above as sociologically relevant is worth noting. Rather than focusing on the destabilizing effects of informality on formal processes, I am instead focusing on the extent to which interviewees report that informal communication was related to inclusion, deliberation, and community building in formal processes. Informal communication may have been perceived as subversive, or it may in fact have been perceived as reinforcing these aspects of the formal process. While most of the theorists cited above would predict that informal communication would destabilize formal process and would most likely be deployed by elites, theorists like Naurin and Polletta suggest the potential of informal communication for public-spirited dialogue and for nonelite actors.

First, I evaluate perceptions of formal inclusion (as represented by assessments of the public and private rationales for stakeholders engaging in, opting out of, or being excluded from the formal collaborative group). Next, I compare perceptions of deliberative consensus building within the collaborative groups (assessments of the extent to which conservation plans reflect authentic preference change and open-ended, transparent decision making). Both of these outcomes reflect key aspirations of participatory democratic process as a "politics of fairness and reason" (Fung 2003, p. 111). Natural resource management researchers describe these aspects of stakeholder reception more mundanely as components of "procedural legitimacy" or process fairness (Gericke and Sullivan 1994; Hunt and Haider 2001; Landre and Knuth 1993; Lauber and Knuth 1999; Lawrence, Daniels, and Stankey 1997; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Smith and McDonough 2001). Both outcomes also relate to the key arguments of deliberative critics—that formal inclusion and transparency do not insure a fair hearing and that pressure for consensus marginalizes less powerful actors in collaborative relationships.

Finally, I compare stakeholder assessments of the role of informal communication in the collective social capital built through the decision-

making process, as exemplified by their perspectives on new networks and participatory initiatives that grew from the two cooperative efforts examined in this article. Here, I use the term social capital to describe the properties of social networks that make collaborative action on conservation possible, such that "networks of civic engagement," like the groups studied here, can "facilitate coordination and communication" in larger contexts than relations within the group (Sirianni and Friedland 2001, pp. 13–14). My division of the analysis between perceptions of inclusion and consensus building that occurred in the process (social capital related to shared understanding, trust, and reciprocity *within* the group), versus perceptions of the elements of social capital that Innes and Booher (1999) describe as "second order effects" and "third order effects" (social capital related to new networks, initiatives, resources, and discourses emerging *from* the group) can be likened to the distinction between "bonding" versus "bridging" social capital (Gittel and Vidal 1998, p. 15).[9] Putnam points out that these are worth distinguishing from each other for their relative emphasis on reinforcing internal or external ties, but notes that they represent a spectrum of activity (2002, p. 22). In organizing my analysis of stakeholder assessments, I analyze perceptions of these internally oriented and externally oriented social process outcomes separately. For the sake of clarity, I use the term "consensus building" to refer to the former, and reserve the terms "social capital" or "community building" for the latter.

It is critical to note here that the stakeholder assessments I am studying are not an indicator of overall project "success." Success is discussed and measured by informants in a variety of ways, from acreage conserved to federal funding received to lack of controversy or contention, and I will certainly discuss these assessments in terms of their relationship (or nonrelationship) to stakeholder assessments of informal communication and procedural legitimacy. However, this study is much more limited in scope: it tests the ideals of formal participation in collaborative decision making—specifically inclusion, deliberative transparency, and social capital—against theorists' own assumptions about the benefits of formality for perceptions of process fairness and legitimacy. If these goals are frustrated in actual practice, it is certainly appropriate to reevaluate researchers' belief in increased community building and cooperation as an inevitable product of participatory best practices.

[9] Woolcock similarly highlights this distinction but refers to it as "integration" vs. "linkage" (1998, p. 168).

COLLABORATIVE REGIONAL PLANNING BODIES AS ILLUSTRATIVE CASES OF STATE-CENTERED DELIBERATIVE DECISION MAKING

Each of the cases studied represents a group that brought together public and private entities over the last two decades in order to deliberate on land conservation priorities within a particular region. In view of the power and resources channeled through these groups and their independence as regional entities, I call both regional decision-making bodies. The chief factors considered here are differences in governance and inclusion in each case (see table 1).

San Diego's Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) is organized along the lines generally understood by theorists to represent the principles of empowered participatory governance (Thomas 2001).[10] Decision making over development and conservation plans affecting endangered species in the selected region have been devolved to local stakeholders who are members of a formally recognized MSCP Working Group with binding decision-making authority. This group focuses primarily on bringing together public officials, developers, and environmentalists. These local stakeholders participate in a public deliberative process geared toward capacity building among local interests and empowerment through locally brokered consensus and compromise. The process is overseen by public planners from the county and the city, although the federal government has final oversight over the decisions. By contrast, the South Carolina Lowcountry's ACE (Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto Rivers) Basin Task Force uses a consensus-based style of decision making limited to an elite group composed exclusively of federal and state agency officials, established state and national conservation interest groups, and landowners of conserved properties. The ACE Task Force draws its leadership from this pool of private landowners, who have ultimate decision-making authority over the public officials who serve as its members. Most studies of participation have focused on inclusion as an end result—and San Diego is clearly superior in this regard, with 29 working group members and over 200 participants listed in the MSCP report, as compared to the meager eight task force members in the Lowcountry case. I am more interested, however, in stakeholders' own assessments of deliberative quality and democratic potential in these very different collaborative re-

[10] There is some disagreement among empowered participatory governance and empowered deliberation theorists over whether habitat conservation planning efforts (HCPs) as a class truly fulfill the EPG model since everyday citizens are typically not interested in direct participation (see Thomas [2001] for an analysis of HCP limitations). Nevertheless, the San Diego MSCP is generally agreed to represent the sort of HCP that most resembles a collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders (Karkkainen 2003, p. 212).

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF REGIONAL DECISION-MAKING BODIES

Regional Decision-making Body	MSCP	ACE BTF
Governance	Public, devolved to city and county administrators, dominated by new regional developers' and environmental groups	Public-private, dominated by long-term national and state level conservation NGOs
Leadership	Chair: mayor's deputy; vice-chair: developers' group representative	Chair: private landowner
Inclusion of interested parties	Citizen working group (invited), municipal and scientific advisory boards, public workshops and hearings	Invited group of agency, third sector, and corporate decision makers and landowners

NOTE.—MSCP is the Multiple Species Conservation Program, operating in San Diego, Calif., from 1989 to the present (working group: 1991–97). The ACE BTF, or ACE Basin Task Force, is located in the South Carolina Lowcountry and has functioned from 1988 to the present.

gional planning processes, structured by federal and state resource agency officials for similar purposes at approximately the same time (the late 1980s and early 1990s).

Despite the differences in their governance style and participatory approach, the two cases selected are actually quite similar in terms of the scale and scope of their ambition to balance conservation and development concerns in popular coastal regions. Each planning effort was initiated with prompting from federal officials and focuses on "comprehensive" conservation, meaning that each has identified a multijurisdiction target region containing approximately 200,000 acres of open space. Both seek to conserve and link habitats within the larger region sufficient to maintain viable populations for valued species. In the face of rapid coastal growth and piecemeal conservation and mitigation efforts, both decision-making bodies attempt to agree on overarching conservation priorities on the basis of remaining undeveloped land and biological habitat data. Practically, this means overlaying maps of potentially developable real estate over maps of existing habitat areas and prioritizing the conservation of undeveloped land according to its habitat importance. Both of these models reject an earlier era of balancing conservation and development through more piecemeal "mitigations," in which development of one area was compensated for by conservation of another, regardless of their rel-

ative habitat value.[11] Whereas the working group experienced direct federal oversight as a result of its use as an alternative to Endangered Species Act enforcement, the task force is equally policy oriented inasmuch as its formation resulted from federal wetland and waterfowl conservation legislation, and state centered inasmuch as it is accountable to federal and state agencies for the public conservation dollars it receives.[12]

This accountability involves a commitment to the involvement of stakeholders of varying kinds. Broadly defined, stakeholders include any community member, organization, or corporation potentially affected by planning activities, from private citizens, to environmental interest groups, to business associations, to foundations and corporations. Concrete interests

[11] Although both face a common deliberative problem of setting habitat conservation priorities in estuarine landscapes also targeted as priorities by developers, their method of approach once priorities have been determined is different. In the San Diego working group, priority lands are legally designated as off-limits for future development with the consent of property owners and willing sellers. The task force attempts to persuade existing landowners to conserve at least some part of priority properties through sale or conservation easement donation to a public entity, a land trust, or a nonprofit conservation organization. Task force activities involve producing baseline data for potential properties, organizing real estate financing for the purchase, bringing together buyers and sellers, ensuring the endowment of proper conservation management once acquired, and lobbying for legislation and financing supportive of these goals. Since the task force plays a strategy and coordination role, all of these separate activities are undertaken independently by interest group or agency members, and even by organizations that are not official members—leading to potential competition among stakeholders for prime properties. In comparison, the MSCP sets aside targets for conservation acreage within municipal subarea plans, and city and county planners are allowed to issue federal take permits if developments accord with the priorities of the MSCP plan. Meanwhile, county, state, and federal wildlife officials acquire priority conservation areas from willing sellers in "rough-step" with acreage lost to development (County of San Diego 2006). In this sense, task force activities are predominantly oriented toward mobilizing private citizens to conserve as much acreage as possible and applying for state and federal support for these efforts under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), while the MSCP is predominantly oriented to achieving a balance among endangered species and development interests within the region and then transferring the resulting plans to federal, state, and local agencies for implementation under multiple sources of federal, state, and local funding.

[12] Private matching dollars used under NAWCA require the same accountability standards as federal dollars (USFWS 2006), and are subject to audit, monitoring, and programmatic evaluation. Such evaluation includes assessment of the extent to which projects include public input, landowner consent, and substantive organizational cooperation (USFWS 2006). From 1991 to 2005, the ACE Basin received $8 million of NAWCA funding from the FWS for wetland acquisitions totaling 31,000 acres; this was matched by $16 million from partners (Watson 2005). From 1999 to 2004, federal, state, and foundation grant funding for acquisition, management, and monitoring of MSCP lands in San Diego County totaled $21.1 million (1999–2004 MSCP Annual Report data). Federal agencies had acquired 6,800 acres, state agencies had acquired 14,300 acres, and the county had acquired 4,100 acres for conservation under the MSCP by 2004 (County of San Diego 2004).

or "stakes" such as land use, ownership, investment, or management within the region or adjacent to it typically produce much greater interest in involvement, although resident and even nonresident groups may participate as stakeholders more on the basis of ideological commitments (fiscal responsibility or opposition to development in general, e.g.) than on the basis of interest in the particulars under negotiation. Stakeholders can be elites or insurgents, powerful consortiums or everyday citizens—as such, some stakeholders may view their engagement in terms of social movement activism, while some may see their engagement as part of the normal course of business. Stakeholders are not simply all those who end up participating, however. Some interested parties may nevertheless be excluded or may opt not to participate. Usually, participants who are national-level decision makers, public employees, planners, and scientists are not identified as stakeholders, except in cases where they represent, for example, a regionally based entity like a federal reserve or refuge (a refuge manager), or a private organization of scientists.

