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Regulation, Conservation, and Collaboration: Ecological Anthropology in the Mississippi Delta

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Abstract Overintensification and subsidies have long made American commodity farmers the enemy of conservationists. Yet, environmental conditions are improving in the Mississippi Delta where farmer-based groups, water management districts and conservation organizations have improved environmental quality and redefined the role of agriculture in environmental preservation. This work is all the more remarkable given the region's deeply conservative politics that discourage regulation. This paper examines this mainstreaming of environmental values in light of debates on the role of the state in fostering environmental subjectivities. Following cultural examinations of the state, we caution that the presence or retreat of the state is insufficient to understanding environmental subjectivities. Instead, an ethnographic focus is necessary to identify connections between the state and particular human-environment relations. In the Delta, this focus shows that local environmentalism is consonant with a politics of unsustainability, one that simultaneously advances radical ecological change and defense of the region's social hierarchies.

Keywords Community-based conservation · United States · Neoliberalism · Autonomy · Environmentality · Anti-environmentalism

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Introduction

Carl Trake sits at his desk in a camouflage patterned collared shirt with "Delta F.A.R.M" embroidered on the front pocket. His office walls are lined with ducks and the mounted head of a 10-point buck. A needlepoint biblical scripture sits on a small pedestal on his desk. Trake is the director of Delta F.A.R.M. (Farmers Advocating Resource Management) an organization that monitors and evaluates agricultural conservation practices along the Mississippi Delta. "Environmental regulatory agencies and production agriculture don't usually get along," Trake explains:

> But by being proactive, Delta F.A.R.M. is getting an opportunity to right the Delta's wrongs with other people's money. The alternative, as we see it, to not doing a good job now is being forced to do it their way with our money, later. This is our home and we must keep others from coming in and making less experienced-based, less educated decisions for us.

The following paper examines the relationship between a recent increase in farm conservation efforts and the region's historical antipathy to federal regulatory agencies. Farmers in the Mississippi Delta[1] are predominantly ultraconservative Republicans with controversial views on race, women, and the proper treatment of the environment. In fact, this community has long been described, along with other conservative American communities (see Johnson 1999; Howell 2002; Williams 2002; Smith-Cavros 2006), as

[1] Delta refers to the fertile crescent of land that stretches from Memphis, TN, to Vicksburg, MS, about 7,000 square miles in its entirety. The central Delta, where this work was conducted, includes the area around Bolivar and Washington Counties. This is an agriculturally intensive region, focusing on rice, soybeans, and to a slightly lesser degree, cotton and corn.

antienvironmentalist. Yet Delta farmers have begun to invest in conservation practices and espouse a new view on environmental protection. The organizations behind this drive are not federally funded programs or liberally guided environmental groups, but private, locally established organizations dedicated to preserving the region's agricultural autonomy and economic prosperity. We here ask how and why this sudden environmentalism has developed and what it might represent for the future of environmentalism and conservation in the United States.

We address these questions by relating the historical and cultural bases of Delta environmental action. The paper draws from historical materials and ethnographic interviews conducted between 2006–2007 with members of the agricultural and environmental communities of the central Mississippi Delta. The paper first relates a brief history of the Delta's resistance to federal regulation of agriculture, and then describes contemporary manifestations of this resistance. Delta F.A.R.M. has been able to use disdain of federal regulation to enlist farmers to conservation programs, however, this was not a straightforward task. Local level organizations must use the social sway of local elites to encourage farmers to participate in their conservation programs. Furthermore, it appears that despite Delta farmers' distrust of external intervention and the state's concern with the Delta environment, local organizations and state authorities are satisfying one another's underlying goals while maintaining their oppositional status. The latter part of the paper discusses the importance of institutions like Delta F.A.R.M. in the development of community-based conservation programs and the ways in which local cultural knowledge equips such groups to recruit local constituents, placate federal officials, and increase environmental protection.

Delta farmers are, for now, reluctant environmentalists who seek to assure a sustainable and profitable agricultural base by using conservation to *forestall* external regulation. This stance, along with their social class[2], makes Delta farmers an awkward fit with the literature on conservation and environmentalism. On the one hand, researchers speak of environmentalism as creating spaces of popular resistance to power structures. For example, authors that focus on the social movements arising from environmentalism spaces link conservation to "emancipatory discourses on minority rights and cultural rights, ...democracy and social justice"(Brosius *et al.* 1998). On the other hand, a newer Foucauldian approach to environmental subjects, perhaps unwittingly, proffers a contradictory stance (Agrawal 2005). From this perspective support for environmental protection rests largely on state intervention and top–down conservation methods, even if these subsequently devolve powers to the local level.

Research on the Mississippi Delta charts a middle ground between this leftist populism and ecological modernization (Hajer 1995; Bluhdorn 2000) while raising new questions about the connections between local initiatives and more centralized state environmental efforts. By raising the possibility of a right-wing environmental populism, Delta farmers force researchers to consider how notions of radical environmental change may be consonant with a conservative commitment to controversial social hierarchies (see Neumann 1995; Igoe 2004). By insisting that their environmentalism is based on autonomy all the while building a financial base around agricultural subsidies, Delta farmers ask researchers to revisit connections between neoliberal governance and cultural constructions of the state. In the conclusion we use the idea of a *politics of unsustainability* to explain these persistent contradictions that may, given environmentalism's increasing popularity, be a hallmark of future environmental debates.

