Social Ecology and Public Policy

Kevin Preister, Ph.D.
The Center For Social Ecology and Public Policy
P.O. Box 3493
Ashland, Oregon 97520
541.488.6978
kpreister@jkagroup.com
www.jkagroup.com

July 20, 2003

Also available at Society for Applied Anthropology:
www.sfaa.net/committees/policy/socialecology.pdf

The Policy Context

Anthropologists have debated the policy efficacy of our work from the beginning of the discipline. Many writers over the years have commented on the inherent tension between administrators and anthropologists, and between public policy and ethnography. In these discussions, I am continually reminded of the firing of Godfrey Wilson from the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in 1937 for daring to talk with the miners while conducting research on mining unrest in then-Rhodesia for the colonial government (Brown 1973). Walter Goldschmidt was similarly dismissed and his work was suppressed for a number of years in the 1940s when he showed that family farms in California had more positive effects on social structure than corporate farms. The political implications of his findings were enormous (Goldschmidt 1947).

In recent years, efforts to cultivate policy effectiveness within the field have intensified. Both the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) and the American Anthropological Association have constituted committees to explore the topic, Rob Winthrop has penned columns on policy ("The Real World") in *Practicing Anthropology*, and the Anthropology Newsletter has a column on policy.

In the forum on public policy at the SfAA conference in Portland in 2003, my colleagues debated the question of "cultivating policy effectiveness." It seemed to me that many fell into the trap of lobbyists, advocates, and government officials by focusing on effective lobbying techniques, how to make use of the media, getting main points across to policy makers in twenty-second sound bites and the rest. The focus of this approach is sound social research and lobbying— "Getting it right" as someone in the discussion said. The assumption, recognized as questionable from the beginning, has been that policy makers will make the best decision possible with the best information available. If only we can be persuasive enough…

It seems to me that if we succumb to such a formalist approach, we become one more lobbyist, doomed to play in a crowded field, scratching for "chits" with which to make our case. Our discipline is relegated to the role of cultural broker—speaking for someone, rather than with.

More damning, this approach presumes that policy comes from the centers of "power" (that is, within the Washington beltway), and belies the necessary two-way relationship between institutions and communities in formulating sound public policy. If our profession is operating from the strength of its ethnographic base, then the challenge becomes more one of establishing the conditions under which people can speak for themselves and social movements can be supported to foster policy responsiveness.

If the formalist approach is "top down", the alternative, ethnographic one, is "bottom up." It is based on the recognition that sound public policy is an outcome of sound social process. Behaviors change on the ground, first, and then laws, regulations, and policies are shaped to fit changed social conditions. This process is true at least in many observed cases and perhaps in all. The Civil Rights Act, after all, followed the civil rights movement rather than preceded it.

Social Ecology

A Social Ecology approach to planning, programs, and public policy is predicated on *cultural alignment* between the institutions in our society and everyday people (Preister and Kent 2001). It reflects the 40 years of practice and writing on the social action theory of James A. Kent. Kent's early work linked policy from the War on Poverty to empowerment and social action (Kent 1967, 1972). Contributions to disaster research, mental health service delivery, and training of public health nurses followed (Psychology Today 1973, Higgs and Gustafson 1985). In the late 1970s, Dr. Kent utilized the newly-passed National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) as a social justice law to foster equitable mitigations in natural resource decision-making (1977, 1978a, 1978b). He conducted extensive training programs in the 1970s and 1980s for the U.S. Forest Service, training over 2000 employees in ethnographic field methods, for which he received the 75th Gifford Pinchot Anniversary Award. This work promulgated the concept of "human geography" in Forest Plans. Using concepts of social ecology for the first time, corporate and military work followed, work consistently focused on mutual empowerment and responsive management (1983a, 1983b). By the 1990s, the concepts of social ecology, outlined below, were fully developed and placed into operation, primarily in the area of natural resource management of federal land use agencies (Preister and Kent 1997, 2001). The recognition of John Steinbeck's contribution to social ecological theory was provided in 1995 (Larsh 1995). Kent, Preister, and other practitioners in the field of Social Ecology, have been operating out of a private corporation, Natural Borders LLC, and the nonprofit Center for Social Ecology and Public Policy.