Involving stakeholders in both of these cases meant inviting them to an ongoing series of discussions entailing substantive deliberation over project goals and recurring consideration of relevant issues. These might take place in a hearing room with a dais in a public building, as in the MSCP Working Group, or in the dining room of a restored plantation house turned refuge headquarters, as in the ACE Basin Task Force. Such stakeholder processes are not public hearings, where the public has a limited opportunity to "comment" on proposed plans, or individualized consultations or outreach sessions between public officials and individual stakeholders. In both of these cases, potentially adversarial or competitive stakeholders met face to face on a repeated basis in the company of assorted public officials.[13] The repeated basis may have ranged from two to three hour meetings during the working day once a month, as in California, to a half-day affair every quarter, as in South Carolina. State-centered planning processes based on stakeholder collaboration are a labor- and time-intensive form of political activity as compared to more standard democratic formats such as council meetings or hearings.

Because of their similarities in approaching comprehensive conservation planning, both groups have substantive similarities in stakeholder membership that make the comparison of differences more striking. Federal investments in these sites mean that Fish and Wildlife Service and

[13] While the contentious climate in San Diego between environmentalists and developers may be well known, the deeply felt convictions against environmental regulation and federal government interference in property matters were potentially fertile sources of friction between politically conservative landowners and public employees or conservation NGOs in South Carolina.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration staff are engaged in addition to state and county officials from wildlife, coastal, parks and recreation, planning, and heritage departments and agencies. The analysis is based on comparison of the perspectives of a cohort of very similar interviewees performing the same sorts of activities in both sites. These individuals might be expected to have similar experiences by virtue of their similar positions within parallel organizations—occasionally as regional or local chairs of the same national organization. Common interviewees included land trust directors, heritage program directors, refuge and reserve managers, state fish and game and parks and recreation officials, conservation biologists, state coastal commission employees, water quality groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs): the Trust for Public Land, the Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Audubon, Sierra Club, and native plant societies. Fifty-two organization representatives out of 69 community stakeholders and officials, or over 75% of the sample, had organizational counterparts in the other case. A core group of stakeholders from the same agencies and organizations appears in both sites, as might be expected given the similarities in coastal resources and the interests these generate on a regional level.

The research described in this article is based on intensive interviews of one to two hours conducted over 13 months in four states and the District of Columbia in 2001, 2003, and 2004. Wherever possible, I have interviewed current and former members of the partnerships. In addition, I have interviewed community stakeholders who were not participants but were engaged in community decision making and conservation in some capacity relating to the site at the local, regional, state, or national level. In total, I conducted 76 interviews for the research, with 69 regional, state, and local interviewees and an additional seven national-level decision makers. All persons interviewed in the course of the research are referred to with pseudonyms derived from a random name generator. Identifying details of the watersheds and partnerships under question, and of authors of publicly available documents cited in the analysis, have been retained. This is both for appropriate attribution and crediting of written sources, and because the geographical, biological, and social particularities of places and their unique histories are of special concern for the analysis. Generic descriptions or pseudonyms of regional and local organizations are used within the text, and some additional identifying details have been disguised depending on context and sensitivity of the information conveyed. When first introduced, an organizational pseudonym is indicated by quotes.

Stakeholders and decision makers were identified through official membership in the task force or working group, affiliation with these entities, and local conservation directories and networks, in addition to snowball

sampling, which produced the same names. In both sites, interviews were conducted until interview data yielded substantial repetition and little new information. As such, the research for this article represents a wide-ranging survey of how the partnerships were understood by involved and uninvolved stakeholders in both communities. I also attended partnership and NGO-related events and activities such as parties, public presentations, and stakeholder meetings during my residence in both sites. I consulted organizational records, web sites, newsletters, annual reports, and maps, and performed content analysis of two years of daily newspaper coverage and letters to the editor on regional conservation issues in order to complement information gained in the interviews.[14] Interviewees were challenged to reflect on their role in collaborative regional planning. Interview questions addressed cooperative strategies and compromises reached in planning and implementation in the partnership as well as lessons learned and applied from previous partnership challenges. Whereas academic sources and stakeholder studies supplemented the San Diego case research, very little research is available for the Lowcountry case.

FORMAL INCLUSION IN THE WORKING GROUP AND THE TASK FORCE

While the San Diego MSCP solicited input from over 200 sources on the habitat conservation plan, the 29-member MSCP Working Group and the eight-member ACE Basin Task Force both recognized the value of a formal decision-making body with stable membership. As the size of the two bodies indicates, participants had differing opinions on the value of including large numbers of stakeholders as formal players. For the task force, a small group that excluded potential critics and groups with limited capacity was critical to producing consensus quickly and efficiently. For the MSCP Working Group, including as many stakeholders of opposing interests as possible was critical for procedural legitimacy. Participants

[14] Document text was collected daily from newspaper web sites under the broadest possible understanding of conservation-related community issues (not through electronic keyword searches) and entered into an electronic database. I used hand coding for interviews, organizational documents, and historical records, while keyword scanning was used in the case of newspaper coverage and letters to the editor once this data had been collected and entered into a full-text searchable and sortable database. The newspaper and letters database contains over 2,000 text files collected from regional and local newspapers from December 2003 through December 2005. Differences in practices of electronic posting and letter publication for these newspapers mandates caution when making conclusions about the quality of local reception represented by the content of newspaper coverage.

actively linked the quantity of formal participants to the quality of participatory input they would be afforded within the process.

The formal process in San Diego attracted more participants by design, in part because the decision to participate carried particular messages about an organization's or individual's standing in the decision-making community. Iris Greene, a project manager for one of the environmental consultants, reports in hindsight on the six-year process:

> In 1991, that was just really a new notion. . . . But what came out of that really was an incredible partnership of developers, environmental groups, different federal, state, and local agencies, and not as many cities as probably would have liked to have been involved. But it was a partnership that realized that land use planning is going to be different from now on and these are the partners that have to be involved. (Interview, January 2004)

As Greene indicates, the newly minted partners realized that, regardless of their feelings for other participants, the other stakeholders had to be involved in order to give their decisions the greatest scope and legitimacy possible. Many participants welcomed the chance to have a more formal role than standard public comment venues allowed. Virginia Reade, the executive director of a small chapter of a birding group, says that formality was critical to making participation count in the MSCP: "It has to be formalized, otherwise, you have no leverage; the more formal a role, the better off you are. . . . It's much better to get in the process earlier if possible" (interview, March 2004).

The powerful attraction of contributing to policy making in the formal process actually led to the creation of two new groups whose representatives became reliable spokespersons in the local and national press for the opportunities provided by habitat conservation planning. These two entrepreneurial groups were the "Habitat Conservation Coalition" (HCC), a "landowners group" of developers formed in 1989 that lobbied for the creation of the MSCP in San Diego County and was represented on the working group by two individuals, one of whom served as cochair. The other group was "Habitat Action Now" (HAN), an environmental organization formed in 1991 specifically to participate in habitat conservation planning (HCP) processes in southern California. To the extent that HAN was staffed by two professionals already deeply involved in planning (one was a county planning commissioner) and that developers' interests were already represented on the working group by representatives of three development corporations and their local association, there was a clear benefit for formal recognition as an independent interest group within the MSCP. These payoffs came in the form of multiple awards for participants

and recognition as leaders in the burgeoning field of habitat conservation planning in the region, ensuring such groups roles in future HCPs.[15]

By comparison, in South Carolina, the task force explicitly rejected groups that could gain in prominence by participating in the process. Will Reidel, a local lawyer, landowner, and the first chair of the task force, sums up this position: "I've sort of had the policy that you earn a spot on the task force. Nobody can come to the table who cannot contribute. We've had an enormous number of people beg to be involved in it but I just don't see where you're going to add anything" (interview, August 2001). In order to accommodate the demand for involvement, the task force welcomes otherwise excluded stakeholders to sit in on their meetings as unofficial "guests." Current chair Philip Rhodes describes this as an effective tool for controlling demand for membership by those who are seeking the reflected light of the task force:

> A lot of people want to be associated with us; a lot of people are always trying to jump on the train. The only way you can get to be on the ACE Basin Task Force is be a player. You've got to have done—you have to have affirmatively demonstrated your value by having done something. Not thinking about doing something. So that's a really good way to tell people that are coming up: "We'd love to have you join as soon as you get out there and make some good things happen, we'd be glad to consider, we'd be happy to have you come to our meetings every so often as a guest, and whatever, but to actually be listed, you've got to be materially assisting." (Interview, October 2003)

This guest attendance policy also defused demands for participation from potentially disruptive stakeholders. Rhodes notes, "We've been really careful not to allow people to enter the task force who don't share our vision because it would be fatal. . . . They'll get bored with it and go on their

[15] In establishing his credentials as a "leader and facilitator of regional conservation activities" and his company's "poster child" status in regional conservation, one developer who served on the MSCP as a representative of HCC lists his awards in testimony before the House Resources Committee: "In 1998, I was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation from Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt for our contributions to the San Diego County MSCP. In 1999, I received a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition from Congressman Brian Bilbray again for our environmental contributions. Also in 1999, I received a California State Senate Certificate of Recognition from Senator David Kelley related to our receipt of a Peacemaker Award from the San Diego Mediation Center" (Committee on Resources 1999). The two founders of HAN list similar organizational credentials ("a regional leader in conservation and growth management"), and similar awards: the David Gaines Award from the Planning and Conservation League, the American Planning Association California Chapter Outstanding Distinguished Leadership: Layperson Award, State Planning Commissioner of the Year, the San Diego Mediation Center's Peacemaker Award, and the national Alexander Calder Prize for business-conservation partnerships from International Paper and the Conservation Fund (HAN web site).

way" (interview, October 2003). The task force's caution in adding new members prevented it from the greater discomfort of exiling former members, according to Reidel: "We started with a small group and we added, rather than start with a large group and pare down" (interview, August 2001). Philip Rhodes describes how publicly excluding people at the outset might involve some disappointment but this is better than the alternative:

> You can't have too big of an inner circle. You can't have players that aren't playing. You're better off to keep it small and bring them in as they start to get it and start to participate than it is to go line them up all at once and you know, all those relationships aren't there. You know, I think that would be a big mistake to bring too many people in at the front end. . . . We don't worry about feelings. (Interview, October 2003)

Having stakeholders knocking at the door is preferable to having dissatisfied or disenchanted former members for the tight-knit community of conservation decision makers in South Carolina.