History of Resistance to Regulation in the Delta

> However well intentioned, the South's critics often did more harm than good by triggering the fear among Southern whites of swift, drastic, and forcible change from without.—Hodding Carter (Cobb 1992:320)

The Mississippi Delta, the "South's South" (Cobb 1992) has long been characterized, as has most of the Southern United States, as resistant to change, a stalwart of tradition—rebellious, racist, and slow (see Cash 1941; Odum 1947; Killian 1970; Goldfield 1981; Fischer 1989; Cobb 1991; Nisbett and Cohen 1996; D'Andrade 2002; Harkins 2004). Even David Cohn (1967) wrote of his Delta homeland: "Change shatters itself on the breast of this society as Pacific breakers upon a South Sea reef." Yet historical data suggest that this oft cited resistance to change is a misinterpretation of events. Given that change in the Delta has been frequent and rapid, Delta actions can be much better understood as a resistance against the external regulation of its agricultural and, therefore, economic practices.

> James Cobb (1992:310), for example, writes of the Delta:
>
> In 100 years, the Delta had risen from swampy wilderness through its heyday as the New South's Old South to its post-New Deal status as a planter's paradise...A late emerging society and subculture, the Delta rapidly relived much of the South's past in full view of a curious and often criticized audience of non-Southerners and Southerners as well.

[2] Delta commodity farmers hold approximately 2,000–10,000 acres and most have incomes that exceed several hundred thousand dollars.

Delta native Shelby Foote similarly commented that "one could see a hundred years of history in 20 years in the Delta;" and author, Ellen Douglas, wrote, "the Delta moved from a state of innocence to a state of corruption in a very short time" (ibid).

The rapid transition that these authors allude to encompasses landmark events including the Civil War, Reconstruction, WWII, and the Civil Rights movement, but other influences also include events such as the cataclysmic 1927 flood, mechanization, and industrialization. The Delta was almost nonexistent at the time of the Civil War save a small number of wealthy landowners and an exorbitant number of slaves, rarely mentioned in personal or historical accounts of the antebellum Delta. These landowners were among the few Southerners with the means and ambition to clear wilderness in order to tap into the agricultural wealth promised by this fertile cotton land (Genovese 1974). This original population was, in fact, largely against secession when the topic first arose for:

> These planters had been well served by the status quo, and for many of them the best hope for maintaining their wealth and status seemed to lie in remaining within the union and, perhaps, seeking further constitutional guarantees to preserve slavery (Cobb 1992:31).

Eventually, however, rapid change did come upon these early settlers who, deciding to revolt in defense of their believed right to a slave-based agricultural economic system, lost everything. First in the Civil War, then during Reconstruction, Deltans opposed federal regulation over their agricultural practices. This 'interference' on the part of the federal government and non-Southerners included the destruction of the levees that contained the omnipotent Mississippi, the military blockade at Vicksburg obstructing all cotton exports; the abolition of slavery and later, share cropping; as well as the devastation of the region's property, economic system, and the decimation of its male population. Later federal interference also included the regulation of crop yields, price caps and minimum wage requirements. These changes caused a decline in agricultural profits, labor shortages, and illuminated for the world the Delta's social ills under a political and liberal-guided spotlight.

Most significant to Delta agriculture, however, was the loss of billions of dollars in land and commodity profits due not only to Northern aggression but also to the ways in which the Northern presence exacerbated the effects of natural disaster. General Grant's destruction of the levees and unleashing of the Mississippi devastated cropland, but this act was truly wounding when it was followed by the 1865 flood against which no levees were left in place for protection. Following the 1865 flood, "in all of Bolivar County, not a single town remained...of what was Bolivar's most populous town, Prentiss, the flood left no trace that it ever existed" (Barry 1997: 98). The Delta's only defense against the Mississippi had been those man-made levees and when those were destroyed and the men needed to rebuild them killed in the war, the region was left vulnerable to natural disasters and further assaults. The argument that the rest of the South suffered the same economic injuries is overshadowed by the presence of the unstoppable force of the Mississippi, as well as the inordinately large sums of money, compared to the rest of the state and South, in general, that the Delta was making and then lost. One might argue that Delta wounds, as well as resentment, ran deeper than the same cuts elsewhere.

The productivity of Delta land demanded and legitimized, from the Delta planters' perspective, a greater amount of labor than was elsewhere needed. Despite the political changes that the Delta and the South underwent in the period of time from the Civil War to 1945, agriculture remained the Delta's primary political concern and its greatest source of income (Walker 2006; Genovese 1974). In 1879/80, Delta counties were averaging .73 bales of cotton per acre, while the average for the rest of Mississippi was only .41 bales (Highsaw 1949:16). Furthermore, although the percentage of farms listed in an 1880 census of agriculture as cultivated by the landowners was nearly identical for the Delta (57.9%) and the rest of Mississippi (56.6%) (Highsaw 1949:16–20), the average farm size in the Delta was 440 acres, while in the rest of the state, farm size was an average of 156 acres (Cobb 1992: 73). Not only did this create a need-based case for labor, it resulted in significantly higher income levels for Delta landowners compared to non-Delta farmers.

These statistics and prices are indicative of the value and productivity of Delta soils compared to the remainder of Mississippi (Ibid). They also indicate that Delta farmers had significantly more to loose from changes to their agricultural practices than did non-Delta regions. The federal prohibition of, interference in, and/or regulation of agricultural practices and social affairs reversed the course of Delta fortunes and prejudiced the Delta farmers against any external regulation of their agricultural affairs. As a result, there is a strong consensus among historians (see Killian 1970; Dunbar 1990; Cobb 1992; Nisbett and Cohen 1996) that the Civil War and its aftermath, including Reconstruction and even the Civil Rights movement, created a culture of paranoia about the possibility of outside regulation among white Southern planters.

