

CAG/RCGS
Geography, Policy and Government:
A Response

By

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Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Dr. Peter Harrison's excellent paper and thank the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and the Canadian Association of Geographers for inviting me to respond.

I agree with Dr. Harrison's conclusion that there is still enormous undeveloped potential for the discipline and practitioners to contribute more fully to broad cross-cutting policy issues and government decision-making. In fact, I would argue that there is a tremendous need and responsibility for Geographers to take a more active role, given the range of current and emerging issues which require integrative analysis and management approaches. These approaches are required not only for complex global issues such as those identified by Dr. Harrison (e.g. climate change, potential opening of the Northwest Passage and ocean management) but for provincial, watershed and municipal issues related to water and land management.

My response to Dr. Harrison's comments are based my observations as a practicing Geographer over almost three decades of employment with the Grand River Conservation Authority, one of 36 watershed agencies in Ontario.

Modern Policy and Government

I agree that public policy issues are becoming more complex and intractable – not only for the reasons Dr. Harrison states but also because as a society, our collective impact on the environment is increasingly more complex and difficult to assess or measure. As Dr. Harrison stated, the interactions between humans and the environment traverse political boundaries from the local scale to the international scale. Even local activities may have global consequences.

I agree that public policy issues are “horizontal” as well as “vertical”, especially for the management of natural resources such as water, which is shared among government agencies and across different levels of government. Without cooperation and partnership among these different institutions, the policies and programs of one department or ministry may contradict, conflict or compromise those of other institutions. I can think of several examples where current public policies regarding the use of natural resources contradict one another in Ontario. For example, the protection of wetlands sometimes conflicts with land drainage for agriculture or the extraction of underlying aggregates.

Too often the integrative analyses regarding best use of the resource occurs at the Ontario Municipal Board with consideration of impacts at the local scale – not at the watershed or subwatershed scale where the cumulative impacts of land use activities occur. Integrative analysis of the interactions of humans and the environment is not only across disciplines but also within appropriate geographic units of varying scales.

I agree with Dr. Harrison that an emerging challenge is “sustainable development”. I think that not only do we need to work “horizontally” to apply the principles of sustainability to policies and operations, but we need to further investigate the interconnections between the environment, society and economy. What does a “balanced consideration of a complex set of cross-cutting principles” look like – over what time frame? How do we know if our decisions yield sustainable results? How do we measure sustainability?

Dr. Harrison points out that one of the strengths of geographers is their ability to straddle disciplines and identify complex linkages in earth-human systems. The input of geographers is sorely needed in our quest for sustainability at all levels from local to global.

Modern policy and Geography

Dr. Harrison argues that the question of how we can keep and enhance the benefits of specialization while at the same time re-energizing the multi-dimensional and integrative aspects of the disciplines is a dilemma for the discipline and the science of Geography, rather than government. I agree that it is a dilemma – I disagree that it is not a matter for government.

In my experience, one of the barriers to addressing resource issues in an integrative manner is the corporate culture of government agencies. Many government bureaucrats are specialized or focused on the program objectives at hand. Even when ministries collaborate on issues and programs, too often staff is narrowly focused on representing their agency’s role and mandate rather than looking for collaborative and integrative solutions. There is a real need for government agencies to encourage and support middle and senior level positions for “scientifically trained problem solvers, able to integrate various fields of knowledge”.

I agree that we need to continue to ground aspiring Geographers in all aspects of the discipline. Since resource issues are seldom one-dimensional, the need for trained individuals with problem-solving skills for complex environmental issues is imperative. Not only should Geographers be trained in problem-solving skills, they need to be able to convey complex issues and solutions to decision-makers in a language that decision-makers can understand.

Dr. Harrison provides three examples of resource issues of national and international scales, which require an interdisciplinary, interagency management approach. Other

examples in Ontario include source water protection, population growth, and infrastructure renewal and expansion.

At the watershed scale, the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) is responsible for “establishing and undertaking...a program designed to further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources other than gas, oil, coal and minerals” (Conservation Authorities Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. C.27, s. 20.). To deal with critical watershed resource issues, the Grand River Conservation Authority develops partnerships with its member municipalities, government ministries, business, academia and non-government organizations. These partnerships are key to the funding and delivery of resource management programs that support integrated watershed management.

It is interesting to note that Geographers on staff outnumber other disciplines within the organization. Geographers have been hired to deliver environmental education programs, develop GIS applications, develop master plans for conservation areas, undertake municipal plan input and review for environmental interests and to coordinate long-range participatory policy and planning. Even the Chief Administrative Officer is a Geographer! At the risk of offending my colleagues, I would speculate that perhaps the abundance of Geographers on staff is one reason why the GRCA has gained an international reputation for excellence in river management.

Conclusion

Governments are currently seeking better, more effective strategies for resolving complex problems. Dr. Harrison provided examples of resource issues at the international and national scales which are a “Geographer’s dream”. These opportunities also exist at other geographic scales. For example, as a result of the Walkerton tragedy in Ontario, the Province of Ontario is requiring the development of source protection plans at the watershed level. These plans will be based on the best available science and will be developed collaboratively with watershed municipalities and provincial agencies. There are emerging opportunities for Geographers to be actively involved in the creation and implementation of these plans. The protection of Canada’s freshwater is also a priority in other provinces across Canada presenting Geographers with additional opportunities for promoting integrated watershed management.

I agree with Dr. Harrison’s comments that universities need to continue to train Geographers with an integrative capacity in both physical and human geography. While there is a need for continued research in specialized fields, there is an ever-increasing need for an interdisciplinary approach to address complex issues. I agree that one of the biggest challenges is to educate politicians and bureaucrats and other key stakeholders such as the business community regarding the potential contribution of geography in supporting decisions that lead to more sustainable outcomes from environmental, economic and social perspectives.

However, if Geographers are to influence government policy and decision-making, they also need to be trained to be politically savvy and to be able to clearly and concisely articulate findings in a style and language that is easily understood by decision-makers. In many cases, the use of geographical tools such as GIS provides a real opportunity in this regard.

I also think that there is greater opportunity for better collaboration between government agencies and universities. For example, the Grand River Conservation Authority is currently pursuing Memoranda of Understanding with its four post-secondary educational institutions to increase opportunities for joint research and educational projects. It has developed strong ties with the Geography departments at Wilfrid Laurier University and the Universities of Waterloo and Guelph. It is hoped that by encouraging research related to better understanding physical functions and processes and the cause-effect relationships between human activity and the environment, society and economics within the Grand River watershed, better resource management decisions will be made.

Geographers can and should play a key role in influencing government policy and decision-making frameworks that support sustainability at the local, watershed, provincial, federal and international levels. I agree that there is a strong role for our professional and academic associations such as the Royal Canadian Geographic Society and the Canadian Association of Geographers to carry this message to government agencies. At the same time, universities need to ensure that that Geographers are not only skilled in all aspects of the discipline but are adept in communicating complex concepts to policy and decision-makers and other stakeholders including the public. And lastly, Geographers need to demonstrate to their colleagues and the decision-makers that their unique integrative skills provide value and are essential for developing and implementing effective policies and management approaches for a sustainable future.