Despite the appeal of formal inclusion in San Diego, many activist groups (mainly environmental and property rights groups) and national environmental groups found the process threatening and chose not to participate. For far-right and far-left activists, the MSCP's interest in balancing growth and conservation was the wrong approach from the start. For national groups, the fear of being formally associated with the MSCP was not sufficient to counter the potential input they could gain by participating. Jeffrey Ecker, the county's planning representative, describes this dilemma: "That's kind of the choice that a lot of the groups have to make, you know, they can stay outside and be pure or they can jump in and get a little bit of mud on them, you know?" (interview, January 2004). But national groups were also sensitive to being perceived as intruding in San Diego politics. According to Ben Lowry of the Nature Conservancy, backstage financing work was more appropriate for his group than a public role in deliberations: "TNC kind of hangs out of it. And rightfully so, TNC shouldn't do it. . . If I were to have my druthers, I'd rather have TNC go get the money and someone else take credit for it because a lot of it should be local" (interview, March 2004).

Groups that opted out still played an indirect role in the MSCP deliberations. Virginia Reade from the small birding group sees outsider groups with no formal role as actually giving leverage to more moderate environmental groups inside the process: "On the pragmatism to the idealism scale, it's a common story, we need the people way out there throwing stones to put pressure on" (interview, March 2004). Rather than replacing the adversarial model of interest group contention, decision making in the MSCP process for Reade seems to reflect others' claims that consensus-

based and conflict-based tactics may actually be complementary in certain contexts (Fung et al. 2004; Pellow 1999). Deliberative democracy theorist Craig Thomas notes that litigious practices by environmental groups were part of what brought groups to the habitat conservation planning table in the first place, so "forum-shopping is an inherent part of the process" (2003, p. 163).

In the more restricted body in the Lowcountry, much less was at stake, and many groups opted out not because they were interested in critiquing from the outside, but because they saw the partnerships' activities as supplemental or incidental to their own goals. Anne Deane, the land use director of "Sea Island Defenders," the regional conservation activist organization, describes the task force as "a partner with us in every sense," despite the fact that her organization has no official role: "We do not attend the focus meetings and I've attended as a guest at a few, but they can't really get into the nitty-gritty of who owns what and who's willing to sell" (interview, October 2003). Because the San Diego deliberations were open to the public, concerns about procedural legitimacy favored inclusion, regardless of organizational tenure or community standing—a factor that ironically prevented some categories of established organizations from participating. In the Lowcountry, organizational legitimacy was paramount for formal inclusion, and damage to procedural legitimacy from this exclusion was understood as the cost of keeping the "inner circle" functioning smoothly. How did these trade-offs affect the internal deliberations of the formal groups, and the reception of their decisions in the larger community?

FORMAL DELIBERATION IN PUBLIC SETTINGS: PERFORMING TRANSPARENCY IN THE WORKING GROUP

Many participants in the MSCP reinforced the prevailing assumption of researchers that formal participation in deliberation is a "win-win" for everyone involved (Walker and Hurley 2004). Former mayor Susan Golding proudly announced "Everybody wins!" in a profile of the MSCP on the *Newshour* with Jim Lehrer (Kaye 1997). Surprising affinities were discovered that may never have surfaced had groups not been forced to get to know each other and the nuances of their positions. Angela Bernstein, the conservation chair of a local native plants group, was surprised to discover that, as a "weed person," she could find common ground with the ranchers whom her group usually opposes (interview, January 2004). Bobby Goode of HAN claimed that a lot of the working group's traction on difficult issues could be attributed to turning points of mutual feeling: "At some point you realize that the mutual goal can serve several different

objectives. It can serve their objectives, it can serve your objectives, and the cliché is you start rolling together. There's a very discernible moment when that occurs, not unilaterally, not with everybody, but you begin to get a sense of momentum. And I've seen that over and over again in the process" (interview, April 2004).

These high-profile cooperative successes were accompanied by individual and group assessments of the extent to which the public deliberations were affected by informal communication and private deal making happening offstage. Outsiders maligned the theatricality of the public deliberations, playing off the notion of the MSCP as redolent of Russian propaganda and Soviet-style centralized planning. Both the extreme right and the extreme left saw the MSCP as an illegitimate civil process because smallholders and small species were threatened by dominant interests in conjunction with the regulatory muscle of the state. Accusations of "socialism" and "communism" were not uncommon from property rights groups (Chase 1997, p. 30), but they were generally laughed off by interviewees who had participated in the process.[16] Jerry Younts, a vocal opponent who claims "San Diego is run by the development community," got increasingly animated when discussing his anger with the MSCP process: "It has no integrity whatsoever. It's just a showpiece, a Potemkin village, we can prove that!" (interview, February 2004). County planners tended to take criticism of the MSCP as an undercover developer giveaway more seriously. An information sheet for the MSCP refutes the question "Is the MSCP just a method for developers to get around the federal and state endangered species acts?" (County of San Diego 2006).

For those who participated in the process, the prospects for authentic public deliberations unmarred by informal negotiation were more complicated. Rather than breaking down barriers to cooperation, the high-stakes policy outcome often amplified the tenor of deliberations and the difficulty for individual groups to satisfy the conflicting demands of their own constituents, their deliberative collaborators, public officials, and the administrative hierarchy of the organizations they represented. In accord with Iris Marion Young's (2000) claim that the pressure for consensus and rational argument in deliberation hampers the authentic expression of differences, Angela Bernstein of the native plants group relates her sense of how volunteers must control their self-presentation: "It helps if you show up places on time. It helps if you come to the meeting prepared, you've read the documents, you've discussed it with other people before you walk in the door. You cannot lose your temper. There are people who

[16] Despite these dismissals, Walker and Hurley (2004) describe a campaign using this frame in a similar California resource planning process that was successfully derailed.

tend to get angry easily and can't hide it too well. You have to have a really thick skin" (interview, January 2004).

But pressure within the deliberations for consensus and professionalism from fellow collaborators was in many senses the least of the stress these stakeholders were experiencing. As Reade of the birding group points out, environmental groups could counter pressure for consensus and force compromise on their own more moderate positions by expressing the pressure to resist that they felt from less moderate groups throwing stones "way out there"—but who were often observing in the public meeting room where deliberations were held. Explicit pressure that was harder to communicate within the deliberations involved pressure on agency officials from within their own hierarchy to make the process a success and forge consensus on viewpoints where lower-level staff frequently wished they could take a stand against developers.[17] These agency employees in turn put backstage pressure on environmental representatives who were seen as more capable of resisting the pressure for consensus. Volunteer representatives could use their supposed unfamiliarity with the rules of the game and the marginal tolerance for their "eccentricity" as an excuse for holding the line against more powerful opponents. In Bernstein's words, "They do use us as the bogeymen at the [wildlife] agency" (interview, January 2004).

Bernstein laments that having to keep common ground with agency officials private and resisting pressure for consensus on behalf of others also means performing an unpopular role: "To the extent that we provide that, I'm glad. But I regret having to have been a bitch, okay? . . . An aspect of my position in the habitat plan is I got to be the environmental bitch while other people got to be the friendly, let's-make-it-happen people. I hadn't experienced it to that extent before" (interview, January 2004). While critics of deliberation like Jane Mansbridge emphasize the importance of "strengthening the will—even the obligation—of the dissenters to stand out against the looming consensus" by finding allies and allowing vetoes (Fung et al. 2004, p. 49), Bernstein shows that in some of the deliberations for the habitat plan, volunteer environmentalists actually felt behind-the-scenes pressure to act adversarially. This caused environmental groups to play the role of lone obstructionist more often than they may have otherwise. On the other hand, representatives of such groups also felt extreme pressure from the administrative hierarchy and local

[17] Koontz (1999) finds evidence that devolution to lower-level administrators is not associated with greater enthusiasm for participation; in fact, national officials are more likely to support participation than state officials. My own interviews support this claim, as in the San Diego case described here and in Walley's quote below.

members within their own groups to resist consensus and explain deliberative compromises that appeared to be concessions from the outside.

Despite the public quality of the deliberations, many outsiders suspected opaque negotiations and power imbalances behind the scenes. Perceptions of the transparency of MSCP decisions provide a useful guide to the limits of "openness," even in a formal process with so many public representatives at the table that repeated staging of secret negotiations within the MSCP process itself would have been relatively difficult to manage. For some observers, the public frontstage of formal deliberation suggested in its very existence the presence of some backstage or hidden or larger reality. National groups in particular were wary of local chapters setting precedents; they suspected that the potential to gain long-term leverage and power within the decision-making community for small-capacity local chapters might come at the expense of the ability of the larger organization to advocate against compromising habitat protection in the future. Volunteers with local chapters of national organizations like Sandra Leath, the conservation chair of the Sierra Club, had to do much more work within their own organizational hierarchy to win approval for their positions in the deliberations. Leath had to gain approval from the land use committee, the conservation committee, and the executive committee of her chapter. She describes the pressure she felt to sustain informal working relationships with elected officials that created room for continuing debate between the group and the county:

> When we were approving the county [plan], there was one supervisor who was very supportive of the MSCP, one of her staff members kept getting on my tail, she kept calling me: "Is the Sierra Club going to approve the MSCP?" because it gives strength to that social process. I was working on that like crazy because there were people who were very upset about the wetlands issue and felt we shouldn't approve. I was very proud that we reached an agreement, but in our approval, in my approval speech to the [county board of] supervisors' meeting, I would say that the wetlands issue was not approved, we felt something needed to be done about the wetlands. But we did approve it. (Interview, January 2004)

These volunteers suffered frustration when they found that the deliberative compromises they were so proud of achieving within the planning process and with fellow chapter members were not looked upon favorably by state-level staff. As a result of a formal complaint lodged against the local chapter, Leath describes how the state organization imposed formal requirements for future participation in MSCPs: "They were required to look into it and they set up a committee and the committee made some rules and regulations, and the national organization made some rules and regulations about HCPs" (interview, January 2004). Whereas the state

and national levels of the organization had concerns about the MSCP as a one-off process that might set a dangerous precedent, Leath saw the process as an opportunity for much greater participation than had been afforded the environmental community in San Diego in previous planning efforts. Local chapter groups were less willing to be seen as obstructionist than their national organizations, since rejecting the MSCP on principle would inhibit their input being taken seriously in community deliberations.

