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Including the Excluded Population in Marine Corps Environmental Decisions

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The authors offer some advice that may be beneficial to base and station commanders.

The Marine Corps and the military in general are faced with a serious threat to training and operations from militant activists intent on curtailing military training opportunities and closing military facilities. Sadly, the military has consistently been outmaneuvered because we tend to focus internally on the issues involved by advising commanders that the military approach meets environmental justice criteria, and we are “safe” because national security requires training sites. In the meantime, despite the internal legal and ethical correctness of our environmental positions, anti-military activists are degrading training through political and court action, unnecessarily closing needed facilities and threatening many more. Why is this happening?

The Marines are losing because we focus internally on the environmental justice and other environmental issues rather than developing our external skills necessary to gain support from “informal networks” of local citizens. We continue to rely on our former allies like members of Congress and chambers of commerce to support military facilities and training because we perceive ourselves as “good guys” who bring money and jobs to the community and, therefore, the community gets to participate in our national security. Those allies are no longer effective in responding to environmental questions because they are not connected with and have little influence on the community’s all important informal networks. Our traditional allies are detached from the local community networks, and radical activists have been successful in filling the resulting cultural void.

As evidenced by the Vieques issue, many politicians are poll, rather than

principle, driven, and often stake out positions before they know the facts. They are detached from the informal citizen’s networks that must support us if we are to win the battle to retain training and keep our bases open. Few citizens pay much attention to newspapers, watch the local news on television, or attend public meetings where we generally try to publish our message. They get their information and form their opinions by interaction with a variety of informal networks at church, work, places of recreation, bars, community centers, coffee shops, and ethnic neighborhoods. Typically, environmental activists have access to these informal networks while we do not. For example, activists in Vieques have falsely convinced the informal networks that the military is a bunch of insane bombers, recklessly bombing and shelling the entire island close to the civilian population, and placing the health and safety of the whole island at risk.

Because we are detached from the informal networks, activists are able to cleverly portray the issue in the community’s informal networks as a battle between innocent, victimized citizens and the evil military bent on polluting the environment and destroying the quality of community life. In this context, who could fail to decide in favor of the opportunist’s agenda? This context, however, represents a false and misleading dichotomy because there is generally much public benefit and latent support for maintaining the facility and conducting the required training. This false dichotomy may actually operate to direct much needed jobs, and other social and

economic resources, away from the community that the military activities could directly benefit. And surely, the military cannot win the battle with the radical groups without direct citizen support. How do we reclaim the ability to connect with and develop the support of the informal citizen’s networks?

It is a process that focuses on the productive harmony intent of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and minimizes the potential for disruption by activists, regulators, and courts by allowing the affected people to participate in the planning and decisionmaking process. The process achieves harmony between the base or training mission and the people by emphasizing Section 101 of NEPA. That section declares that it is a policy of the Federal Government to:

create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans.

The Marine Corps has already used the process to defuse opposition to beach landing and training in Hawaii by meeting with and accommodating the cultural concerns of the informal networks in the Makua Beach area of Oahu and the Molokai Ranch area of Molokai.

Following the clarion call of Section 101, James Kent Associates of Aspen, CO, a global sociocultural consulting firm, has developed a reasoned process designed to minimize the surprise and disruption created by the intrusion into the community culture of a new environmental influence or continued base activity. They do so by

opening a familiar, predictable, natural process of communication and action so the well-being of both the affected community population and the physical environment is addressed by the people. The method, referred to as The Discovery Process, results in a description of the affected communities “from the inside out,” that is, from the perspectives of the people who live, survive, and maintain their culture in the community. By focusing on several well-tested cultural descriptors, like informal networks, settlement patterns, work routines, support services, recreation routines, and geographical features, a complete picture emerges of community life that may be used by commanders to align the training mission with the civic protocols of the community culture.

It is not enough to understand the formal level of the community’s government like the city council and mayor. Rather, it’s more important that the research methods reflect the social reality of everyday nonpolitical people, their routines, traditions, beliefs, and important issues. The Discovery Process is concerned with the common practices people employ to create a sense of order in their lives. A clear understanding of the training mission’s intrusion into the community’s cultural realities allows all training missions to be tailored to resolve many of the community’s issues.

The Discovery Process experience has revealed that most proposed environmentally sensitive matters that run into legal or regulatory objections, fall behind schedule, and generate community opposition, have one thing in common. From the start, they failed to deal with the real issues existing in the community that are important to people who don’t read the newspaper or come to public meetings and are, therefore, excluded from the training mission discussion and design. One of the original framers of NEPA, Lynton Caldwell, a Harvard professor, in a recent review of NEPA effectiveness, stated that if NEPA is to achieve its intent “it must be used to bring the active political will closer to what appears to be the nation’s latent preference.”

The Discovery Process requires commanders to know and consider everyday people’s concerns about the

environmental effects of the training project. These concerns then may be rationally explained, discussed, and reasonably accommodated. Any accommodation must not give the impression or be characterized by either party as a tradeoff to allow the training or keep the base. Bribery will not work because it implies that there is something environmentally wrong with the mission. Bribery can never achieve the desired end of productive harmony between the mission and the community. It must be made clear to the affected community that the military is reaching this accommodation because we have an obligation to our country to act to enrich their specific culture through the presence of the military activity.

Importantly, the approach also allows for compliance with the environmental justice requirements of Executive Order 12898, which broadly provides that “all communities and persons across this nation should live in a safe and healthful environment.” As James Kent, the creator of The Discovery Process states:

The management technique is clearly one of ‘participatory communications’ in which the proponent of the mission engages the community within its cultural boundary system in a manner consistent with that community’s own culture, beliefs, traditions, stories, and approaches to maintaining or enhancing their environment. As a result, the training mission is tailored to harmonize with the membrane that protects that culture and achieves environmental justice.

Does it work? The proof is in the resolution of several highly controversial projects from Hawaii to West Virginia. Two, one civilian and one military, clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the process. In 1995, a 3-year Discovery Process for the Aspen Skiing Company freed a proposal to expand skiing on Burnt Mountain from 15 years of social chaos involving militant environmentalists and the county government. In 1997, the Marine Corps at Kaneohe Bay used The Discovery Process to address polarization occurring between the Marines and native Hawaiians over training exercises involving beach

landings. By discovering the informal networks in the Makua Beach area and understanding their cultural maintenance, survival, and caretaking systems, the Marines have an opportunity for a win-win situation. By discovering and addressing the cultural objections in the Hawaiian community—not as a bribe or a tradeoff, but as enriching the culture—the Marines were positioned to turn the relationship from adversarial to one of community cooperation.

A valuable byproduct is that the radicals who object to any circumstances are separated from community support because the informal systems understand how the training activity, through enhancements to their culture, can directly benefit them. Therefore, the training becomes a mutual benefit with the community networks standing between the military and the activists. And finally, use of a model like The Discovery Process in international sustainability projects has achieved remarkable success. There has been a stark contrast between the success of sustainability programs that follow the community-oriented model against the social chaos that results from paternalistic, rigid, top-down centralized command and control. The community-oriented projects work because the informal community has participated in the decision-making and has ownership in the outcome. We suggest that the Marine Corps adopt the community-oriented Discovery Process approach when facing environmental challenges to training and operations before it is too late.

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