INTERDISCIPLINARITY, EXPERIENCE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PHILANTHROPY

David Secord

Professional and personal evolution

I have spent my career in two kinds of institutions that most people see as remote from reality: universities and foundations. More than a decade of designing and directing university environmental programs made me wonder whether anything I had learned or taught in the academic world had much to do with the real world. The gospel we preached to students was: break out of the narrow confines of disciplines – especially in addressing wickedly complex environmental issues – and you'll be better prepared to tackle them professionally.

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Seven years after escaping the ivory tower to become an environmental grantmaker, I conclude that what my colleagues and I preached about the value of interdisciplinary study might actually have been correct. It turns out the value of chipping away at boundaries is just as potent for institutional funders. Environmental funders tend to attend the same conferences and fund the same genres of grantees year after year, rarely even meeting other kinds of funders in potentially relevant fields like human rights, community development, health, or arts and culture. Yet many funders I know are haunted by a sense that improved environmental policy outcomes might be achieved only by thinking beyond ENGO (environmental non-governmental organization) grantees and by hanging around with people who are not environmentalists. In a complex and rapidly changing world, ENGOs are necessary but not sufficient to move the needle on environmental issues. Still, environmental funders often find it easier or more comfortable to grant mainly to ENGOs. I wondered why.

Here I describe how I arrived at the conviction that a broader grant portfolio – informed by a deeper reservoir of information and experience – is both possible and desirable. The academic and foundation stages of my career have each shaped these conclusions and both have informed ways of *thinking* and *acting* about relationships and strategies. My thoughts about professional grantmaking have developed at two quite different foundations. The first was the Wilburforce Foundation, a U.S. based private funder supporting science-based terrestrial habitat conservation in Alaska and western Canada. The second is my current employer, the Tides Canada Foundation, a national public foundation designing and managing strategic grant portfolios for institutional and individual donors in several Canadian provinces and territories.

Three themes have emerged: get socially uncomfortable, get out more, and bring science home.

Getting socially uncomfortable

When I joined the Wilburforce Foundation in early 2007, I inherited a place-based grant portfolio centred on parts of Alaska and B.C. In the beginning I spent a lot of time reading about, and visiting, my funding regions. Reading was squarely in my academic comfort zone, but it took effort to deepen relationships on the ground, not only with ENGOs and scientists, but with others who probably stereotyped me as a naïve urban foundation employee. I was lucky that around the time I started at Wilburforce, a new body was coalescing in Southeast Alaska called the Tongass Futures Roundtable. This multi-stakeholder table was partly inspired by funders who had been active in the early development of the Great Bear Rainforest Agreements in B.C. It was intended to stimulate dialogue, and ultimately policy and practice solutions, relevant to the half-century battle over timber jobs, public land, rural Native and non-Native communities, and iconic coastal rainforests.

The facilitated table had all the usual suspects: environmentalists, federal and state land managers, loggers and mill owners, rural mayors, Alaska Native tribal and corporate leaders, representatives of the fishing and tourism industries, and more. But it also had something unusual: direct participation of funders. With experienced program staff from other foundations, for three years I was part of formal and informal discussions at these quarterly multi-day meetings. It was a cumulatively transformative experience of high drama, grand themes, and maddening minutiae. The funders were not seen by most participants as synonymous with ENGOs who were also at the table. At first I found this remarkable – weren't environmentalists over-represented since the ENGOs *and the ENGOs' funders who presumably shared the same values* were both there? Gradually it dawned on me that even though we funders were helping to support the whole exercise through grants, we were actually valued for our ideas as well as our money. This was not delusional; we were not always perfectly sympatico with the green groups at the table, and the other participants clearly appreciated that diversity of viewpoints.

In hindsight, after millions of dollars invested during half a decade, there is precious little to show for the Roundtable in tangible public policy outcomes. Perhaps it was naïve to expect that erecting an elaborate forum for conversation and negotiation would end one of the bitterest environmental conflicts in U.S. history in a few grant cycles. But what did emerge was equally profound and perhaps as valuable in the long run. A bunch of strangers, iconic enemies who may have met only on opposing sides of a courtroom, had to spend a heck of a lot of time together. It was shared time in remarkable circumstances, too. We met in a different community with each passing season, each with its own culture, history, traditional or vestigial economy, and hospitality traditions. Simply by meeting in the smaller places, we measurably boosted the economies of Alaska Native villages, overgrown logging camps, boom and bust fishing towns, and larger centres still reeling from pulp mill closures. During these years of dialogue, we got stuck awaiting planes during wild winter storms, biding time with the full spectrum of the region's humanity. I learned volumes about people's lives and aspirations and perceptions of environmentalists, and in many catalytic moments came to see "non-traditional allies" as friends and colleagues rather than as campaign cartoons.