Three phases are critical in accomplishing a social ecology approach:

1. The Discovery Process™ is a means to "enter the routines" of the community to describe it from the inside out, as local people do, so that the trends, concerns, and current conditions are understood in their own right. Key methods are describing informal social networks, identifying emerging citizen issues, and mapping the human geographic boundaries that people use to distinguish themselves from others.

2

2. The Human Geographic Issue Management System (HGIMS)™ places the insights gained from the Discovery Process into a management framework for response and action. It is "working within the culture", mimicking local practices and building relationships for action. HGIMS integrates the citizen issues from the informal levels of society with the management concerns of agencies and organized groups from the formal levels of society. It is a process for "externalizing management" so that there is continual feedback between the formal and informal systems for issue resolution and mutual action. Critically, this process is structured within human geographic boundaries, reflecting the actual ways that people identify with and distribute themselves on the landscape, and by which they distinguish their area from others.

3. Planning, programs, and public policy become community-based products that are outgrowth of the experience that has developed, and codify practices between formal and informal systems that have already become routine. The cultural alignment achieved through HGIMS makes this phase celebratory by recognizing changes already in place.

In Social Ecology, three concepts move ethnography from a "feel good," "ain't it wonderful" place to an actionable position useful for policy development:

1. **Informal networks** are the mechanisms by which people sustain themselves in everyday life. Although support networks are fundamental to who we are as a species, many policy makers are simply unaware of how communities function. Rather than presume that the more visible formal processes are the driving forces of a community, we recognize the informal networks by which people gather, communicate, support each other in predictable ways, and protect cultural values. Networks can be mapped, accessed and mobilized in the ethnographic process (Preister and Kent 1997).

2. **Citizen issues** are statements people make that can be acted upon. In contrast to themes, which are general perceptions, attitudes or values in a community ("We take care of our own around here," or, "You can't trust government"), we listen for actionable statements because they are a better predictor of things people will really take action on ("I'm against growth because the parks get overcrowded and my kids have no place to play."). Focus at the level of citizen issues grounds the public policy process in the real concerns of everyday people. It begins to create a "middle ground" of practical solutions to problems that are otherwise captured by the ideological positions of those in formal structures.

   Over time, vested interest groups who are adept at positioning themselves to achieve their goals can capture the public process. Without deliberate attempts to get into the "grassroots", the public debate gets evermore polarized; the extreme voices dominate the public stage, and the "silent majority," what we call the "Ninety-eight Per Centers" (98% of the people that don't attend the meetings), stay home. In these cases, organized groups that lobby for their position create public policy, and the outcome is often poor policy because the real interests on the ground have not been identified. For example, the

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) closed the Imperial Sand Dunes when an environmental group threatened to sue because the milk vetch plant was endangered by off highway vehicle traffic. For local residents in El Centro and Yuma, the decision was undemocratic and made enemies of people who could have been allies in addressing the problem. The off-highway vehicle community had used the area for three generations and was very interested in helping with restoration activities. BLM was unaware of this resource because leadership in the off-highway clubs focused on the ideology ("We have a sacred right to use public lands any way we want.").

3. **Human Geographic Units** recognize that people identify with their landscape and have cultural means to distinguish one population from another. Using seven Cultural Descriptors, we map several scales of geography that reflect how local residents view their own territory. These units have proven useful as planning and administrative units because they more closely match how residents actually use their landscape. The concept of treating the land base and people as one unit we call "staffing the culture," in contrast to the arbitrary, fragmented, and overlapping jurisdictions currently dominant in the political system. Over fifteen BLM and Forest Service offices are using this mapping system for planning and management purposes. For a recent, large-scale project that applied human geographic mapping, refer to Preister et.al. (2002).