The data collected in this project do not allow for an assessment of how much backstage deal making among MSCP participants may have subverted the deliberative ethic of the overall process. Despite some suspicions of deliberative "window-dressing" and "behind the scenes" decisions (Merrick 1998), the length of time it took to reach consensus and the frustrations many felt with the messiness of the process indicate, if anything, a remarkably scrupulous effort to accommodate diverse viewpoints in a very large group.[18] But the foregoing discussion of the informal pressures experienced from outside the formal deliberation process demonstrates the extent to which the "reality" of transparency does not matter. Regardless of whether participants themselves experience public deliberations as authentically cooperative, the discussions and position taking within are less public spirited than outsider directed, as Naurin notes (2002). Compromises and consensus are made by group representatives in the context of awareness of how these agreements and their subtleties will be perceived by different constituencies of varying scope. Environmental nonelites in San Diego lamented the fact that locally grounded political knowledge and place-based networking outside the process (perceptions of provincialism from within their own organizational hierarchy and relationships with nonparticipants in the local environmental community) inhibited their engagement with fellow collaborators inside the sessions.

Because of these difficulties, nonelite social movement actors like many of the environmental group representatives in San Diego may withdraw from public deliberations exhausted and demoralized—and not necessarily by the process itself. They may retain belief in the process and fellow participants, but feel hamstrung by a lack of trust, support, and cooperation from within their own organizations or the larger environmental

[18] This scrupulosity itself may be interpreted as intended for public consumption. Nevertheless, the pursuit of cooperation in San Diego is notable for its adherence to EPG ideals when compared with alternative HCP processes which did not bother with participation at all, like the Orange County process Hogan describes (2003). Additionally, the fact that the final plan did not impose solutions for particularly contentious areas provides evidence that consensus was not forced in areas of substantial disagreement.

community. Despite the claims of deliberative democracy theorists that "perpetual" participation is potentially ideal, the ending point of the long seven-year process provided a convenient exit for participants like Bernstein and Leath to move on to other projects or to retire formally from the deliberation scene. Not surprisingly, those professional players least tied to broader constituencies and memberships—local organizational entrepreneurs who organized to lobby for and then participate in the process on both the environmental and development industry side—may find their own public profile significantly strengthened by their interest in continuing to participate in public deliberation. HAN representative Bobby Goode describes this as "the self-limiting reality": "There's only a handful of people that are involved with the MSCP that have had a continuum of engagement. It's just different jobs and moving on and so on, just life. In San Diego, I know there's less than 10 people that have been in there since the beginning [1991]" (interview, April 2004). This smaller group of long-haul participants represented a reversion to the "usual suspects" model of planning politics, where community elites with vested interests in negotiation tend to outlast newer faces at the table. Similar habitat conservation planning efforts were adopted for other regions in the county, but county officials directed planner Jeffrey Ecker to revert to the old model of ad hoc consultative meetings with community groups: "They didn't want to have an ongoing stakeholder group. . . . So we're trying to do it that way rather than have a formal set of folks that are at the table, and I think it's working but we'll find out at the end of the day" (interview, February 2004).

The end result of the San Diego process, where collaboration produced conflict in the larger environmental community over strategies of engagement (Pollak 2001, p. 30), and continuing deliberative dialogue was narrowed to a core group of agency officials, planners, and interest group professionals, illustrates the insights of Naurin, Selznick, and other critics of state-centered grassroots efforts. Certainly, these critics are correct that without understanding the local political landscape and institutional and organizational missions under which public deliberations take place, one cannot understand the limited potential for power redistribution in formal processes. But public deliberation is experienced as a contradiction for some players more than for others, and pressures for consensus and rationality are not singular or strictly internal forces in deliberation. Membership groups and more traditional social movement organizations experienced external backstage pressures for resistance within public deliberation as requiring excruciatingly nuanced public performances, whereas interest group professionals were better able to reconcile stronger internal pressures for consensus with their own organizational missions. Informal communication was not strictly the domain of elite players in

the case of San Diego. In fact, elites operating within the process had the most to gain by sustaining other participants' belief in the authenticity of the deliberations; given their power as formal participants in the proceedings, they had very little need to engage in backstage deal making. Informal communication in the context of the public deliberations was most salient inasmuch as it created tensions for nonelites between their struggle for attention space and authenticity within the deliberations and their capacity to retain legitimacy in their larger community of interest.

INFORMAL COMMUNICATION IN PRIVATE SETTINGS: NATURALIZING AUTHENTICITY AND INTIMACY IN THE TASK FORCE

Contrasting the inclusive, public deliberations in the San Diego MSCP to the exclusive, private deliberations within the ACE Basin Task Force illustrates the vastly different perceptions of the role of informal communication to procedural and organizational legitimacy when participation is limited to a small group. The closed, public-private deliberations of the task force members mobilized among a few environmental groups ongoing collaborations so powerful that they came to resemble an elite governing regime more than a coalition between NGOs and public agencies. In fact, consensus was so naturalized as to hardly require formalization once stakeholders had been assembled, according to members like Philip Rhodes: "So what we needed here was to bring those people together with a shared vision. . . . The same themes are going to come naturally from each one of them. It's not something that got written down and then memorized. It's something they believe and feel" (interview, October 2003). Whereas national groups in San Diego preferred to cede decision making to local stakeholders, national groups like TNC and Ducks Unlimited saw their ability to stem organizational pressures on local group representatives in the Lowcountry as key to their local relevance. The power to exclude and deliberate privately in the task force is explicitly linked to the capacity of the body to take the interests of larger publics, not individual organizations or fragmented constituencies, into consideration.

As the experience in San Diego shows, informal backstage pressure among groups with similar interests but different approaches may lead to frustration and disillusionment. Informal backstage pressure in the task force came from private landowners with cross-cutting affiliations and was oriented toward making sure interest group representatives did not compete or promote their own missions at the expense of group consensus. Philip Rhodes openly claims that the board commitments of landowner

members help them to control the competitive instincts of professional conservation organization staffers:

> The staff people at those organizations are measured in part by how many easements they get. And so the task force defuses those pressures. "Okay, well you do this one and you do this one and I'll take this," you know? And because the private landowners are represented on the boards of those organizations, the private landowners have a way to kind of go over the staff's head if necessary to the board and say, "These guys have got to calm down." I'm not saying that's the key, but it's just what sort of keeps it from all blowing up, because they are competitive. (Interview, October 2003)

Task force leaders' backstage pressure reinforced pressure for consensus within the group, just as agency higher-ups pressured lower-level staff in San Diego to hew to consensus in the deliberations. But task force members did not believe that restrictive pressures were "the key" to generating cooperation.

Instead, the task force emphasized their ability to socialize together in informal contexts as essential to the ongoing nature and authenticity of their collaboration. Task force members credit their success to the substantial amount of time reserved for informal conversation in their lunch meetings. Each member takes turns hosting a meal for each meeting. These meals enhance the sense of friendly personal competition while diminishing intergroup rivalries, according to Reidel: "We always start with a meal, and everybody tries to outdo each other with a Lowcountry meal. So the first couple of hours are social hours, and we build camaraderie and team work rather than competition amongst organizations" (interview, August 2001). Philip Rhodes describes these extended sessions as lasting at least an hour: "We get together and we always precede our meetings with a meal, at least an hour, maybe an hour and a half of social before and 30 minutes or 20 minutes of social after. . . . I don't know that it's easily replicated" (interview, November 2003).

The substantial task force meals are designed to break down the professional decorum and rational efficiencies of meeting preparation that Bernstein described as mandatory for being taken seriously in the MSCP deliberations. Kathy Walley, a federal agency official, also describes the meal as critical to establishing relationships on issues unrelated to individuals' professional capacity: "This seems basic but every task force meeting starts with a meal. . . . It could be frogmore stew or whatever, so it's kind of good to have that social aspect, chit chat, talk a little not about what you're going to talk about" (interview, August 2001). Frogmore stew is a messy local delicacy of half crabs, shrimp in their shells, corncobs, and smoked sausage that is virtually impossible to eat without using one's hands and a large quantity of napkins. Fried quail over

creamed grits, or the southern dinner of barbecued "meat-and-three" (vegetable sides) are other similarly substantial options that serve to reinforce the place-based geographies of group members while also showcasing the game and fisheries resources they are trying to protect.

Philip Rhodes distinguishes this type of privately prepared collective meal and guest-host dynamic from conference table brown bagging that occurs on other boards or committees: "I'm a member of a lot of boards and have been and it completely changes the whole program when you eat with somebody, when you have that. You don't show up to these noon meetings and there's a sandwich in front of you and you're talking and you're eating and you're all gone by one. . . . It just isn't peanut butter and jelly. It's an effort" (interview, November 2003). In contrast to Walley, Rhodes emphasizes that the social time is strategically useful for sharing information privately without involving the rest of the group: "What it does is it creates an environment for people to get to know each other a lot better than they would otherwise, and to exchange sort of some one-on-one information that maybe isn't really appropriate for the entire meeting and there's a lot of, a real effort to help the other partners with what they've got going on" (interview, November 2003). As Rhodes reveals, this informality is relatively theatrical in nature and by no means a space free of political negotiation, despite the deliberate blurring of personal and professional interactions. A place for sensitive conversations is purposefully made in the company of the rest of the group—a clear contrast to San Diego's closed subcommittee meetings, which prompted suspicions about the authenticity of the public deliberations.