The Federal Conservation Agencies

Today, local mistrust for the federal government is manifesting itself in the offices of the federal conservation agencies that interface between Delta farmers and federal

funding. The Minetti's, for instance, are one of many small farming families in Bolivar county to complain about the federal conservation cost share programs:

> The government will only cost share for the more expensive projects, so even though we would like to implement the same conservation projects as many larger farms, and even though ours don't cost as much because of size, the projects are still cost prohibitive because the government won't help.

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)[3] is one federal office that has long been in place in the Delta. Lately, their presence has been shrinking due to budget restrictions, office closings, and the overall sentiment among farmers that federal agencies are profit mongering, exclusive, and insensitive to the plight of Delta farmers.

"Our job is program driven, now" says Carla Rathburn, a county level employee of the NRCS:

> It's program and deadline driven. We're still hands on in getting people to fill out contracts to be enrolled in those programs but we are becoming more and more of a regulatory agency and that keeps farmers less close. It doesn't lend itself to a close-knit relationship with the farmers and it's all becoming about legislation and paperwork.

"Our goal is still to get better yields, decrease water use, and diesel use, increase profits, and enhance the habitat for hunting," comments Carla's colleague, Justin, "but the regulatory enforcement of all this money and the way it gets used is really a negative thing." Carla and Justin are also both concerned about farmers' responses to the newest federal program, the Cultural Resources Program. "Under it," Carla explains:

> Anyone applying for EQIP money to help pay for dirt work must send in an application to a Jackson archaeologist for an evaluation to make sure that it won't desecrate any Native American burial grounds. Native American burial grounds are common in the Delta and are most frequently found when farmers are working their fields. The problem is that the farmers want to get things in the ground and they need to hurry to do so, but under this new program, the archaeologist must come in and evaluate the site. If you want any federal money for pads, pipes, or leveling, you must be evaluated. Everyone in EQIP must be evaluated and it will take at least 45 days for the whole thing to get done. It's all unfortunate for the work that was being done towards conservation under EQIP because now EQIP is attached to regulation and so is conservation. Farmers are really sensitive to any regulation.

On this latter point, these industrialized farmers have much in common with the peasant farmers who comprise the object of much conservation research (Haenn 2006). However, as the following conveys, prosperous farmers approach regulation through both resistance and co-optation: "All these programs are pretty much about the dollars, not the conservation," Justin says:

> You can't please the government and help the people, even though our motto and our goal are: 'Help people help the land.' We always used to have a lot of leadership at the state and federal level helping us out. Jamie Whitten from Tallahatchie County, for instance, was the Secretary of Ag for 40–50 years. He always made sure that Mississippi was funded double any other state and helped us so much, especially in the area of soil conservation. Because of Cochran and Whitten, we are second to Texas in the number of people employed in our NRCS. But they are cutting those numbers down and it seems that level of leadership is decreasing, too. We have fewer congressmen with farm backgrounds these days...we've got to have some changes—lately it's only been for the worse.

This antiregulatory sentiment, historic and contemporary, is ironic when viewed in light of the current situation in the Delta, as described by Tony Dunbar (1990):

> There is very little that is not touched by the federal government. What to plant, when to plant it, where to plant, whom to hire, how to house farm workers, how to finance the farm, not to mention public welfare, the schools, and local government itself are all strongly influenced by the federal government.

While this is true, it is a truth that survives by a fine balance of political powers within and outside of Mississippi—itself indicative of the Delta's efforts to maintain an impenetrable, albeit historically symbolic, fortress around its agricultural traditions to which federal regulators can only get so close. Walker (2006:170) found that even as farmers criticized the government for too much interference in farming, they demanded more government aid. She believes that by blaming elected and appointed policymakers and others the narrators could hold real people, rather than faceless market forces or themselves, responsible for their failures.

[3] The NRCS manages programs such as the WRP (Wetland Reserve Program) into which farmers apply to put their land and for which they receive money to stop farming it; the CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) in which farmers again apply to enter their land into conservation and get money for it but are allowed to put it back into farming in one year's time if they so desire; and EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program) which is an environmental cost share program.

Local Level Institutions and Conservation in the Delta

Although the federal agencies are becoming increasingly ineffective at recruiting farmers to the task of conservation, privately funded local organizations have been able to mobilize the farming community by espousing a cause and a philosophy valued by these Southern commodity farmers. By claiming that on-farm conservation will keep federal regulators off private land, these organizations appeal to the farmers' historic sensitivity towards external intervention. While the basis of these local organizations' establishment is culturally unique—requiring extensive ethnographic analysis of various cultural factors—the reason for their effectiveness has parallels in other regions. Arun Agrawal (2005), for instance, also addresses local level institutions dedicated to implementing conservation practices in the Kumaon villages in India. However, in contrast to the conclusions drawn from this research, Agrawal takes a Foucauldian approach and provides support for the argument that environmental protection results largely from state intervention and top–down conservation methods, as well as from a combination of local level resistance and participation. Although Agrawal's research tracks the decentralization of power to the local level, the Delta demonstrates a very different flow of power and knowledge from the local level institutions to the state. We here present data from local level organizations in the Delta and use Agrawal's (2005) research as a comparison to demonstrate the variety of forms environmental action can take and thus the importance of intensive ethnographic research into a community's history, politics, values, and beliefs.