Application

My colleagues and I have been working for several years with federal agencies, mostly the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Forest Service, but also with Defense, the Environmental Protection Agency, Fish and Wildlife Service and others. We have used a variety of methods—training programs, project-based support, project troubleshooting, and team building—to build awareness and practice of social ecology methods. I will briefly describe four examples of the application of social ecology to public policy.

1. Josephine County, Oregon in 1997 created a controversy when it accepted state guidelines for aggregate gravel development. To the consternation of local residents, the guidelines gave all the preferences to the owners and developers of aggregate resources, invoking cries of infringement on "private property rights" and fostering raucous public meetings. I was called in to work with a committee charged with fostering community-based policy for aggregate development. Using a social ecology approach, we created a policy, with community members and the major developers, that gave developers extra points in the formal review process if they had met with neighbors and come to agreement about handling many of the impacts of gravel production. At the hearing for approval of the policy, only one dissenter testified, and everyone knew he was going to because they all knew he loved a good show! The policy was approved with strong public support (Preister 1996). The State of Oregon Department of Geology gave an award to the committee that facilitated this process for progressive work and proposed regulations that can be applied throughout the state (Rolle 2002).

2. In 2000-01, I managed a team that identified issues and opportunities associated with expanded oil and gas production in northwest New Mexicounder the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management's Farmington field office. Because of the polarized, controversial nature of oil and gas development presently in the San Juan Basin, it was expected that public meetings would not be a productive way to gauge citizen interests. Instead, the Discovery Process was used to identify informal networks, traditional patterns of communication, and citizen interests related to oil and gas development, recreation, land ownership tenure, and other aspects of federal land management.

With regard to oil and gas development, citizens were concerned about compressor noise, impacts on water sources and wildlife, impacts on agricultural operations, and concerned about inadequate compliance with existing regulation. Rereationists reported increasing conflict between different types of recreation users on public lands, increasing economic importance of visiting recreationists in the area, and numerous management ideas for addressing citizen issues. Faced with steady to rapid growth, regional leadership was very interested in land ownership tenure and the role of BLM in providing public land for community expansion.

Not only was this information identified, but the specific issue holders as well. A communication strategy was developed and implemented in conjunction with BLM that led the way to significant reform in oil and gas management, a communitybased recreation plan, and a citizen-centered land tenure alternative. For example, a policy change was created whereby oil producers volunteered $1000/acre for restoration work, half of which could be applied for by ranching surface users for restoration work they valued. In addition, a number of ranchers became subcontractors to oil companies for the revegetation work and other aspects of site restoration which were compatible with ranching interests. These changes were accomplished working through the culture so that residents were active participants in the outcomes.

3. My company has worked for the last three years with the Phoenix Field Office (PFO) of the Bureau of Land Management to train staff in methods of social ecology. We have conducted workshops for staff and citizens to practice these methods together that led to direct, collaborative action on the ground with citizens. We conducted ethnographic fieldwork, which linked staff to informal networks and emerging issues in local communities. We also participated in the social and economic aspects of the Resource Management Plan (RMP) currently underway. This effort has enabled the PFO to increase its understanding of the issues and concerns of Arizona residents in public lands within the planning area, as well as to broaden their own staff expertise.

Alignment with local communities has improved impressively since ourwork began three years ago. The suspicion and hostility of local residents toward the federal government has become reduced or muted. The public meetings associated with the planning process have been well attended. Informal community leaders and mainstrem people have attended the meetings, and not just organized groups or those advocating positions. The climate at the meetings has been positive and even enthusiastic. Community coalition groups have formed in every area, some of which have even surveyed their own communities to offer further guidance to BLM. Coalition

leaders have met each other in a regional gathering on at least one occasion, fostering learning about mutual issues across a broad landscape. Citizens and a BLM person from Sonoita Valley, Arizona participated in a steak fry with local citizen leaders to inform local residents of the successes of the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership, which opened a floodgate of enthusiasm for a new relationship with government.