Such seemingly trivial details of lunch meeting protocol as food preparation and hospitality are wholly absent from discussions of how to make consensus work in MSCP deliberations, which may not be surprising since the emphasis in San Diego is on the formalization of consensus, not an insistence on informality and local exceptionalism. But the intimate social activities that take place around the meal are not simply about fostering Stinchcombe's "warm personal relations" that Polletta and Stone find so helpful in creating pleasurable, friendly contexts for decision making. The content shared in these informal discussions reinforces the transparency of the groups' "official" discussion. Travis Wise, an executive of the "Downstate Conservancy," a statewide land trust and task force member, describes working relationships with the national organizations as confessional in nature: "We just work extremely openly, and there's no holds barred, we tell them all our secrets" (interview, November 2003). As members of the task force acknowledge, the ability to forge consensus and change individual preferences is much easier and less messy in a small, private group than in a large public process. But understanding the success of the Lowcountry body as based in a simple trade-off in which

formal public dialogue (and diverse perspectives) lost out to the greater efficiency and trust possible in informal deliberation is missing a large part of the story.

INFORMAL COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC SETTINGS: PRIDE IN LOW PROFILES OUTSIDE THE TASK FORCE

The ACE Basin Task Force did not ignore the necessity of engaging with those in the larger community, but they did not equate formal inclusion with achieving these goals. Participation of those outside the task force was critical to the partnership for producing better conservation outcomes, not for increasing project legitimacy—despite partners' awareness of potential backlash. Wise, like many others, lampoons the bureaucratic mindset that public participation is positive in itself: "'We're here to help the people so all the people can come.' And you accomplish less and less. You know the definition of the zebra? A racehorse designed by a committee" (interview, November 2003). As in their meetings within the exclusive group, the South Carolina task force pursued informal means of soliciting individual support from potential opponents and resistant property owners. Rhodes describes why it is important for the task force to maintain a low profile in mobilizing resistant landowners and sympathetic real estate brokers while avoiding the wrath of property rights' groups: "I mean the task force is nothing. It's a group of people that come together. There's no budget, there's no constitution, there's no bylaws. It's just a meeting that occurs whenever we set the next meeting at the meeting we're at. So there's nothing for anyone to even—there's no way to get at it" (interview, November 2003). Higher-profile tasks like energizing the conservation troops in the general public and educating public officials were delegated to Sea Island Defenders, the powerful regional conservation activist organization and unofficial task force ally; public participation was only valuable to the task force inasmuch as individual members of the public were critical to achieving project goals.

The task force members focused first on convincing resistant locals living on ecologically valuable properties to conserve their land. They adopted an extremely personalized approach, using family members or organizational representatives with the most ties to locals to persuade them that conservation was both a property right and a hallowed local tradition under threat from outsiders. Reidel gets visibly animated when discussing the social networks the partnership leverages: "We never stop asking. We're so strategic in the ACE Basin. We're down to where if we can't get this guy, we work the children. Hell, we work the grandchildren! We connect every day. We sit down and say whosever got the most con-

nections [should approach the landowner]" (interview, August 2001). Despite South Carolinians' famed resistance to public interference in private property matters,[19] the private landowner members are so impassioned about their mission that they actively pursue resistant landowners (in San Diego, these parties were carefully handled to avoid any implication of pressure from the state): "We will never stop, the Trexler family, largest landowner, we haven't gotten but a little bit from them, but we will never stop until the day—and they will feel the pressure from every end. Joe Hageman says, 'I don't want to hear the word easement!' Well, Joe, you're going to hear it, you're going to hear it until finally one day, you're just going to have to do it because all your neighbors are doing it" (interview, August 2001). The low profile of task force members' cooperation and coordination of their efforts with public agency officials is critical to maintaining credibility with conservative property owners deeply distrustful of government.

Partners find that these personalized tactics are far more effective than public informational sessions because so many landowners are guarded about public discussion of conservation; the Downstate Conservancy's Wise describes this strategy as "just worthless": "I was at a seminar for landowners on the M—— River last week and the same people came who came 20 years ago. Nothing's happening. We'll continue to go. But I'm sorry, we're not dedicating a whole lot of time and resources to that" (interview, November 2003). Wise sees his group's attempts to personalize landowner education as necessary responses to citizen avoidance of public processes: "Unfortunately in today's world, people are busy, people are suspicious, and they tend to not want to come and talk about something. The people who need it the most are the ones who are the most sensitive . . . they understand that they're just going to air their dirty linen" (interview, November 2003). Members of the task force generally avoided public forums not because they thought such processes were messy, but because they found such processes unproductive because the citizens they were trying to reach thought such processes were messy.

Despite the aggressiveness of these "quiet" tactics, conservation provided clear economic gains for landowners and developers. Task force members saw themselves as responsible for preventing co-optation of conservation and ensuring the integrity of the conservation projects they had achieved. Travis Wise describes a scrupulous effort on the part of the task force organizations to make sure conservation is done by the book and for the right reasons: "The work we do has to be squeaky clean. . . . The problem is . . . people who will come in and take leftover wetlands of a golf course and use terms like 'Audubon-certified golf

[19] This resistance is most notoriously represented in the motto "Don't tread on me."

course,' which is nothing but a membership organization" (interview, November 2003). Philip describes the ways in which the partnership proactively leverages networking contacts deep in the development community to ensure that buyers are not speculators: "The brokerage community, they're not a member of the task force, but we certainly are in close contact with the brokers and we know who's interested in buying properties and who's interested in trying to make sure the right people buy it, you know, that sympathetic people are buying it" (interview, October 2003).

That these activities have been kept discrete is seen as a virtue since it means that organizations and individuals are interested in pursuing conservation not for political gain or public stature but for the "right" reasons—a clear difference from the San Diego case where MSCP participation afforded developers and regional conservationists "poster child" and "leader" status. The ultimate approbation for conservationists is to be seen as selfless. Anne Deane says, "You talk about classic statesmen. These are people who care about the good of the land and not 'what I can make out of it'" (interview, October 2003). When asked what they are proudest of in their involvement, Rhodes defers to the other members: "I'm just astounded by what we've accomplished. It's just got little or nothing to do with me, but they are people who have created something that will last for generations that is the result of their passion, but it's not for any kind of economic self-gain or benefit" (interview, November 2003). Reidel is characteristically blunt in assessing the importance of having partners who avoid the spotlight: "You've got to have people who are not egomaniacs . . . their satisfaction comes from having it done and not from taking credit and that's a hard thing to find. . . . And we've not only been fortunate in having people like that, we've had excess people like that" (interview, August 2001). In contrast to the MSCP process, where citizen participation frequently garnered individual recognition in the form of awards, Deane says, "We don't do awards. . . . We don't recognize our members in any way, . . . we're just working our behinds off and I think they know that" (interview, October 2003).

Despite the fact that the task force was generally more interested in maintaining a low profile than in pursuing public input, the public was regularly informed through the local newspaper about the exclusive task force approach. Partners actively publicized individual conversion stories in the local press and foregrounded the informal sociability of land use decision making in the region. Openness about backstage pressuring tactics and deliberate exclusion poses a puzzle for researchers who link informal elite tactics with inherent predispositions toward private redistribution and personal gain. The regimelike informal activity of the task force in the Lowcountry challenges this linking of elite interests and pri-

vatized tactics inasmuch as the Sea Island Defenders have actively pursued public understandings of informal, discrete elite activity as benefiting the conservation interests of the larger public.

An instructive example of the extent to which backstage conversation and interpersonal pressure has been normalized as the route to collaborative conservation planning comes from articles in the local newspaper, the *Post and Courier*. One front-page story relates a phone call as a critical turning point in converting a developer to the gospel of public-private land conservation. The piece is headlined "Conversation Led to Conservation," and describes preserving a barrier island as "a quiet goal of many people." However, a deal between a national conservation organization and the developer with an option on the property "didn't heat up" until a fateful phone call: "A few days after Christmas, the two had an hour-long telephone conversation about the fate of some 126 acres on the northern end of island." The representative of the conservation organization thought his organization's mission might "strike a chord" with the Florida developer, who had local roots in the area. A visit from the developer to the conservationist's office sealed the deal: "The two chatted about the island and about putting together a deal to save it" (Behre 2006). In fact, chats like this are carefully choreographed, and the article goes on to report that Charleston mayor Joe Riley had a hand in insisting that the two "ought to talk": "Riley said he contacted [the developer] just before Christmas as a courtesy to let him know that the mayor planned to write an opinion piece in this newspaper about the need to save the island from development" (Behre 2006).

Similarly, an article on the turn toward public-private partnerships and away from regulation as a way of managing wetlands reports a conversion experience on the part of "no-holds-barred environmental regulator" George Swinney prompted by an unsolicited call. Swinney was phoned by a "well-known bane of regulators," a "developer conservationist," and asked if he would like to join one of the new task forces sprouting along the coast in 1991. Now a friend, the developer is quoted in a local newspaper profile of Swinney regarding his transformation: "'Most people wouldn't understand how difficult the transition was for him. . . . He was on-the-record, death-and-taxes about managed wetlands. He bought into the idea of public-private partnership more than any man I met in government'" (Peterson 2005). Despite the fact that Swinney initially thought the phone call was a joke, he has become an evangelist for more flexibility in wetlands management within his former agency. ACE Basin Task Force member and Ducks Unlimited biologist Anthony Briley says Swinney "'never lost sight of the rules and regulations, but he found a way to make it work. . . . He has made some difference, and he's done it quietly'" (Peterson 2005). Swinney's quiet manner is one of the greatest

compliments the task force can bestow upon a regulator now known as one of the region's selfless statesmen.

The informal communication that produces such unlikely pairings, forestalls co-optation, and avoids contentious public battles between the state and landowners or conservationists and developers is heralded by members as consistent with local traditions of cooperation. Anne Deane describes this level of backstage networking outside the task force as critical to cooperation across political lines and among potential opponents: "In South Carolina, the environmental community and the development community and the political community—all three are all small enough that we all know each other, and I would dare say at this point now that there is a high enough level of respect that they all go to each other and they all talk to each other. . . . That is how the ACE Basin happened, that is why we are kicking butt on protecting land in South Carolina more so than most other southeastern states" (interview, October 2003). Forging cooperation among individuals representing diverse interests is also an avowed goal of the MSCP Working Group, but the manner of approach is starkly different. In San Diego, consensus emerged from formal commitment to the larger group and long duration of association. For members of the MSCP like Bobby Goode of HAN, "just being in the trenches with a number of people for years" was crucial for hammering out agreements (interview, April 2004). In Charleston, preference change was portrayed in the local press as happening rapidly through the extension of direct personal contact.