As in the Delta, Agrawal (2005) found institutions to be critical to the implementation of local-level environmental programs:

> "governmentalized localities" are part of a new regime of control that seeks to create fresh political-economic relationships between centers, localities, and subjects. They are knit together by the thread of state power. They are shaped anew by the soft hammer of self-regulation. They come to conform as a result of interventions that rely on knowledge about their internal dynamics. (Agrawal 2005:15)

However, the key difference between Kumaon and the Delta remains that in the Kumaon villages these regulatory structures were the brainchild of the state, whereas in the Delta they were the idea of the local founders of the organizations. Furthermore, as we learn from the leaders of such organizations in the Delta, the use of the term 'regulation' alone is enough to discredit any state or local authority figure and decrease any chance of their garnering local support.

Agrawal (2005) describes the Kumaon's forest councils as a way for villagers and officials to come together in a new form of government through which a vision of joint interests could be manufactured. The result, as he saw it, was increased attention to forest use, a decrease in resource extraction, the making of environmental subjects, and a more productive level of interaction between residents and regulatory authorities. However, as we shall see, the local-level Delta organizations seek not to bring together but to separate local residents from state and federal authorities while still procuring the necessary funds to adequately repair environmental damage. While in conversations with federal authorities, their spoken aim is to align federal and local interests and protect the environment: at home, in the Delta, their stated goal is to satisfy the regulators and rid themselves of any further restrictions. It is through the friction (Tsing 2005) of these efforts that unexpected alliances have been forged and agreements made. Despite these huge differences in motivation, direction, and objectives, like the Kumaon, the Delta is witnessing increased conservation levels among farmers and increasing participation in conservation organizations, both in large part because of the works of the local conservation organizations.

The Mississippi Delta houses three primary local level conservation agencies; and although there are several federal and state agencies active in the region, it is these privately funded organizations that are most active in their recruitment and publicity. Founded by wealthy landowners, they are currently engaged in two forms of collaborations (Tsing 2005): they are simultaneously promoting Delta farmer conservation efforts and moderating the attentions of state and federal environmental regulatory agencies. While the mission statements of these private offices vary slightly, their overarching goal, to keep regulatory authorities out of Delta agriculture, remain consistent. Here we present ethnographic data from Delta F.A.R.M., the largest of the three organizations.

Delta F.A.R.M (Farmers Advocating Resource Management)

Prior to 1996, local level environmental action in the Delta was concentrated on water supply rather than on water and/or environmental quality. However, in 1996 the Sierra Club sued the EPA, Region 4, for not upholding the Clean Water Act. They won, and through the Consent Decree implemented Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL)[4] regulations and initiated analyses of major U.S. water sources. The EPA was instructed to determine which water bodies in the

[4] The TMDL is the regulated measure of certain substances, such as sediment, organic enrichment, legacy pesticides, DDT, fecal coliform, and mercury that are allowed to be present in a waterway over a given period of time.

U.S. were impaired and to establish, as well as implement TMDL limits for the impaired waterways. This list of impaired waterways is known as the 303d list.

According to the 303d list, Mississippi has 72,000 miles of impaired stream segments, more than any other state in the nation. In accordance with the Consent Decree, the EPA would have to force regulatory action on all of these sites. As director of Delta F.A.R.M., Carl Trake, explains:

> Prior to the Sierra Club lawsuit Delta F.A.R.M. was just a brewing idea, but when this hit, some of the wealthier families decided they needed to reach immediate consensus, get funding, a staff, and involve all state, federal and private organizations, as well as anybody and anything that might have anything to do with natural resources to develop a formula whereby the Delta could gain legitimacy in the eyes of the regulatory organizations. The idea was to fix the problem and be left alone. If we could do this without incurring any major costs, that would be even better.
>
> This took 2 years. We started working with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and we eventually convinced them to support us. We got them to pose our argument to the state and they urged the state to allow the local stakeholders to propose ways to fix the problems.
>
> We started holding meetings with the watershed communities and we met with farmers to develop feasible plans of repair. Together we came to the conclusion that not only would this take money to implement but that it was going to take land out of production. We knew these farmers needed compensation. So, we appealed to the EPA and changed their payment system for the repair of these waterways so that farmers were getting compensation for their sacrifices.
>
> As a result, Mississippi now gets large amounts of money from the national EPA—we're getting about $12 million a year right now paid though grants and proposals for stakeholders to work with us to develop a clean-up plan and execute it. ...once a group of stakeholders gets their watershed beneath the TMDL levels, the watershed comes off the 303d list and cannot be regulated. Our goal is to de-list all the watersheds and eliminate the possibility of regulation by the EPA.
>
> ...F.A.R.M. really put enemies together—agencies, farmers, community leaders.... The state and federal agencies told us that by collecting information from local farmers on their conservation methods and management practices, F.A.R.M. would gain the respect of regulatory boards and get a seat and a voice in regulatory decisions concerning the Delta. But we had a large cultural obstacle to overcome: the landowners didn't trust us. We needed an information conduit that the producers would trust asking these tough, personal questions. The goal was to ascertain information without condemning the farmers. Information dissemination became the most important thing. But farmers wanted to know what they were getting in return for this service.
>
> Respected wealthy families like the Percys were crucial to the early stages of information gathering because they were trusted by the community. With people like the Percys F.A.R.M. could gain a key to the 'farm gate' and find out what was going on, on the other side. These gates were built so that the outside world didn't know what farmers were doing. It took people like the Percys to enter it so that it's long-term security could be maintained...Slowly but surely F.A.R.M.'s reputation for representing the right thing to do, confidentiality, and prestige, grew.