Internal changes within the PFO have been fostered:
- A new position of Community Liaison was created to manage the planning process and to signify that a community-based approach would be used.
- A number of small collaborations between BLM and citizens in three geographic areas resulted in better land conditions and better working relationships.
- A staff person has been assigned part-time to work directly in the community.
- A staff person has been assigned part-time to develop volunteer capacity.
- The PFO insisted on a close working relationship between my company and the NEPA/RMP contractor, the positive effects of which were noted in the public meetings.
- Not only has the process worked in extremely good fashion with communities, but staff are now oriented to the technical concerns needed to respond to citizen interests.
- Staff has thus already been active in creating alignment so that the planning process responds to citizen issues, gives citizens responsibility in the planning process, and creates opportunities for mutual action.

Phoenix probably represents the premier BLM case in the country in which planning has truly been collaborative and community-based, and in which citizens are not only participating in issue scoping but are very directly involved in alternative development and analysis as well.

4. In October, 2002, we completed a large-scale effort of Human Geographic Mapping for the Willamette and Siuslaw National Forests and for the Eugene and Salem offices of the BLM. We conducted fieldwork in 23 communities in the Willamette Valley (population about 800,000). Information is organized by human geographic boundaries at three scales. By having local residents identify their own sense of place, the maps reflect the ways in which people have distributed themselves on the landscape and the meanings that they have developed related to that distribution.

Using the Discovery Process in each community allowed direct citizen contact around areas of interest. Each community report has 3 sections: a) Baseline social and economic information, organized around seven Cultural Descriptors; b) Communication strategies, to foster ongoing dialogue around common interests; and c) Public lands perspective, the uses of and orientation to public lands, citizen issues about natural resource management, and opportunities identified by citizens for improving federal land management.

Information organized this way, according to local perceptions, uses and values related to public lands, offers proactive management opportunities. Our term is "Human Geographic Issue Management System"—or HGIMS. With this system, staff can call up a particular geographic

area to the screen, zoom in on a locale, and learn what trends are affecting local communities, how and with whom to communicate, and the issues and opportunities of local residents related to public lands management. For example, as the Sweet Home District explores the feasibility of scenic by-way designation around Brownsville, Crawfordsville, and Holley, Oregon, the system can show current conditions in the area, in this case current attitudes about the proposal, and key contacts and gathering places through which to develop collaborative action.

This information is integrated with the agency's GIS (geographic information system). Census data are disaggregated into the human geographic units, thus integrating qualitative and quantitative information in a systematic way. For the first time, social, cultural and economic information is displayed as equal to and integrated with the more traditional biophysical data that is typical to GIS. The outcome is a highly enhanced management tool useful for day-to-day management, long-range planning, and NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) documentation. Central to the final product is a set of communication strategies based on geographic diversity through which to sustain citizen relationships.

Discussion

Sometimes there are significant shifts in "de facto" policy, that is, behavior on the ground, without any formal policy change. Staff in local offices have begun to use the language of social ecology—productive harmony, informal networks, emerging issue, gathering places, and so on. We observe that they begin to act differently. For example, instead of viewing "public participation" as an obstacle or another requirement in the work load to be completed, staff have begun to ask, "Who owns this issue and has to be involved in its resolution?" Or, they have begun to actively engage key informal networks in practical resolutions to the issues raised. Thus an entirely different set of staff responses has been triggered in a number of settings that has yielded more positive outcomes on the ground.

Appendix A of the new BLM Land Use Planning Handbook (H-1601-1) encourages collaboration through "face-to-face" relationships, informal communication opportunities in the community, and the importance of early contact. These are terms and practices adopted through patient work in many field offices by myself and other people to integrate the concerns of people near to or interested in public lands with the more technical, in-house considerations of federal agencies.