Just as perceptions of informal communication in the MSCP Working Group deliberations demonstrated that the use of informal practices within formal process was not thought to be limited to elites, so perceptions of the regime-like activities of the ACE Basin Task Force demonstrate that the informal tactics of elites are not always assumed to be conducted for the purpose of concealment of private gains. Task force members actively took pride in their low profiles as revealing an orientation toward substantive accomplishments rather than organizational prominence. Members avoided publicizing their task force membership or organizational affiliations in favor of publicizing their individual concern for the best interests of the place—a strategy that also made their interest in voluntary conservation far less threatening for property-rights-oriented citizens distrustful of government intrusion into private affairs.

The resulting efforts of the task force to engender limited participation and persuasion of strategically important individuals do not accord with ideals of transparency, maximal inclusion, or open-ended discussion of local perspectives. Certainly, this informal approach to soliciting public support would have reeked of cronyism and paternalism for locals in San Diego—and likely would have increased suspicions of conspiracy on the

far right and far left. Nevertheless, these informal strategies should not be dismissed out of hand as irrelevant to the recurring challenges of formal participation in the sorts of participation-wary communities that Irvin and Stansbury (2004) describe. These efforts did respect public diversity to the extent that they actively tried to solicit substantive support beyond the usual suspects and likely constituents for conservation. These efforts did respect substantive dialogue to the extent that they repudiated token input in favor of concrete contributions and ongoing relationships among strange bedfellows. For those like Naurin who associate deliberative authenticity with the capacity for preference change, the conversion of state regulators and private developers to public-private cooperation—let alone their willingness to be seen as having changed their minds in public—does represent progress for public-spirited rather than constituent-directed dialogue. Emphasizing the potential reinforcing effects of these informal methods is not simply a matter of making formal efforts more flexible to local contexts or correcting their errors of omission or approach. The very idea of formal transparency, maximum inclusion, and public discussion can, in certain contexts and for certain constituencies, convey the taint of publicity and self-interest on the part of organizations, and government interference and privacy violations on the part of individuals. In fact, for those members of the public most resistant to formal public engagement, informal participation was worthwhile to the extent that it was irrelevant in principle to formal government conservation efforts, organized political activity, and professional roles.

STAKEHOLDER ASSESSMENTS OF PARTICIPATORY "SUCCESS": PROSPECTS FOR ONGOING COLLABORATION IN SAN DIEGO AND THE LOWCOUNTRY

As described earlier, the MSCP process left some nonelite participants feeling alienated from other environmental groups at the end of the process. These participants had mixed feelings about what had been accomplished and, as volunteers, used the completion of the plan as an opportunity to withdraw from the decision-making community. This consolidation of deliberation within a core group was largely voluntary, and on its own it does not refute the claims of Fung and Wright regarding the recursive benefits to be reaped from state-centered processes that secure ongoing "broad and deep" participation, especially the surplus stores of social capital such groups generate. This broader social benefit among the participants at the table is not necessarily destabilized by the departure of a few participants; "perpetual" participation cannot possibly extend to every individual participant, and those who exit may have built

lasting relationships with other participants. Even when deliberative theorists recognize practical difficulties, they still maintain that formal deliberation—even if imperfectly approximating democratic ideals of transparency and inclusion—nevertheless represents a "powerful socialization experience" (Button and Ryfe 2005). For this reason, I conclude my comparison of perceptions of inclusion and transparency in the working group and the task force with a comparison of perceptions of the collaborative social capital (Thomas 2003, pp. 163–64) their decision-making processes generated. I find that participants in the formal processes draw strict distinctions between the benefits of informal networking capacity that such processes generate, and the benefits of additional formal processes.

For groups that had participated in the San Diego process, stakeholders frequently invoked arguments linking participation with increased social capital, regardless of their position in the working group. Even volunteers like Bernstein and Leath who chose not to continue their participation viewed the informal social benefits of participating in the process positively. Angela Bernstein notes that the MSCP has been particularly effective in promoting networking with those outside her usual circles: "The one major benefit of doing the habitat plan is it brought a lot of different groups together and people networked a whole lot better. . . . Most people feel a whole lot better if they've met the person before, even if it's just in passing. If they've seen the face, it's less hard to think about picking up the phone, so they communicate better." Bernstein observes that networking comes more easily with groups with similar interests: "We do try to network but it's usually only with other environmental organizations here. That's the only way we get most of what we get done done" (interview, January 2004). Travis Wise in South Carolina acknowledges a similar affinity in working with like-minded groups outside the quarterly task force meetings: "They flip us projects, we flip them projects, I'm on the phone at least three or four times a week with their people. . . . I got to tell you it's the people who are working with private landowners on the local level who are more like us that we get along with better" (interview, November 2003). Even when complaining about the difficulties of establishing these working relationships, none questioned the value of informal networking and cooperation.

By comparison, representatives charged with leading partnering efforts in San Diego acknowledged widespread consensus about the social benefits of partnering but questioned the depth and breadth of formal partnering efforts. Jeffrey Ecker, a county planner, notes that demonstrating this social capital publicly has yielded enthusiasm from legislators: "The bottom line is having the program and having the plans in place and having the social infrastructure in place in terms of working together to do these plans over the seven years that it took. You know, you develop

working relationships with the [agencies and HAN], which then allows you to use that social capital and go back and pitch that this is all something that everybody agrees with" (interview, February 2004). However, Ecker, who was proud of how much cooperation the groups in the MSCP planning process could show when they lobbied in Washington, acknowledges that when the issue is deciding how groups will contribute their own money to regional funding sources, stalemate is common: "There's a regional funding source requirement, which is how [funding is] supposed to happen, by the way, but that has never come together because it takes a lot of cooperation" (interview, February 2004).

This lack of a regional funding source is the most notable failure in developing new collaborative institutions out of the MSCP, particularly since a new funding source was agreed to within the Final MSCP Plan (City of San Diego 1998, sec. 5, p. 21). A city report from June 2005 states that conservation efforts are strictly in crisis mode, oriented toward keeping the habitats from being degraded for lack of attention: "Management for biological resources has been primarily focused on maintaining the existing biological values of habitat under City control. Once a regional funding source is established, opportunities for more extensive biological management activities could be pursued" (Greer 2005, p. 7). Whereas the MSCP provided incentives for cities or agencies to participate as partners in developing policy, without such incentives, local jurisdictions and agencies with limited capacity and rivalry for resources have very little incentive to continue partnering.[20] Veronica Tanner from the state coastal commission describes her commission's partnership in the region as similarly fragile: "People need to believe in the partnership. Our [wetlands project] is a good example. It's a house of cards. There's nothing that compels any of the agencies to participate aside from goodwill. It could easily just fall apart, but the reason it hasn't seems to be because partner agencies have bought into the idea that partnership is valuable for them" (interview, February 2004).

In San Diego, stakeholder perceptions that partnerships were important in the abstract did not necessarily reflect their everyday actions. As a result, these partnerships failed to excite much enthusiasm despite infusions of funding from foundations to promote ongoing regional stakeholder partnerships that built on the MSCP. In a survey conducted by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) of 42 stakeholders

[20] A government evaluation of the MSCP and other NCCP (Natural Communities Conservation Planning, the statewide legislation enabling HCPs) processes described "major uncertainties about funding needed land acquisitions, science, monitoring and habitat management" (Pollak 2001, p. 1), a finding that caused amendments to the NCCP Act assuring funding for monitoring.

who participated in the MSCP, the most frequent recommendation from respondents was for DFG and other stakeholders to form partnerships (Nyce 2000, p. 14). Nevertheless, a 13-member partnership called "Greenways San Diego," funded with $15,000 from the BankAmerica Foundation and coordinated by DFG and the Nature Conservancy, had already been organized "to bring the many core interest groups together in one unified outreach and education effort" concerning the San Diego MSCP and successive habitat conservation planning projects in the region (Nyce 2000, p. 17). Begun in 1997 on the MSCP's completion, this project had already been discontinued by 2000. The difficulty of sustaining spin-off partnerships across stakeholder categories was not unique to San Diego and may reflect both the exhaustion of participants discussed earlier and the retrenchment in foundation grant making that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. South Carolina's Downstate Conservancy had had similar experiences with maintaining enthusiasm for broad regional partnerships in the late 1990s, and the organization had also changed strategies to focus staff energies on projects with quantifiable results by 2003. In any case, when the monetary incentives for forming such partnerships dried up, formal partnerships were easily abandoned.

Some high-capacity participants question the recurring emphasis on participation over substantive cooperation among those in the core group of high-profile organizations that emerged from the MSCP. Christopher Sigler and Joshua Guertin, two San Diego project managers for a national conservation NGO, acknowledge that they are skeptical of most meetings to coordinate regional planning, since the majority of these partnering efforts involve getting the same assortment of people sitting down at yet another meeting. Sigler reports on the frustration expressed at the most recent effort to begin one of these partnerships: "People were grumbling at the scoping meeting that this was a waste, whether because things had failed in the past or because it was just another meeting to attend. That new age stuff does not help. It's a lot of feel good, not a lot of deals" (interview, April 2004). Sigler maintains that his group, which spends such limited time on the ground in the region, has conserved nearly 20,000 acres, the best record of any group in San Diego. Tanner of the state coastal commission avers, "In San Diego and elsewhere, there is a core group of people whose names seem to crop up over and over again. You need to go beyond that group to make things happen" (interview, May 2004).

Conservationists in the Lowcountry largely agreed with Tanner's and Sigler's assessments. Anne Deane describes why her organization pursues unusual partners: "When you have a network like that, whatever your goal is, you present it to the public with a larger force behind you, it just doesn't look like the usual suspects, and it's not just the Sierra Club, the

Audubon Society, the League of Women Voters and the Sea Island Defenders—oh yeah, what else is new? When you pull in a network, you maximize the chance that your initiative will succeed" (interview, October 2003). Travis Wise describes how enthusiasm for regional partnering projects resulting from the success of the task force caused many organizations to lose critical focus: "We did tend to get ahead of ourselves as far as all the projects and partnerships and things. Some good things came out of it. But some things came out of it that were redundant and wasteful of time and resources and that always happens when you have partnerships because you've got a lot of people doing the same thing" (interview, November 2003). One Lowcountry NGO staffer describes how replicating the task force model throughout the coastal area was a good idea in theory but has tested the resources of his group for little concrete benefit: "We've got the five task force areas . . . and that's all wonderful but that's a task force meeting for each one of them, times every quarter. That's 20 meetings a year, takes a whole day, so that's 20 working days a year that somebody's got to go sit and pay homage to—The ACE is invaluable, they hit home runs, we get a lot done. . . . The rest of them . . . nothing happens" (interview, November 2003).