Now, in addition to repairing the watersheds, F.A.R.M. also gathers information about on-farm conservation practices. The membership of Delta F.A.R.M. consists of a volunteer community of farmers that annually fills out anonymous surveys, designed by Delta F.A.R.M., on the types of conservation measures they use on their farms. The extent of their implementation of such practices, however, is not recorded. The evaluation is brief—it takes farmers about 45 min and requires only minimal statistical knowledge of their on-farm conservation practices. Delta F.A.R.M. currently has 800,000 acres under evaluation, equal to about 30% of all Delta farmland. All farmers who score 90% or higher receive an annual Environmental Stewardship award; and as of 2006, the membership of Delta F.A.R.M. had a stewardship level of 82%. Trake says that the inspiration for this branch of Delta F.A.R.M. was similar to that underlying their watershed repair projects:

> Community leaders believed that if there was an organization or entity that could represent the voice of Delta agriculture and earn a seat at the table with regulation industries, then that would help the Delta survive by its own traditions in the future.
>
> ...The farmers trust us now. They know we are looking out for their best interests because they know that while water quality is our greatest concern, in terms of the immediate threats regulation—regulation, not environmental damage—is our greatest threat. Period.

The Role of Institutions

Not surprisingly, many researchers (Clearfield and Osgood 1986; Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Berkes 1999; Agrawal 2005) believe that institutions alone are the most influential element on community conservation practices. “In general, the higher the number of institutional contacts, the greater the likelihood that a farmer will use conservation practices” (Clearfield and Osgood 1986). And although there are relatively few studies on conservation institutions that span the multiple levels from the community to the federal, many researchers (Agrawal 2005; Berkes 1999, 2002; Tsing 2005) are taking steps to amend this. Those that address these rare institutions tend to reach the same conclusions as proponents of community-based conservation projects, and argue that to be successful, the efforts as well as the institutions must move bottom up rather than top down. This comes from the assumption that in order to be successful and have any longevity, conservation projects must include the community to a large degree (Rikoon and Goedeke 2000; Tsing 2005; Agrawal 2005; Ghimire and Pimbert 1997; Brown 2003), if not, as we argue here, even show some sort of local initiative.

It makes logistical sense to begin the organization of such a project at the lowest possible level (Berkes 2002), but this is also the level at which it is often most difficult to garner support given the long time association among rural, conservative communities of conservation with exclusionary liberal elites and values and objectives in opposition to their own (Rikoon and Goedeke 2000; Dowie 1995). Neither local nor bottom-up initiation of such projects can guarantee support, however, because communities are inherently diverse entities, “marked by multiple hierarchies, harsh regimes, and nasty legitimizing sanctions” (Hahn 2003: 33). The historical value of effective institutions has thus been to “promote, at once, a deep sense of social identification among members—including those of different rank or class—and deep suspicion of outsiders” (Ibid).

While this depiction of the role of institutions fits nicely with the current situation in the Delta, Agrawal’s (2005) *Environmentality* presents institutions as more integrative entities, tying together state and local interests and mediating differences between them. Agrawal (2005: 638–639) notes the fact that institutions serve to congeal the behavior of disparate actors along a particular course; and it is because of this, he believes, that, in order to gain leverage with the state, communities must organize themselves into larger collectives or institutions that can span the gap between the local and the national.

It might appear that this is exactly what the Delta has done—founded institutions to mollify the federal authorities and yet coax local residents into adopting certain practices (i.e., follow certain regulations). And while the local organizations are in fact placating federal authorities by providing them with the requested audits of farmers’ conservation practices, in discussions with these local institutions, we learn that the objective is not to establish better relations with the state, or regulate for the immediate sake of the environment. Both of those are mere benefits of the final goal, which is to take all waterways off the 303d list and convince the federal officials to leave Delta agriculture and its clean-up to the Deltans.

Fortunately for Delta landowners this result fits nicely with neoliberal governance and allows the state to keep a distant control over environmental clean-up without maintaining a constant presence or heavy hand in Delta agriculture (see Jessop 2002; Clarke 2004; Brown 2006; Rose 2006). This arrangement, furthermore, supports the tenets of ecological modernization and the myth that sustainable development is compatible with commercial endeavors since these conservative farmers and their federal foes are similarly demonstrating their belief that profit from commodity production and preservation can be achieved simultaneously (see Carruthers 2001; Bluhdorn and Welsh 2007). These local institutions have thus changed the way that antiregulatory Deltans deal with the threat of outside regulation by attempting to satisfy rather than flatly oppose federal requirements. Not only does this situation illustrate how a new, conservative demographic might be added to the list of the nation’s ‘environmentalists’ but it demonstrates the pertinent role of cultural understanding in instigating conservation and regulatory environmental relationships.

The reason the local institutions in Agrawal’s study of Kumaon and the Delta organizations were/are successful lies very much in just a few similarities. According to Agrawal (2005:128), the regulatory community:

> ...Was more autonomous and legitimate. It was continuous and modulated. Its autonomy and legitimacy derived at least in part from the closeness to its objects of regulation. Villagers themselves selected who would regulate. The actions and decisions of regulators were less hidden from them than had been the case when forest department officials were exercising control. The continuity and modulation of local regulation stemmed from the better understanding about their locality that the new regulators possessed. After all, officials of the forest councils and those they sought to regulate both lived within the bosom of the same community.

