

COMMUNITY BASED AUDITING
EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY TO TAKE CHARGE
pathways to a just and sustainable society

By

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The emergence of the critical community

It can no longer be argued that our futures are in the hands of the so-called experts. We are learning very quickly that the use of traditional approaches to solving social and environmental problems is leading to serious and far-reaching dilemmas. Mad cow disease, groundwater pollution, nuclear reactor failures, salinization of agricultural land and destruction of indigenous cultures, to mention a few, have all been largely brought about through the application of the *Western magic* of positivism. The positivist worldview demands an objective and concrete, impersonal reality that is measurable and "real". The worldview tends to judge those views and opinions based upon local or experiential knowledge as lacking validity and credibility, seeing them as even *unscientific*. Thus "everyday" common sense is always seen as just a very rough approximation of the real *truth* that only a select few can know. In similar fashion new or alternative paradigms or worldviews are usually not taken seriously. The resistance shown toward organic agriculture is just one example. My thesis contends that this inflexibility on the part of the positivists has been in large part a contributor to the crises now facing us.

The positivist worldview holds that the gatekeepers of the knowledge of science must have special status and be seated in large and complex institutions, effectively out of reach (most of the time) of *ordinary folk*. As a change agent out in the community I hear time and time again how ordinary folk are just bamboozled by it all, unable to simply be heard or taken seriously. Fortunately, the winds of change are a blowin'. As we enter the postmodern moment one can sense a growing disquiet out there in *the community* as people begin, more and more, to question whether the "experts" have in fact got it right: community has begun to question its faith. The community is, I think, beginning to move from the question, "who's in charge" to a position of, "we must take responsibility". Even in our tiny State (Tasmania) we often hear of the victories of "People Power". Indeed it's the same wherever you go around the world. Folks are waking up and wanting to take an active lead in the shaping of their futures.

The tools for change

In my practice and research I am continually faced with facilitating community involvement and empowerment. For over twelve years now I have worked on this project, working with communities of interest across a range of issues from aerial overspray, pollution from heavy industry to water and forestry issues. The thing that struck me in nearly all cases (and there have been over sixteen to date) is the immense wealth of knowledge, experience and creativity that resides *out there* in the community. As a professional (coming from a science background) I see continuing confirmation that a just and sustainable future is possible only through processes that encourage full participation and empowerment. Indeed I assert that resonating within

this postmodern moment is the *new science*, a science that deals successfully with complex, messy site-specific issues where *numbers and values meet*, some would call it *soft system*, whereas I prefer to just call it socially relevant science. Harding (1998) sums it up well in arguing that knowledge is a result of an ongoing interaction between those holding 'local knowledge' and those holding the so-called expert knowledge. One wonders what we would have learnt from our indigenous culture if we would have, "*asked before we dug*". But, alas dear reader, the rest is history...

Community Based Auditing (CBA) is an attempt to engage the community as active players in the planning and management of their resources. CBA has been used, over the past 2 years, to train several community groups across Tasmania. The flyer appended to the end of this essay details a training program offered by Tasmanian Community Resource Auditors, Inc (TCRA). This organization is run as a non-profit community facilitation organization with the principal focus of community ownership in resource management. It recognizes that community is the ultimate "responsible person" in relation to decisions involving resource management. A voluntary board organizes Journal publication (*Upper Catchment Issues Tasmania*) and auditor training, including supporting community groups in telling their stories. Each year there is an AGM where a new Board is elected. Current membership is around 30. In the first year of operation (2002-2003) a total of 4 community groups were supported through training and audit publication. Currently the Journal, *Upper Catchment Issues Tasmania* is into its second volume of publication. Since 2000 four editions have been published.

TCRA is supported by a number of key professionals, who support community regarding matters of project design, peer review processes and technical matters. Money from Journal sales and other fund raising from training are the principle sources of revenue. TCRA does not rely on state or Federal grants.

The Community Based Audit process uses an action research approach to guide participants as they *plan-act-reflect*. Audit groups report their findings in *Upper Catchment Issues Tasmania*. The audit process can also include a risk assessment (along the lines of Post Normal Science) where experts are used to cross-check or triangulate results. A recent community audit looked at a proposal to clear fell a forested area in a catchment in the North East of Tasmania. A local community group was concerned that clear felling in the catchment would negatively impact on water quality and yield, flora and fauna, tourism amenity and cultural heritage values. The group initially surveyed their wider community and discovered significant community attachment to the proposed logging area. The group then proceeded to audit. The focus of the audit was to determine whether or not the proponents of the logging operation had, in the first instance, identified the same environmental aspects as those already identified by the community group and whether or not a thorough risk assessment had been completed. The group began by accessing information on the biophysical aspects of the area including the proponents Forest Practices Plan. The group then walked the site taking photos and making observations. The group met and asked critical questions of the Forest Practices Plan and then met with the proponents to discuss their concerns and issues. Unresolved issues were then taken for expert review. Remaining mismatches and concerns were then taken back to the proponents for discussion prior to writing of the audit. The upshot of the enquiry was

the discovery that the proponents had not adequately addressed significant environmental issues such as water quality and yield, cultural values and tourism ementity. Once again logging in fragile catchment areas was seen as undesirable if not foolish.