I also learned about the ideological and tactical diversity of the ENGO sector, and more importantly, so did the rural communities and resource harvesters who had previously painted all "greens" with one brush. I witnessed the spectrum of environmentalism from confrontational orthodoxy to nuanced views of how economy, community, and environment interlock. I heard a venerable senior conservation scientist say, in frustration, how much he disliked "extreme environmentalists" who were unwilling to compromise. I saw one mayor from a struggling logging town break bread with a big city environmentalist and a senior federal official – and a few hours later storm out of the room when discussions got heated. I saw how elements of the rural economy (fishing, forestry, tourism, government) intersect and sometimes clash. I saw raw nerves and tears as bureaucrats and campaigners and tree fellers realized more deeply what it meant to be arguing so long and so hard over Native land. And I witnessed real-time community impacts of environmental campaigns and political standoffs in a distant Congress.

Many new grantmaking insights also came out of these experiences. For example, during a meeting break in the Tlingit village of Yakutat, Alaska (near the Yukon-B.C. border), I strolled in a downpour with a Roundtable member who was not a grantee of mine. She was excited about an arcane federal policy tool that would enable communities to receive contracts to restore logged land, producing a critical handful of family wage jobs in remote towns, while improving the ecological integrity of the forest. She argued that such a policy solution would address the specific conundrums the Roundtable had grappled with that morning. That conversation led to a small pilot grant, then to a couple of bigger ones, and eventually to an ongoing federal effort to add a new policy tool to a solutions toolbox long desperate for innovation. In the art and science of strategic grantmaking, serendipitous conversations in the rain can matter – but they can't happen if funders rarely leave their offices. The Roundtable was my excuse to be in Yakutat during that October monsoon. There are myriad other good reasons to get out once in a while.

Getting out of town and out on the land

Many times I have heard from ENGO grantees that a certain "Native community is on our side" or was "coming along toward our environmental position." The truth is more complicated: a handful of fringe supporters in a village near an oil field does not imply a community consensus or widespread concurrence with a particular "environmental" policy. Feelings about mines and old-growth clear-cuts and devolution of resource decision-making are usually complex and mixed. The Russian proverb, "trust but verify," springs to mind. Although it is difficult and sometimes inappropriate for ENGO *or* foundation staff to parachute into a community to try to take its pulse, with patience and transparency of purpose funders can build their own direct relationships and draw their own conclusions.

This kind of due diligence is usually easier when there is a direct grantmaking relationship with a non-ENGO community organization (often a First Nation or Inuit NGO or other indigenous people's organization). This is not a matter of buying information; rather, it is simply another reason for both parties to spend time together, with a clear eye to reciprocity in the relationship despite the power dynamic inherent when one party is in the business of writing cheques. In post-colonial North America, these relationships are

fraught with baggage, but grant-makers are gradually getting better at them thanks to increased direct granting relationships and emerging dialogue venues such as the Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada.

Two examples will show why funders can and should "go there" rather than working solely through ENGO intermediaries. The first concerns a large conservation campaign for the wild salmon-bearing Taku watershed, part of the 3 million-hectare traditional territory of the Taku River Tlingit First Nation (TRTFN) in extreme northwest B.C. For years, conservation funders in the region granted to a small group of capable ENGOs with relationships in the community. As a First Nation-to-provincial intergovernmental negotiation on land use planning and shared decision-making neared completion, the three funders most active in the region got together and agreed on a shared desire to get to know Tlingit leadership more directly. We planned a trip to Atlin, the home community for the TRTFN. We spent three days there, meeting with the TRTFN government, citizens, and board members of an emerging First Nation NGO set up to advance integrated cultural, economic, and environmental objectives embedded in the new land-use agreements. We hiked on the land, shared herring roe with seal oil received by trading with Alaska Tlingits, and in the process learned more than we had gleaned from years of reports received from ENGOs active in the region.

It is important to emphasize that we did not go to Atlin secretly or to circumvent the good work of our long-time grantees. But the community was rebuilding its capacity to steer its own destiny, and we felt we owed the Tlingit – not to mention our foundation trustees – a more direct relationship between the funders and the people most impacted by the funding. As a result of this visit and a year of subsequent discussions, we designed something unique together. We established a new endowment fund, capitalized with environmental philanthropy plus TRTFN funds, to support conservation activities including science, stewardship capacity, and cultural revitalization. The fund is structured and governed such that affected people are in the driver's seat. It is important to note that the foundations involved are not all huge, geographically nearby, or extremely well-staffed – but all are finding this a more satisfying, ethical, and effective approach to environmental funding in the region, and the approach is spreading.

A second example comes from the Arctic Funders Group (AFG), an informal cluster of 8-12 foundations, mostly with environmental portfolios, funding in the circumpolar world. The AFG has held together since 2007, with little institutional infrastructure besides periodic meetings, shared learning trips to various Arctic regions, and the glue of a part-time consultant as a coordinator. While we have occasionally made joint grants and funded studies together, the group's primary goal has been shared learning and relationship-building, particularly with indigenous peoples of the North whose homelands our grants impact. On one of our early learning trips in Nunavut in 2009, we shared a deeply formative experience. Over the course of several days, we had long conversations with Inuit leaders, land-claims organizations, and the institutions of public government responsible for wildlife, water, fisheries, oceans, traditional knowledge, and more. But we spent our most memorable day and evening on thinning sea ice with a group of elders and youth and emerging leaders. It was a typical day of travel, harvesting, skill sharing, and community – yet a remarkable day for a gaggle of urban funders and a treat for the young leaders whose desk jobs with critical Inuit institutions do not allow

them as much time on the land with elders as they would like. We were a good excuse. We shared tea, caribou stew, and seal. We induced some cross-cultural chuckles when a big city foundation executive in our group showed up to the skidoos wearing tweed and a windbreaker. After making him the butt of Inuit humour, the elders got him outfitted in fur and skin for a proper day on the land. We had the kind of strategic conversations about science and Arctic policy, traditional knowledge, resource extraction, social wellness, sustainable livelihoods, and Inuit governance that could never have happened in a conference room in Ottawa or, for that matter, Iqaluit.