Agrawal does not investigate beyond this point to determine how and if the familiarity of these local regulators versus the state regulators influenced their leadership strategy and how the knowledge that these local officials had of their community affected the way they encouraged participation. Instead he simply maintains that

there was better communication, better trust, and so more participation, and thus a development of environmental subjects among local residents. Despite his statement that community characteristics impact resource management because they affect the interactions of different actors around conservation he concludes only that these interactions are shaped by and simultaneously shape prevailing institutions (2005: 639–40). Within this closed circuit of analysis we have no window into the origin of these characteristics and how they affect community interactions in other respects. We are thus left to wonder if there could be any greater cultural motivation to conservation other than institutional influence and environmental concern.

The similarities between Agrawal's analysis and this investigation into Delta conservation end in the discussion over the forging of environmental subjects from local residents. In the Kumaon villages, as described by Agrawal (2005:196):

> Specialization of enforcement roles and direct participation in enforcement seem to create the greatest willingness on the part of villagers to contribute to environmental enforcement as well as to express an interest in environmental protection.

This is because, as Agrawal (2005:173) explains, "involvement in regulatory practices and awareness of collective decisions contribute to shifts in environmental practice as well as beliefs." But why do people join to begin with? Agrawal (2005:16) argues that such:

> Social and institutional relationships within and between communities and their members come to be founded on the goal of a more strict and sustainable government of communal resources.

Thus concern for communal resources, a desire for stricter regulatory control, and a feedback cycle of participation and environmental concern is making environmental subjects of Kumaon residents. While the Delta scenario does not demand that an antiregulatory sentiment replace environmental concern or regulatory participation as the crucial component in the creation of environmental subjects, it does make a case for investigating not just a community's historic and practiced concern for the environment, as does Agrawal (2005), but also for investigating the historical, cultural, and political sentiments, values, and beliefs in general that have effectively motivated cooperative community action in the past. We argue that these are the means by which communities may most likely be inspired to action once again.

Institutions and the Making of Environmental Subjects

Ideally speaking, government institutions should be able to implement environmental practices and create environmental subjects by the very laws, codes, and ideologies that they disseminate throughout and impose upon a community. In the Kumaon villages described by Agrawal (2005), for example, the government's implementation of local level institutions provided a vehicle to contact and engage the communities with which they were once at odds. It was through such governmental notions and conceptualizations that local level individuals cooperated with institutions and evolved into environmental subjects. According to Luke (1995:69), this results from the fact that:

> Government discourses methodically mobilize particular assumptions, codes, and procedures in enforcing specific understandings about the economy and society. As a result, they generate "truths" or "knowledges" that also constitute forms of power with significant reserves of legitimacy and effectiveness. Inasmuch as they classify, organize, and vet larger understandings of reality, such discourses can authorize or invalidate the possibilities for constructing particular institutions, practices, or concepts in society at large. They simultaneously frame the emergence of collective subjectivities (nations as dynamic populations) and collections of subjects (individuals) as units in such nations...

According to Foucault ([1975] 1979: 29), these subjects, once individuals, become, "the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain types of power and the reference for a certain type of knowledge". Despite the fluidity of Foucault's argument and Agrawal's exemplification of it, neither the excavation of knowledge from individuals nor the supposed accurate and/or adequate interpretation and implementation of such knowledge in the creation of persuasive and coercive discourses are guaranteed to produce either collectivity or subjects. To imply the opposite is to transform the state as well as the populace into single, simplistic entities: the former, congregated, powerful, and well-intentioned, the latter, homogenous, simple-minded, and in need of collective control. Both the state and the Delta community are heterogeneous entities with multiple, conflicting interests and agendas, secondary to which, in either case, appears to be the permanent improvement of the Delta environment.

This then raises the question, simply stated: why do either the state or the local community agree to the game if they know it's a charade on each side? Furthermore, how is it that community members can be brought together by a local level organization that appears more concerned with the statistics it can show to state authorities than with the actual results of the community's environmental efforts? We have already addressed the historical basis for the Delta farmers' participation in conservation and uncovered their longstanding desire for agricultural autonomy, but as we

delve deeper into how the organizations' actions reinforce the needs of both their local constituents and the federal regulators we find further evidence to support the fact that neither the state nor the local community has the environment as their primary concern. We see, rather, that this is one community's concern with their economic future (which has been impeded by outside interference in the past) juxtaposed to the state's concern with the appearance of environmental regulation.

Literature on the *politics of unsustainability* investigates how, in adherence to the tenets of ecological modernization, modern capitalist consumer democracies attempt and manage to sustain what is unsustainable (Bluhdorn and Welsh 2007). Although the alarms have been sounded and cries for emergency environmental efforts abound, the discourse of ecological modernization has convinced a relieved capitalist society that they can pursue their financial gains and uphold an 'environmentalist' image. It has convinced us that we can, indeed, 'sustain the unsustainable' (Ibid).

This dovetails with recent literature on audit cultures and how different societies and labor groups differ in their categorization of performance audits (i.e., as socialism, neoliberal governance, etc) (Dunn 2004; Kipnis 2008). The relevant point for this work, however, is *formalism*, that the outward form of a target is met without really undertaking the task that the target is supposed to measure (Kipnis 2008:278). In the Delta scenario we see how the state, like the local community, itself faces social pressure to make efforts towards improving environmental conditions—thus requiring the Delta farmers to reach certain benchmarks in their use of pollutants, etc. However, despite its environmental agenda, the state is willing not only to lift such regulations at the first sign that minimum requirements are met, but also to accept anonymous conservation data from organizations such as Delta F.A.R.M., and allow them to dictate which variables are measured.