The group was also able to put forward logical and convincing arguments relating to inadequacies of the proponents' Forest Practices Plan and the *State Forest Practices Act*. Finally, the group put forward alternative plans for the area, which included development tourism and multiple use forestry. The final report was then distributed to the Local Council, proponent, media, government, libraries and general community through a series of community forums. This process, given only in summary here, is very powerful in that not only are the community members involved and *learning* (Dakin, 2003), but they are also creating a clear record of *their work – their science*. This is an important first for Tasmania and is enabling community to slowly move into the driver's seat in relation to this important issue of control of our diminishing resources.

Community Based Auditing although still evolving serves as a good example of how community can be an effective change agent and at the same time control what it is doing. The important thing about the approach is that it *starts where others are at*, that is the process and language used are not too far removed from people's comfort zone. Once produced the community audit report, replete with its expert evidence, graphic evidence (including transcripts of interviews) and journal format, stands as a credible, well argued and logical case study that could be read by academics, community, politicians, journalists or who ever. Each edition has an ISSN, which means it is sent to State and National libraries and is in demand in other government and NGO libraries as well. The point about accessiblity and credibility is vital. All too often we see the two extremes: at one end, community asked what they think of a proposal *after* the decision is made and at the other, full-on protest. All too often we see "the movement" doing good work that is largely ignored by the wider public, mostly because of the attendant "protest and greenie" images that seem to accompany much of activism. The goal of Community Based Auditing is to bring community into the process using languages and images *they* understand and are comfortable with. There is another benefit. The presentation of well argued and well presented cases also confronts industry and government with material that is very hard to ignore – it is in their *language* and coming from the community. This, we have found, is very challenging and is a change process in its own right.

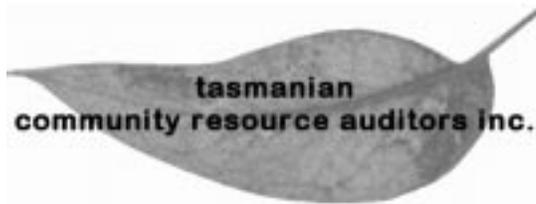
Community Based Auditing offers a new mid ground – still challenging and tough going, but above all rich learning for all involved.

References

Dakin S. 2003, 'Challenging old models of knowledge and learning: new perspectives for participation in environmental management and planning', *Environments*, vol.31, no.1

Harding, R. 1998 (ed) 'Gathering and using data – beyond the scientific paradigm', in *Environmental Decision making: the Roles of Scientists, Engineers and the Public*

Tasmanian Community Resource Auditors Inc., *Upper Catchment Issues Tasmania* (ISSN 1444-9560), Resource Publications, Beauty Point Tasmania, Australia 7270



Overview of Auditor's Training Course

The purpose of audit training is to provide people with skills in environmental/project auditing to enable them to compare and analyse projects against the stated planning, execution and outcome of the operation. Some examples of what can be audited include:

- The effectiveness of a community action project, i.e. Are key assertions adequately supported by evidence and can statements be substantiated?
- Implementation of a Landcare plan or the effectiveness of a Forest Practices Plan .i.e. Is the plan being implemented as designed? Are there effective safeguards for violations?

An audit can be applied to any operation where an operational plan or strategy has been documented.

The one day workshop is structured as follows:

1. **Introduction to Community Based Auditing.** What do we mean by auditing? Who can audit? Why audit? Auditing in the context of managing your own community based project.
2. **The audit frame work.** To audit we need a consistent reference point, e.g. with forestry operations it would be the Forest Practice Code, the Forest Practices Plan or the Forest Practices Act. With industrial pollution it would be the Environment Management Plan or project operational plan held by the company and so on.
3. **The importance of gathering background information.** Be clear on the reasons why an audit is being proposed, e.g. is there an issue or problem? Is it a matter of measuring how well a proponent has prepared themselves for a project or how committed they are to the projects stated outcome? Answers to these and other questions form an important starting point for the audit.
4. **Making use of experts.** The use of experts to cross check your findings and any assertions you may make in the final audit report. This step is vital in ensuring the validity and professionalism of your work.
5. **What constitutes an audit.** The search for mismatches and inconsistencies (this is very much at the heart of the audit process). Preparing check sheets, what counts as evidence, photographic evidence, quantitative and qualitative evidence, letters of proof and discovery of documents. Production of the report and publication. The media and public right to know.
6. **A Case Study.** The group walks through an actual case study.

The cost of holding the workshop is \$10 per person with a minimum of 6 people. To find out more about this Auditing Training Course please contact:

Kim Eastman Ph: 6352 3429.