At higher levels of management, we have observed a similar use of new language that has begun to enter into formal policy discussions. For example, we drew upon the concept of "productive harmony," contained in the policy language of Section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and began to operationalize its meaning in order to make NEPA more efficient and effective (Preister and Kent 2001). Over time, leadership has also adopted this term. The first productive harmony assessment is currently underway for a grazing management plan in southwest Colorado by the U.S. Forest Service. In addition, the BLM's National Training Center in Phoenix has recently developed a course in conjunction with my colleagues entitled,

"Place-based NEPA," that will instruct federal employees in using the productive harmony concept to foster community-based approaches to federal decision-making.

Finally, one may note the widespread proliferation of "community-based partnerships" throughout the West as a solution to the political gridlock affecting natural resource decision-making. While the efficacy of these partnerships is actively debated (Cortner 1999, Weber 2003), the sheer number of them has spawned policy attention at the Washington level to respond. The U.S. Forest Service created a Partnership Task Force, for example, to respond to the growing presence of partnership efforts. More particularly, "community-based forestry," primarily in the Pacific Northwest but not exclusively, has become so predominant that policies directly related to the concept have become voluminous (Gray et.al. 1998). As Mike Dombeck said, the former chief of the U.S. Forest Service, "We simply articulated the reality" (Southern Oregon University Speech, April 24, 2003).
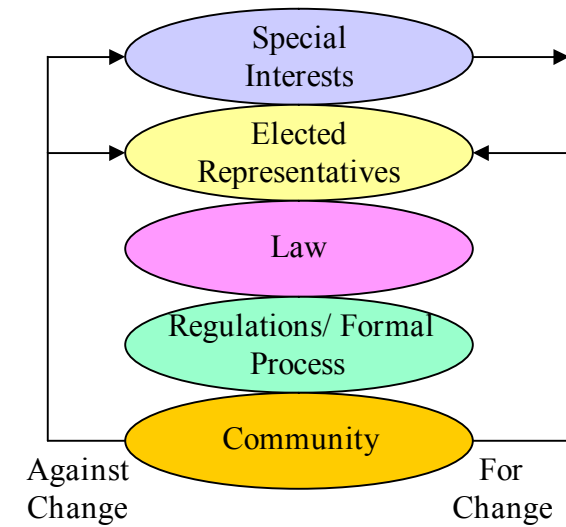
I do not believe these stories will be very surprising to anthropologists that have worked for long in applied settings. It does seem to me, however, that this learning is not well articulated in the field. We run the risk of eschewing the social processes at which we are so adept in favor of the more formalistic, power oriented approaches unless we really develop theories of public policy that relate to anthropological concepts and methods. Social ecology is one means with which to approach this challenge, and, I believe, a particularly powerful one.

The two figures below compare the approaches described in this paper. Figure One is a vertical model, showing the lobbying approach to policy and its shortfalls. It could be called the "Representative Government" approach. We see how elected representatives, with feedback from local communities, create the laws, regulations, and formal processes that is the policy process. However, at least in industrial societies, a superceding level has been created called "Special Interests" that lobby and influence the elected representatives. The result often is that the local community gets fragmented into people for or against the change whose only recourse is to call their congressional representatives, hire the attorneys, organize formal groups, and play the lobby game. Zakaria (2003) has recently documented the extent to which democratic institutions in the U.S. have become captured by professional lobbyists.

Figure Two is a horizontal model. It shows a community based approach, expressed here through a social ecology orientation, that offers a remedy by creating an inclusive process where policy outcomes are the result of broad-based connections with diverse interests, focused on "communities of place," that is, specific geographic locations. Figure Two shows that if an inclusive process is used to align citizen issues with management concerns, opportunities for social capital gains emerge. This is the "low hanging fruit" of early connection, which gives people the chance to work together on common interests. It may simply be a matter of better communication, or it may be stewardship projects that foster early success. Social capital (Putnam 2000) is the system of norms, trust and reciprocity that hold a people together. Social capital gains are those that add resilience to a community to deal with disturbance as a result of successful history of working together.