The actors in this Delta scenario are thus attempting to prove the principle of ecological modernization that "radical system change is not actually required as environmental goals can be realized through the modification of existing structures" (Bluhdorn and Welsh 2007:9). Although it is unexpected given their history with the state, the farmers' success in this effort depends largely upon the audits or statistics that rank the commodity farmers' progress. These numbers are furthermore aiding the state's environmentally concerned façade without actually requiring the state or the farmers to dedicate themselves to long-term environmental preservation. In this way, the farmers of the Mississippi Delta as well as the state officials are actors in the *politics of unsustainability*—arguing and attempting to prove that environmental crises can be assuaged without compromising the principles of neoliberal governmentality or jeopardizing the bottom line—in turn, perpetuating unsustainable behavior and endangering their local environment.

Evidence of this sort of rationalization is also present in research on corporate social responsibility and large companies' efforts to avoid federal regulation and adhere to environmentally sustainable practices for the sake of public perception (McWilliams and Siegel 2000; Joseph 2001; Scholtens 2008). Here, too, the tenets of ecological modernization dominate public communication and practices as companies work to maintain and/or increase profits by addressing stakeholders' concerns about a company's reputation for meeting certain social and environmental responsibilities (Baker 2006). The problem with this corporate tactic, however, is that it replaces the concept of averting environmental crises with the idea that the consequences of such disasters can be managed (Bluhdorn and Welsh 2007). Furthermore, in the instances in which social responsibility, such as environmental or public deeds, may diminish profits or increase costs, these social acts are cast aside (Sethi 1979; Scholtens 2008). Can we then assume that when the federal limitations are reached and/or when farmers come on harder times, conservation practices will be set aside, as well?

Both ecological modernization and audit practices enable state authorities to govern from a distance for they not only support the continuation of business practices, but also present the image that these practices are being evaluated. In the Delta scenario, these philosophies are equally appealing to those being audited, for they are aware of the necessary numbers they have to provide state authorities and are happy to concede to the concept that money can be made as the environment is saved. Not only does it further their goals of agricultural autonomy but it appeals to the conservative nature of this Southern community for it reinforces the dominant opinion that, "whatever environmentalists may regard as ecologically necessary or desirable are projections of their ethical and political values into the supposedly Other of society" (Bluhdorn and Welsh 2007:8). Thus although farmers are changing their cultivation techniques, intensive production continues, commodity sales only increase, and capital gain from 'sustaining the unsustainble' is perpetuated.

In the end, these two foes—the local community and the state—appear more as bedfellows, each willing to go through the motions to fulfill their own agendas while simultaneously aiding the other achieve their goal. The local level community and organizations provide the state with the data to reinforce the appearance of the state's environmental efforts (see Kipnis 2008)—and the state grants the Delta its agricultural autonomy, rationalizations, and freedom to profit off the still endangered land (see Bluhdorn and Welsh 2007). Since there are no permanent

checks on either establishment, however, the fate of the Delta environment depends on the environmental ethics of the farmers themselves.

Knowledge and Power

> Small-scale peasant communities...have organization, codes, and values, which are felt by them to be deeply important. The people have been conditioned to these things since childhood, and feel that they are basic to their corporate existence. Their institutions, partly because so many of the same people tend to be involved in all of them, are closely interrelated, so that change in one affects the others. Hence, changes which are initially economic tend to have repercussions through the whole of the community (Firth 1963: 89).

Although the farmers of the Mississippi Delta are far from peasants, they too live in a society in which codes, values, and local organizations are held in common and sacred to the vast majority of residents. There is little question but that the familiarity of the local conservationists aided organizational efforts to recruit local support. However, how they did this and what they did with it says more about the power that such knowledge conveys onto its possessor than it does about the types of people who utilized such power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault ([1975] 1979: 194) argues that instead of existing purely as a negative force to constrain action and the types of people and outcomes that can result from action, power can in fact produce. "It produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production." In other words, power can be positive in the sense of creating rather than simply withholding. It can create subjects of local residents, meaning that it can produce the types of people and outcomes that suit a particular design for society and enable governments to avoid the distrust and resentment of residents that can result from regulatory tactics.

Although Foucault described this situation as the means by which governments control their populace, we can easily apply a similar logic to explain why the federal authorities are less successful than local organizations and institutions in gaining support for conservation in the Delta. While federal authorities offered incentives, their primary tool of enforcement was regulation of agricultural practices. Whether the farmers themselves experienced government intervention previously, or even if they had only heard about it from the generations before them, Deltans have been here before. They have seen and felt the financial impact of government intervention in agriculture and they have experienced the debilitating loss of autonomy over their families' land. What the federal government dismisses as antienvironmentalism, the local authorities better understand as an abhorrence of regulation, ecological or otherwise.

Equipped not only with knowledge of the area, the land, and the community, the local conservation organizations are also armed with the knowledge that any form of agricultural regulation would be protested and avoided by local residents. In addition, they themselves, as local residents, claim to feel similarly to their neighbors and want to avoid external interference. Finally, these local level organizations and board members have realized that just as this local aversion to regulation foiled the government's plans, it can, in fact, help their own. Advocating conservation as a means to avoid federal regulation over agriculture is not only promoting environmental action on local farms, but the progress they are making is enabling local officials to stave off the regulatory agencies and secure farmer autonomy over local land.

Contrary to Foucault's perception of power, regulation doesn't create, it controls. It determines what cannot be done, and its effectiveness is based on the extent of monitoring of compliance and the use (and severity) of sanctions against offenders (Johnston 1996: 220). Furthermore, regulation neither reduces demand on environmental resources directly nor increases the capacity of the environment to meet societal needs (Johnston 1996: 220).

