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Review of Restoration of the Great Lakes: Promises, Practices, Performances, by M. Sproule-Jones

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Restoration of the Great Lakes: Promises, Practices, Performances

Mark Sproule-Jones

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002, pp. 149

In this book, Mark Sproule-Jones reports on research into the organization and effectiveness of efforts to improve environmental quality in the Great Lakes under a new approach begun in 1985. That year, the International Joint Commission (IJC) asked the governments of Canada and the United States to develop remedial action plans to reduce pollution and restore degraded uses in 43 areas of concern—regions whose persistent degradation had resisted earlier attempts at improvement. The two governments, in collaboration with the states and provinces, were given wide latitude in how to proceed: the IJC's only specific requests were that all plans involve local stakeholders and that they recognize interdependencies of resources and uses. This initiative has generated a diverse body of experience, of great potential value for advancing the understanding of institutional design and associated outcomes.

Sproule-Jones's ambitious agenda is to explain variations in the success of these 43 experiments; to attribute variation in effectiveness to different rules and institutions, taking into account sites' differing degrees of degradation and biophysical complexity; and advance a broader theoretical understanding of how responses to common-pool resources can be extended to larger-scale resources subject to multiple, interdependent uses. Working in the "Institutional Analysis and Development" tradition pioneered by Elinor and Vincent Ostrom (Ostrom, 1990, *Governing the Commons* [Cambridge University Press]), he proposes to examine systems of rules and institutions with a degree of scepticism, recognizing that rules, official reports, and officials' observations are not authoritative descriptions of what happens or why; that rules operating in practice may differ from the official ones; and that rules are better viewed as attempts to construct incentives than as binding constraints on behaviour. He draws on in-depth case studies of four areas (Hamilton Harbour, the Menominee River, the Niagara, and the St. Lawrence), plus secondary literature on a few additional sites and a survey of plan coordinators at all 43 sites.

He concludes that the performance of the programme has been disappointing. Overall, there has been fair progress in restoring degraded uses, but most progress has

come from programs already underway prior to the new action plans, principally the building of sewage plants and tighter regulation of industrial polluters. He is especially critical of the environmental lead agencies for not ceding more control to the stakeholder processes. He argues that with few exceptions, agencies treated the stakeholder processes as advisory bodies, and “layered [the action plans] onto their pre-existing programs of environmental management and pollution control” (103).

His other conclusions address causal explanation of performance outcomes. In one cluster of conclusions Sproule-Jones finds better performance when problem structures are more benign: that is, when fewer jurisdictions are involved, ecosystems are less complex, and implementation tasks are less interdependent—in particular, when they can be done by separate groups in parallel. While better performance is surely to be expected on easier problems, the last of these points may have some implications for institutional design, if relationships among tasks can be designed to reduce interdependencies.

In a second cluster of conclusions he finds that success can be attributed strongly to institutional design. Plans succeed more frequently when stakeholder participation is broader, stakeholders are empowered to seek operational solutions, the plan formulation process is more consensual and implementers have incentives to manage across organizations. They succeed less frequently when agencies are indifferent to institutional design, and they design action-plans to suit their interests and agendas rather than those of stakeholders.

The best parts of the book are the detailed, highly informative discussions of the history of human uses of the Great Lakes, and of the complex network of institutions and rules for managing their environment. In its more ambitious, explanatory agenda, the book disappoints—particularly relative to its bold ambitions. A central weakness is that the arguments linking the major conclusions with the underlying empirical evidence are not presented with enough clarity or detail.

For some conclusions, it is not clear what combination of data sources they are based on. For example, the conclusion that success is associated with wider stakeholder participation and more consensual plan development appears to be based mainly on the Hamilton study, perhaps secondarily on the Cuyahoga (although this was not one of the detailed study areas)—but scarcely any information is provided about environmental progress achieved in either case.

Other conclusions include statements of statistical significance, suggesting they are based on the survey of all action plans. For example, Sproule-Jones states that perceived environmental improvements are linked to inclusive decision-making (98). But the specific tests employed, indeed even the definition of variables on which tests were performed, are not stated clearly enough to permit the reader to understand the claimed result, or assess its persuasiveness. It appears that the result refers to improvements as perceived by stakeholder-process participants—an interesting result, but one could say as much about how these perceptions are formed as about the real improvements. More broadly, since there is no systematic reporting of evidence regarding environmental improvement across areas of concern—and no alternative definitions of effectiveness are presented—it is difficult to evaluate any arguments about determinants of effectiveness.

These weaknesses may reflect a more fundamental issue, that institutional characteristics such as inclusive participation and consensual decision-making are treated sometimes as attributes of plans whose effects on success can be examined empirically, sometimes as indicators of success in and of themselves. The text appears to reflect a conviction that broadly inclusive, consensual processes are good things, so must contribute to—or perhaps constitute—effective environmental outcomes. But they cannot be both constitutive and causal, or the argument collapses into tautology. If the constitutive argument is intended, it must be made explicitly; if the causal argument is intended, the evidence must be marshaled more persuasively.

A related concern is that in criticizing environmental agencies for seeking to advance their agendas, the author does not adequately distinguish existing bureaucratic agendas from existing programs that may be founded on good understanding of causes and solutions of an area's environmental problems. In effect, he is too quick to identify environment agencies' relevant expertise with their defense of bureaucratic prerogatives. The converse risk—that stakeholder processes may also succumb to domination by sectional interests, or to error based on imperfect understanding of environmental problems and their causes—is not addressed.

A final objection is more purely theoretical. The author's discussion of effects of institutions and rules only admits that they can operate by changing actors' incentives, neglecting the possibility that they can also change actors' capacity, information, or opportunities for collaboration or bargaining—despite these alternative mechanisms being in evidence in the case descriptions.

In sum, this is an informative book on an important set of institutional experiments. But in terms of exploiting this experience to generate well-founded insights into the effects of institutional design on environmental performance, it provides only a first step. Given the good foundation that has been laid, one must hope that the author's work on this topic continues, and that a fuller account will be forthcoming.

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