While the task force model has been replicated with lesser success up and down the coast, the members of the ACE Basin Task Force have gradually attempted to focus on larger-scale conservation planning by skipping regional-level efforts and instead moving the decision-making networks within the ACE Basin Task Force to the state level. Will Reidel describes how the ACE Basin Task Force and Vincent Stegall, the head of the Sea Island Defenders, have taken the ACE efforts statewide in the South Carolina Landscape Mapping Project, a key part of laying the foundation for priority projects for the state-funded conservation bank: "The ACE Basin group, which is the same damn group as we all, plus Vincent Stegall, essentially got together and did a vision for the state. The truth is rather than create new task forces, this task force can think broader and do a statewide vision" (interview, August 2001).[21] Wise notes that all partnering efforts are not equal in concrete results: "Some of those projects got done that were very useful. The statewide mapping project. We're glad to have participated in that. I think those were good. Some of them didn't do as much as we could have accomplished had we spent more time with the individual landowners getting the job done" (interview, November 2003).

[21] As forecasted, the South Carolina Conservation Bank's (2006) efforts were indeed oriented toward conserving lands in other areas of the state. Of the 39 grants given for land or easement acquisition, none have been in the ACE Basin and only three have been granted in the coastal Lowcountry.

The MSCP and the task force did produce a reliable network of interest group actors with the ongoing capacity to partner successfully as needed. Participants were highly conversant in the argument that participation generated social capital, and knew that these soft benefits could generate hard federal and state support. Angela Bernstein summed up the lesson of the MSCP: "When opposed people lobby together, politicians really like it" (interview, January 2004). Stability within the regional landscapes of interest group participation made partnering and information sharing for future collaborative efforts relatively straightforward, but it also risked reinforcing social ties and increasing genuflections to the importance of participation at the expense of accomplishing concrete goals and expanding networking capacity beyond groups that already worked well together. Success in partnering did breed further partnering success—but members of the task force and the MSCP Working Group were careful to point out that the proliferation of formal partnerships that arose from their original formal groups generated diminishing returns. Kathy Walley, a federal agency official in the ACE Basin, relates the pressure to partner as often and expansively as possible: "'Partnerships' is the key word, and the more partnerships you can get, the better it is." Nevertheless, as Walley admits, "Oftentimes the more partners you have, the less you get done. And though it looks good on paper, you don't get anything accomplished" (interview, August 2001).

The ground-level fragility of state-centered partnership contests Fung and Wright's (2003) claim that state-centered activity provides ongoing security that participatory efforts will be productive, as compared to the "relatively brief democratic moments" afforded through participation in collective action or electoral politics. While interest group partnering and cooperation in San Diego and the Lowcountry were relatively stable among the core group of high capacity NGO professionals, the landscape of policy making and implementation was highly uncertain due to administrative turnover, expired legislative mandates, and power struggles among agencies, counties, regional associations of governments, and cities. In South Carolina, conservationists shuddered at the loss of the state's senior senator, a key ally and powerful committee chairman. In San Diego, the entire MSCP model was threatened when administrative withdrawal of leadership at the federal and state level caused NGOs to withdraw resources as well. Ben Lowry of the Nature Conservancy in San Diego describes his local office's skeleton staff, which had turned over four times after momentum at the state and federal level shifted: "What happened is everyone went away. The Clinton administration went away, the Wilson administration went away. They left" (interview, March 2004). Insecurity in federal, state, and local-level leadership eroded participants' belief in

government implementation of the MSCP plan, which eventually led to lawsuits that the collaborative process had been designed to forestall.

Groups recognize that participation without informal cooperation in implementation threatens their collaborative efforts, regardless of the substantive cooperation and goodwill generated in the formal process. A study from the native plant society states: "As we experienced in the southern California experiment, . . . conservation platitudes may sound nice and make the NCCP look good. But if implementation lacks specifics, the implied positive action may never actually occur" (Witham 2001).[22] This criticism of the ongoing uncertainties of interpretation in implementing the plan was rooted in the consensus-building approach itself. Critics claimed that in order to reach consensus, participants had walked away thinking they had agreed but interpreting their agreement differently: one critic notes, "The only way an agreement can be reached . . . is if the language is so vague that it can be interpreted the way each side wants to interpret it" (Davis 2003). The plan gave legal assurances to developers and promises of protection to environmentalists, but neither stakeholding group came to believe that the formal consensus had been implemented properly. Even a state official who conducted a review of the MSCP and recommended stricter standards for species protection acknowledged that legal requirements would change little without the political will of the partners: "There's only so far you can go. Changes in language don't necessarily translate to changes in actual practice" (Davis 2003).

Traditional mobilization strategies and coalition building among groups with similar interests continued to hold promise for nonelite stakeholders following the MSCP process; former collaborators justified their reversion to litigation and project-specific campaigns because they felt the implementation of the MSCP did not adhere to the negotiated plan. The alarm with which the developers' advocacy organization responds to what it understands as an illegitimate renegotiation of the MSCP in the public sphere demonstrates continuing contention over the meaning of the formal agreement among official participants. A letter to the editor of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* from the president of the Habitat Conservation Coalition reviews the purpose of the MSCP for those who have forgotten:

> The plan was hailed as a national model for habitat conservation. . . . That is why we read with great interest the story about opposition to the Salk Institute's expansion based on biological concerns. It is our understanding

[22] The NCCP was the California Natural Communities Conservation Planning Act of 1991. This statewide legislation allowed for regional habitat conservation planning as an alternative to California's endangered species enforcement, for which the San Diego MSCP and other Southern California HCPs served as pilot projects.

> that the institute's proposed expansion is entirely on land authorized for development by the MSCP. . . . Our hope is that the MSCP plan is honored and respected, and that we not re-engage in the biologically ineffective and inefficient project-by-project, species-by-species battles. (Kilkenny 2005)

However publicly oriented the MSCP deliberations were, and however long they took to negotiate, the formally binding character of the resulting plan ended up surviving more on the honor and respect of a "gentlemen's agreement": that groups not reevaluate what they had stood to gain by cooperating in the plan with what they could gain through protest or litigation once the plan was actually implemented.[23]

Entrepreneurial professionals like the Habitat Conservation Coalition were furious that the formal, state-centered process had not guaranteed the implementation of a binding contract. In 1999 testimony, one of the HCC's founders and MSCP Working Group members asserted:

> We continue to support the MSCP and HCPs in general, notwithstanding recent attacks on these plans by a variety of environmental groups. We are deeply concerned, however, with the long-term credibility of federal agencies to deliver to the participating jurisdictions and landowners what has been promised through these programs. For years during the MSCP planning process, we were repeatedly told by senior assigned management of the Department of Interior to "trust us." If we can't even trust that the federal agencies will do what is required under the Implementing Agreement contract, how can we trust someone's simple word in the future? (Committee on Resources 1999)

Environmental stakeholders felt similarly betrayed by public officials, despite the complaints they had made about the lack of specifics when consensus was being reached: "We were repeatedly told, 'You're just not sophisticated enough to understand how this plan is going to work. Trust us'" (Pollak 2001, p. 16). Former participants' efforts to undermine the formal MSCP agreements on individual projects demonstrate the continuing informal relationships required to sustain public, formally deliberated cooperative agreements.[24]

[23] Legal rulings have thus far reinforced environmental groups' decision to return to litigation. In a 2006 decision, District Court judge Rudi Brewster supported the claims of an alliance of conservation organizations, finding that the city of San Diego's MSCP plan approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service "violates both the spirit and the letter of the ESA" (*Southwest Center for Biological Diversity v. Bartel* 2006).

[24] This disenchantment from former participants is not an unusual outcome. In a 13-year study of consensus-based processes used by all federal agencies, with a specific focus on the EPA, Cary Coglianese (1998, p. 1261) finds that negotiated rules were actually challenged more frequently than those not developed through consensus and that petitioners were often those who had been included as stakeholders in the policy-making process (p. 1303).

These challenges to the MSCP from organizations that had been participants in developing the original agreement demonstrate the complex relationship of formal agreement and the ongoing consensus it is presumed to generate. Theorists like Mansbridge argue that "a history of successful action and mutual respect" (2003, p. 190) creates reserves that can be drawn on when encountering divisive issues in the future. In the MSCP, some skeptics were won over to the process as they saw that implementation was not as threatening as they had originally perceived. Partnership could be managed relatively easily when oriented toward collective ends, such as lobbying for outside MSCP funding. But maintaining the consensus over time required increasing work on the part of administrators, who faced turnover among parties to the agreement and complaints about the ways in which consensus was being implemented that threatened to derail the entire HCP model of preventing litigation. Diverse participants recognized over time that public, state-centered consensus required ongoing cooperation that, if threatened, could throw state-centered collaborative planning itself into question. As early as 2001, a government-sponsored evaluation of the MSCP and other NCCP projects warns:

> Because the NCCP program requires so much cooperation and collaboration, erosion of that consensus can undermine the continued viability of the program. The NCCP consensus in Southern California shows signs of strain. If the consensus broke down, stakeholders could begin throwing legal or political obstacles in the way of implementation. Or, stakeholders could simply decline to participate in the development of new NCCP plans elsewhere. . . . Many of the complaints of both local governments and the regulated communities can be summarized with the rhetorical question, "A deal is a deal—or is it?" (Pollak 2001, p. 69)

The MSCP plan was impressive as a document of the cooperation that had gone into producing it, and certainly represented a seven-year history of productive interactions and earned respect among those in the MSCP Working Group. Nevertheless, stakeholders recognized after the fact that formal cooperation was ultimately preliminary to the question of whether former collaborators would resort to litigation over implementation. Both environmentalists and developers claimed that government officials overseeing the process and its implementation had betrayed their trust by failing to implement the formal terms of the agreement in the way they believed had been promised. These changes in perspective on the benefits of formal agreement over time demonstrate the limitations of increasing formalization as a method of inducing groups to reach consensus. Those who are once bitten by state-centered action may be twice shy about engaging in later formal decision-making efforts or trusting in the security

of increasingly explicit standards, especially if they have already resorted back to alternative contention strategies.