According to Johnston (1996), there are three types of regulatory instruments available: laws and directives, licenses, and voluntary agreements requested by the government. Up until this point, the Delta had been loosely organized by regulatory licenses. They had little regulatory effect, but they kept a record of who was utilizing the water resources. However, the current fear among Deltans is the imposition of the first instrument, laws and directives. The farmers of this region are aware that environmental regulation over individuals "frequently involves limiting (if not removing all together) the rights of individuals and other bodies to use their property as they wish" (Johnston 1996:232).

According to Agrawal (2005: 220), "technologies of government may be characterized as being founded on some combination of knowledges, regulations based upon these knowledges, and practices that regulations seek to govern." But what about when the government cannot grasp the necessary and/or relevant local knowledges? When scientific knowledge is not enough to comprehend how a community feels about its environment or its protection or its own control, what happens? Government institutions may fail. If they fail, we don't necessarily see a dissipation of the power once held by the state, rather we may see a transference or reversal of power from the state

to the local institutions, from the center to the periphery, where locally initiated organizations and institutions are better positioned to negotiate with the state and to utilize local knowledge of the people, culture, and the land to persuade local level action in the realm of conservation. These institutions are equipped with local knowledge that comes from being members of this community. They are aware, first hand, of the popular sentiment regarding government regulation, and what it is that can motivate this population to act as a cooperative unit for or against a given cause.

Here we see knowledge become power. These local institutions, internally diverse, are aware of actions of government, just as the government is of theirs. They can discern governmental schisms, motivations and examine their internal differences, and they can make productive alliances with various branches of federal authority. As Foucault argues, power is not just something that operates negatively on preconstituted subjects. Rather, one of the prime effects of power is how "certain bodies, certain gestures, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals" (1977: 98). In the Delta's resistance to federal regulation, producers are opening a window from which a new form of regulatory power can emerge—one that they are familiar with, of which they are a part, whose philosophies they agree with and whose lead they will voluntarily follow. The power of these local institutions, therefore, as Foucault also noted, does not come from the ability to constrain the kinds of actions, people, or outcomes that arise. Rather, it comes from the ability to grasp the knowledge necessary to motivate and produce the types of actions, people, and outcomes that are desired.

Conclusions

This research has a number of implications for ecological anthropology, environmentalism, and cultural understanding. The Mississippi Delta, because of its unique ecological resources, agricultural economy, and history of relative social isolation from the rest of the United States, provides an ideal setting to study community conservation. By tracing the Delta's penchant for resisting outside regulation to its historical sources we discover the region's abhorrence of federal regulation over agricultural affairs. This is further supported by statements from farmers and conservationists regarding their distaste for regulation, the importance of preemptive action, and their preference for internal versus external decision-making. There is little doubt from the evidence provided but that this is a conservation movement inspired not by environmental damage, but by the threat of regulation by federal authorities because of that damage.

The Delta, like Agrawal's (2005) *Environmentality* demonstrates the evolution of environmental subjects, the importance of local level institutions, and the diversity of ways in which community-based conservation can be initiated as well as the different directions that the power and knowledge necessary to stimulate such efforts may flow. In contrast to Agrawal (2005) however, the ethnographic information coming out of the Delta also demonstrates the effectiveness of a broader investigation into a community's historical, sociocultural and political behavior.

An analysis of these two studies, in particular, and the field of community-based conservation, in general, demonstrates that no single formula for conservation is universally applicable to the world's amalgam of communities. There is a great need for scholars and conservationists to understand the various models of community-based conservation, why they work and/or why their fail. But it is equally important that the local knowledge that surfaces in the process of such studies be documented to further not only our understanding of the local communities themselves, but of their environments and the biodiversity they contain.

Thus this work also serves as a plea that ethnographies of community-based conservation include a certain level of flexibility—that they look beyond just the environmental factors at stake to consider other relevant sociocultural and historic factors, and that they at least acknowledge that although an understanding of cultural history and values may not always make the difference between the success and failure of an environmental effort, they can at least be of use to promote a greater understanding and respect for the communities under consideration. After all, gone are the days when environmental studies are focused solely on underprivileged victims of 'antienvironmental' tyrants. We must now recognize that 'tyrants' have environmental ethics of their own, a historical wealth of environmental knowledge, and a role to play in the protection of their local environment.

While the Delta scenario demonstrates that motivation may not matter in terms of sustainable outcomes, from an anthropological perspective, motivation does matter. Understanding the cultural basis for conservation, be it social, historical, political, religious, or ecological, is pertinent to our grasp of community dynamics and a region's historic, contemporary, and future relationship with its environment. In this particular instance we see not just one community's historic fight for agricultural autonomy and economic freedom, but also the evolution of that fight and how local level players and federal officials, though fundamentally opposed to one another, are ultimately aiding one another.

After decades of suffering under federal intervention, Delta elites have realized that by providing the federal regulators with what they want—an assessment of farming practices and environmental conservation, no matter how shallow or incomplete—they can free themselves from further environmental and agricultural regulation. Local

citizens trust these local level organizations because they know how to satisfy both parties and get the community what it wants. What we find is no less than an audit situation in which neoliberal principles of government-at-a-distance and rugged independence complement the state and local community's belief that environmental improvement need not diminish potential profits. Thus, we believe that the relationship between the federal regulators, local organizations and Delta farmers is consonant with the *politics of unsustainability*, in that although it currently promotes resource management, it is dependent upon economic and political issues that could easily overshadow and prove counteractive to local environmental preservation.

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