As people gain practice in working together, they may influence the policy context, as I have seen repeatedly in the settings with which I am familiar. Policy context is influenced by these factors: legal; fiscal; resource capability; level of technology; social and political attitude, and an organization's cultures and traditions. These are the filters through which any policy initiative must pass. By creating social capital gains prior to the application of those filters, the community has enhanced ability to affect the policy outcomes.

Figure One:
"Representative Government"

Special Interests

Elected Representatives

Law

Regulations/ Formal Process

Community

Against Change

For Change

Source: Gary McVicker, BLM State Office, Colorado

Figure Two:

A Social Ecology Approach to Public Policy

Citizen Issues

Management Concerns

The Discovery Process

Social Capital Gains

The Policy Context

Policy Outcomes

9
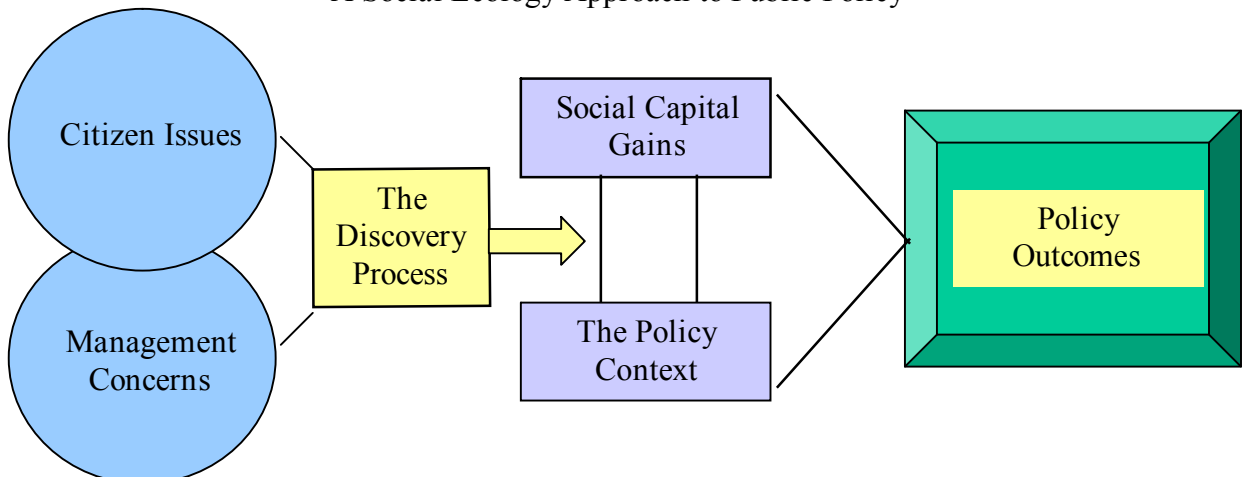
References Cited

Brown, Richard
  1973 "Anthropology and the Colonial Rule: Godfrey Wilson and the Rhodes
       Livingstone Institute, Northern Rhodesia." IN Asad, Talal (ed.)Anthropology
       and the Colonial Encounter. London: Ithaca Press.

Cortner, Hanna J. & Margaret A. Moote
  1999 The Politics of Ecosystem Management. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

 Goldschmidt, Walter
  1947 As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness
       Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun and Co. Publishers., 1978 (1947).

Gray, Gerald J., Maia J. Enzer, and Jonathan Kusel (editors)
  1998 Understanding Community-Based Forest Ecosystem Management. Washington,
       D.C.: American Forests, June.

Higgs, Zana Rae & Dorothy Dell Gustafson
  1985 Descriptive Approach to Community Assessment, IN Community as a Client:
       Assessment and Diagnosis. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company.