Participants' perceptions of whether collaborative social capital is a worthwhile outcome—regardless of their awareness of its symbolic value—is instructive in terms of the hopes of those who claim that participation as a positive socialization experience is self-reinforcing. Certainly, social capital in the form of informal networking among collaborators endured over long periods of time in both cases, and participants understood these relationships as instrumentally valuable for their ongoing work in the community. Formal collaborative efforts laid the initial groundwork for additional formal collaborative institutions, as those arguing for the recursive benefits of participation would predict. But stakeholder perceptions of prior collaborative efforts also restricted the potential of the successive efforts they fostered. In the Lowcountry, task force members found that proliferating partnerships stretched their capacity for little additional benefit, and reverted to their original regional group, even when organizing collaboration at the statewide level. In San Diego, the realization that contractual language was not enough to sustain formal agreement or to produce the regional funding partnership mandated by the plan was a hard lesson for many participants, and one that changed many stakeholders' perspectives on the benefits of investing in later collaborative processes at all—despite the fact that legislation was amended to correct weaknesses in implementation mandates. These perceptions do not demonstrate that stakeholders necessarily favor informal networking over formal collaborative institutions in all cases, particularly since formal collaboration fostered informal networking in both sites. But they do urge caution regarding the unintended consequences and limited benefits of additional formal processes engaging the same collaborators, a phenomenon that most researchers have read as evidence of participatory enthusiasm.

INFORMAL COMMUNICATION, INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN, AND THE POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC DIALOGUE

I began this article by questioning whether participation improved the decision-making landscape in local communities. As such, I conclude by assessing the goals I proposed at the outset and examining potential directions where my conclusions might lead. First, I have shown that, in the cases studied, stakeholders did not necessarily link institutionalized inclusion and transparency with procedural legitimacy and process fairness. Stakeholder perceptions of procedural legitimacy did not rest on abstract conceptions of transparency or inclusion, but often emphasized

the organizational authenticity of other participants and their ability to gain recognition from their engagement.

Reconciling cooperative deliberation with public inclusion created a number of potential obstacles to stakeholder reception in San Diego. The formal character of the process was most beneficial not to less powerful actors, but to entrepreneurs who carved out a new role for themselves as regional leaders capable of reasonable compromise and continuing involvement in ongoing planning efforts. This was quickly apprehended by national interest groups and more oppositional local actors with substantial interest in the issues but less commitment to participatory governance as a viable strategy for accomplishing their goals. The professionalized forum of the MSCP Working Group did put pressure for consensus on nonelite local actors who chose to participate, but their public role in the working group also led to backstage pressure from surprising sources to resist consensus. These forms of informal communication may have been perceived as frustrating subversions of the formal process, but they were by no means the province of the entrepreneurial elites, who could reap the greatest dividends from public recognition of the collaborative social capital generated in the process.

Despite the exclusion of interested stakeholders and the privacy this afforded task force members, the informal deliberations and backstage networking of the elites in the task force were often just as self-consciously dramaturgical as deliberations in the public arena of the working group, and private conversions were even promoted in the local press as signs of public-spirited decision making. Task force members actively linked their informal sociability in unprofessionalized contexts of shared meals to their own success in reaching substantive consensus and establishing trust and reciprocity within the group. Neighborly conversations and personal relationships were seen as critical to persuading reluctant or resistant opponents whom task force members targeted for discrete involvement. Task force members took pride in their low profiles and "quiet" manner, and this transparency about their lack of transparency was used to promote their good intentions to community members reticent to engage in public dialogue on potentially explosive personal property issues.

Second, consensus on the limits of formal participation in both cases suggests skepticism about the increasing formalization of decision making. As deliberative researchers predict, formal participatory institutions prompted additional formal efforts that built on pilot initiatives and engaged many of the same participants in ongoing discussion on planning issues. But stakeholders' experiences did not necessarily lead to more enthusiasm for formal participation, despite skills honed in practice over 60–70 lengthy meetings over many years. For those in San Diego, the inability to collaborate according to the terms of the MSCP agreement

destabilized successive collaborative efforts, despite the fact that later efforts usually included more explicit provisions that collaborative plans would be implemented as participants had agreed. For those who had discovered that a deal was not a deal, changes in language provided little security that changes in practice would occur. For nonelite environmental groups, alternative strategies of protest and mobilization were seen as more worthwhile pursuits—a reversion to the status quo that does not argue for the complementarity of oppositional practices and empowered governance.

In the task force, stakeholders were dismissive of enthusiasm for formal participation for its own sake, not because formal collaboration had not worked for them, but because they were especially skeptical of the extent to which formal partnerships produced duplication of efforts and recognition seeking at the expense of substantive contributions, engagement of unusual partners, and quality projects. These outcomes point to less-noticed challenges of maintaining ongoing participation that is satisfactory for stakeholders over long-term periods of 10 or more years—challenges that are not due to capacity or experience limitations, or a result of local pathologies or abuses. The very "success" of formal participatory institutions, and the resulting ease with which "successful" institutions may be replicated with the same stakeholders, may cause formal processes to become increasingly hollow exercises for participants—a result that, at least in these cases, is far more destabilizing to stakeholder trust in the virtue of formal participation than the looser arrangements that theorists typically see as inadequate to truly inclusive participatory goals.

For a project that criticizes a model-based approach to implementation of abstract ideals of engagement, it would be particularly foolhardy to come up with prescriptions for action based on the study of these two very unique cases. I am arguing that informal communication should be reconsidered as an important factor for elite and nonelite participation, but not that proponents of formal participation should attempt to "structure" informal elements into participatory proceedings—as doing so would diminish a primary source of their appeal. Why might private conversation have a role within public dialogue in some places? It is appropriate here to elaborate on three potential trajectories that these contextually rooted stakeholder perceptions suggest are worthy of future investigation:

> increasing contention over participation itself on the part of stakeholders,
>
> increasing fatigue with participation and partnership from administrators,
>
> increasing professionalization and outsourcing of participation to

third parties.

First, researchers' assessment of a less adversarial moment, in which "blended" forms of social action are emerging as dominant methods of civic engagement, may overstate the complementarity of protest and participation—and the extent to which the move to participate within government-sponsored processes may not represent choice on the part of social movement actors so much as the co-optation of claims to exclusion. When formal processes are open to all interested parties, it is particularly difficult for those who reject the method under which they are required to engage with other participants to win sympathy for their arguments for better representation. This leads to increasing contestation of participatory methods and widespread cynicism among volunteers and activists about the political dramaturgy of participatory processes and the publicity they enable for select participants. Community debates in formal settings may hinge less on the issues at stake and more on the appropriateness of the methods used and the extent to which they have become dominated by entrepreneurial stakeholding entities that specialize in participatory input. Just as the luster of direct democracy as an avenue to voter empowerment has worn off with its increasing domination by high-priced signature-gathering firms, so state-centered participatory processes may increasingly become fora dominated by a new category of "usual suspects": stakeholders like HAN and HCC who have made a career not simply out of issue advocacy, but out of participation itself.

Second, evidence from my informants in both cases suggests increasing fatigue with participatory processes for their own sake (or for "higher order" social capital benefits) from elites, administrators, and decision makers as well as from stakeholding insurgents. While empowered participation and cooperative partnership may have been the mantras of foundations, academics, and government administrators in the 1990s, the rejection of partnering "on paper" from ground-level agency and NGO staff documented here, along with a renewed emphasis on accountability and measurable results in an era of tight philanthropic budgets, indicate diminishing enthusiasm for formal collaboration as a form of civic invigoration—just as the enthusiasm for the "synergy" produced by conglomeration in the business world in the 1990s now seems faddish and overhyped. In this sense, a move toward decentralization in combination with more emphasis on partnership and participation seems bound to produce conflict, since the more empowered local-level administrators are, the less likely they are to embrace perfunctory partnerships for abstract goals of empowerment or inclusion.

Finally, the two preceding trends (increasing public contention over and cynicism about participatory methods and increasing fatigue from administrators and decision makers for expansive collaborative partner-

ships) described in this article help to explain the commodification and outsourcing of participatory expertise and capacity training on the part of local governments, corporations, and the third-sector to professional consultants (Button and Ryfe 2005, p. 21; Mansbridge 2003, p. 186). Whether or not it yields improved stakeholder perceptions of procedural legitimacy, this newfound emphasis on training participants in the arts of satisfying participation and effective partnerships should not be applauded without more research. Because civic engagement and citizen participation have been promoted to counter the perceived disempowering effects of expertism and professionalized interest group advocacy, it is particularly ironic that the solutions now being offered emphasize the necessity of technical knowledge in public participation. Not least, the demands of professionalization might cause increasing formalization of participatory methods, if only so that they can be commensurated, trademarked, and sold.

Is there a place for private conversation in public dialogue? In light of the preceding trends, private conversation may be useful because it stakes out a place for resistance within increasingly formalized venues for public input—not necessarily to destabilize the processes themselves, but to challenge the uses to which such processes can be put. While this study has attempted to demonstrate that researchers should not automatically ascribe democratic benefits to formal participation in local decision making, the trends described above suggest that more research is needed on less recognized social projects to which formal participation may contribute—most notably, the perpetuation of organizational and professional logics of accountability and indemnity for federal and state agencies, local governments, NGOs, and professionals. Formal participation represents a particular reconciliation of the tensions between bureaucratic administration and democratic self-governance that has benefited some actors at the expense of others, a result that should not be celebrated out of context simply because the actors being privileged happen to be "local" (Purcell 2006). That formal participation as an abstract ideal has been described as utopian by researchers impoverishes our understanding of how formal participation may reinscribe relations of power at multiple scales of action and in less easily contested ways. But promoting participation as virtuous in itself and tractable in all contexts may also make it particularly susceptible to overuse and to progressively superficial appropriation by corporations and marketers (Elliott 2006). Participatory theorists' focus on how to prevent urban elites from co-opting local political process may distract from a better understanding of how local participation itself may be co-opted by powerful interests. As stated at the beginning of this article, participation is both best practice and big business, and as such, it can tell us just as much about broader social priorities and landscapes of

power as it does about the local needs and opinions it is intended to reveal.

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