The insights and relationships from experiences like these have carried forward in the work of all the AFG member foundations. They have created more direct First Nations and Inuit relationships, including much more direct grantmaking to indigenous governments and NGOs. And they have given us more clarity about the conditions under which outside capacity and distant institutions – including researchers – can be welcome and useful in communities. A new generation of academics, guided by their full partners in communities, is leading the way.

Building usable science with communities

Since leaving academia for philanthropy I have developed a healthy skepticism about what constitutes excellent applied research. I've seen too many perfunctory attempts to describe the broader impacts of basic research and heard too many stories from communities about superficial interactions with visiting academics who seldom share research findings, leave behind local capacity, or truly digest what communities want to glean from and contribute to research. Yet universities represent massive capacity to enhance environmental knowledge and stewardship, which is frequently the missing link between sound public policy and its implementation. Foundation dollars will never approach the scale of public research funding, but they can be deployed more flexibly and creatively and thus have disproportionate impact.

One measure of that impact is whether the funding is seen as equally useful for practitioners on the ground as for individuals seeking to thrive in the staid system of academic rewards and responsibilities. Can rigorous peer-reviewed papers and community-directed research questions really coexist? The best way of summing up the challenge is what David Hart of the University of Maine's Sustainability Solutions Initiative has described as the Loading Dock Problem. In this potent analogy, university research is produced in large quantities but simply accumulates on a metaphorical loading dock at the back of every large research institution. The assumption is that citizens or policy decision-makers seeking solutions to complex challenges will automatically pick up and assimilate the bits of relevant research they need. These data will magically find their way from the reams of peer-reviewed papers on the loading dock to the individuals or communities needing relevant knowledge, in an understandable form, just in time to make a difference. There is little irony and much aptness in the metaphor, despite the well-intentioned efforts of university outreach offices, science communications training programs, and technology transfer agreements of the growing industry-academy complex.

Yet there are other ways of doing business for academics. Generally they involve spending a lot more time in communities, or in the field with community members,

designing and carrying out collaborative research, and less time in the lab or writing papers and proposals. While these models have always been around to some extent, they are considered risky for pre-tenure academics. But it is often these courageous assistant professors and post-docs who are leading the way, buoyed by the genuine community appreciation and intellectual stimulation of true partnership. There are many great examples of good university-community partnerships that foundations can help encourage – including some regional networks such as the Sustainability Solutions Initiative in Maine and the Hakai Network for Coastal People, Ecosystems and Management in B.C. One smaller example here will illustrate the value of the approach and the role of philanthropy.

On the central coast of B.C., young leaders from four First Nations with adjacent overlapping territories have recently set aside historical differences for a clear, shared agenda: ending trophy hunting of bears in their coastal watersheds. This is at once a conservation agenda (carnivores are critical components of food webs), an economic agenda (economic data suggest that bears are worth more alive than dead), a cultural agenda (trophy hunting is incompatible with traditional values), and a public-policy agenda (changes to provincial guide outfitter regulations would be required). But it is also a science agenda: objective genetic and demographic data on bears are critical to the case for policy change. The Central Coast Bear Working Group, the alliance of emerging leaders from these four First Nations, has formed robust partnerships with academic researchers. The research *questions* are truly community-driven, but the policy-relevant *answers* are data-driven. The research is being published in peer-reviewed journals, helping the careers of young academics (including many First Nations students) and bolstering the case for policy reform. More and more academics spend enough time in communities and in the field that they have genuine (not superficial) relationships with community-based researchers. The research is shared in community forums and diverse media outlets, not just in academic journals. University administrations and band councils are equally supportive of the new approach. And the funds for both the science and partnership dimensions have been largely provided by foundations. There are other good examples of sustained academic-community partnerships like this around the world, but they remain a relative rarity. Still, philanthropy has a role to play in nudging the academic ship in the right direction.

Final Thoughts

My journey has taught me that interdisciplinary thinking, authentic time with rural people and places, and thoughtful philanthropy are a powerful nexus. Cultural and behavioural changes in universities and foundations are both possible and essential. Better public policy hinges on social inclusion, which requires us to push ourselves to shift our thinking and our actions. Broader dialogue, time in the field, and "riskier" grants that reward leadership and innovation are some of the critical way markers on our path. Funders love to be focused and strategic, but as any ecologist or social scientist knows, the straight path in a non-linear world is rarely the most likely or effective one. Cultivating a range of experiences and funding a diversity of grantees is an approach that has been full of rewards in charting my course from here to there.