Kent, James A.
  1967 Involving the Urban Poor in Health Services-The Employment of Neighborhood
       Representatives," American Journal of Public Health,Volume 57, Number 6, pp.
       997-1003, June.

  1972 Death of Colonialism in Health Programs for the Urban Poor, INRehabilitating
       the Disadvantaged Disabled,J.F. Harris, et.al. (eds.) State University of New
       York, Upstate Medical Center, pp. 100-114.

  1977 Social Impacts: A New Era for Industry and Citizen Partnerships,1977 Mining
       Yearbook, 80 National Western Mining Conference, February.

  1978a   The Social Resource Unit: How Everyone can Benefit from Physical
       Resource Development, 81st National Western Mining Conference, February.

  1978b   Sociologic and Economic Tools for Land Managers: a User Guide to
       Sociology and Economics for Mining Reclamation in the West, USDA Forest
       Service, General Technical Report INT-73

  1983aColorado Engineer published "Social Responsibility of Engineers-People or the
       Project, Colorado Engineers, Vol. 1, Number 1, pp 14-15, August.

  1983b   Social Risk Management, A Successful Project Development Approach,
       Military Engineer, Vol. 75, Number 487, pp. 268-272, May-June.

Kent, James A. and Kevin Preister
  1999 "Methods for the Development of Human Geographic Boundaries and Their Uses,"
        in partial completion of Cooperative Agreement No. 1422-P850-A8-0015 between
        James Kent Associates and the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land
        Management (BLM), Task Order No. 001, 1999. Review on the internet at:
        http://www.naturalborders.com/Docs/JKent_MethodsfortheDevelopment.pdf.

Larsh, Ed B.
  1995 Mack and the Boys as Consultants, IN Doc's Lab: Myth and Legends of Cannery
        Row. Monterey, CA: PBL Press.

Preister, Kevin
  1996 "Josephine County Goal 5 Resources: Issues and Opportunities in Policy
        Formation," The State of Oregon's Regional Problem Solving Program Applied to
        Aggregate Development in Josephine County. The Rogue Institute for Ecology and
        Economy and the Applegate River Watershed Council.

Preister, Kevin and James A. Kent
  1997 "Social Ecology: A New Pathway to Watershed Restoration." in Watershed
        Restoration: Principles and Practices, by Jack E. Williams, Michael P. Dombeck and
        Christopher A. Wood, Editors. Bethesda, Md.: The American Fisheries Society
        (with James A. Kent). On the internet at:
        http://www.naturalborders.com/Docs/KPreister_PathwayToWatershedRestoration.p
        df.

  2001 "Using Social Ecology to Meet the Productive Harmony Intent of the National
        Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)," Hastings West-Northwest Journal of
        Environmental Law and Policy Volume 7, Issue 3, Spring. Berkeley, CA.: Hastings
        College of the Law. Review on the internet at:
        http://www.naturalborders.com/Docs/KPreister_UsingSocialEcology.pdf.

Preister, Kevin et.al.
  2002 "A Human Geographic Issue Management System for Natural Resource Managers
        in the Willamette Valley, Oregon." James Kent Associates (with L. Ibanez Dalponte,
        T. Keys, M. Gordon, K. Saylor, A. Arias, J. Kent), Willamette National Forest,
        October. This is available on the internet at: http://www.naturalborders.com/.

Putnam, Robert
  1993 "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Journal of Democracy
        (January 1995) and "The Prosperous Community," TAP (Spring 1993).

Psychology Today
  1973 "Therapy in the Wake of Disaster."

Rolle, Su
  2002 "Measures of progress for collaboration: cast study of the Applegate Parnership."
        Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-565. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture,
        Forest Services, Pacific Northwest Research Station.

Weber, Edward P.
  2003 Bringing Society Back In: Grassroots Ecosystem Management, Accountability,
        and Sustainable Communities. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Zakaria, Fareed
  2003 The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad. New York:
        W.W. Norton & Company.