Community-based environmental health planning

A Book Review

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Title: Common Ground & Common Sense Community-based Environmental Health Planning. An Action Handbook
http://sites.uws.edu.au/research/rimc//contents.html

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The Handbook was designed and developed at a writing workshop in Canberra 2001, with six groups of 5-6 contributors, facilitated by Peter Cuming of Sustainable Futures Australia. The collation of writings has been edited by four of the eight members of the research team from the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury Campus. The objective was to produce a guide to the marshalling of resources to address issues that fall within the overlapping orbits of health, ecology, environment, community and community governance. The Handbook provides a checklist of potential stakeholders and resources with anecdotal examples and Handy Hints on the management of media, politicians and many other mechanisms of advocacy. Some sections would be of particular interest to local community action groups or 'People's Organizations' established under Community Development partnerships. It does not set out to satisfy any expectation of illumination of the links that bind environment to human disease, nor does it prescribe practical, remedial action as in the Northern Territory Public Health Bush Book [1].

Part I – Using the Handbook

This chapter takes the reader through the User Guide, an abstract of the Handbook and some examples. We are introduced to the CEHAP Action Web (after Peter Cuming [2]), as a matrix of the relationships and interdependence, to be articulated in the quest for sustainable environmental outcomes via the negotiation of a shared vision in a local community forum.

The second section of Part 1 – The Handbook at a Glance – summaries Part 2 of the Handbook – Making a Difference – which expands upon the six sections of the Web – People Caring for Places; Community in Action; Community as Partners; Multiple Alliances; Place-based Planning and Future-directed Action. Questions are posed to refine the concepts and objectives, with Stories & Group Activities exemplifying features of local governance, issues for stakeholders and positive partnership outcomes.

The third section of Part 1 – Summary of Progress Indicators is followed by Examples of the Handbook in Practice at Manly, Exmouth and Acacia-Larrakia in the Northern Territory. There is no summary of Part 3 – Resources for Action.

This initiative has assembled a broad range of contributors and diligently sought to prescribe a collegiate methodology to a range of issues, that is perhaps impossibly broad. There are inherent difficulties in generating interest in other people's dreams, as exemplified in the section The Handbook in Practice.

Example 1 – Manly, the National Beach Icon: Community Litter Management – explores a people's organization approach to an issue of predominantly visual pollution. The focal concern is a litter collection bill of $1.3m to tidy up after the locals and 6-8 million visitors a year. Though no doubt of profound concern to some, it is the sort of problem that every local council would welcome. If visitors spend only $10 per head, the rateable & tax-deductible clean-up costs are a minuscule outlay for a $70 million windfall.
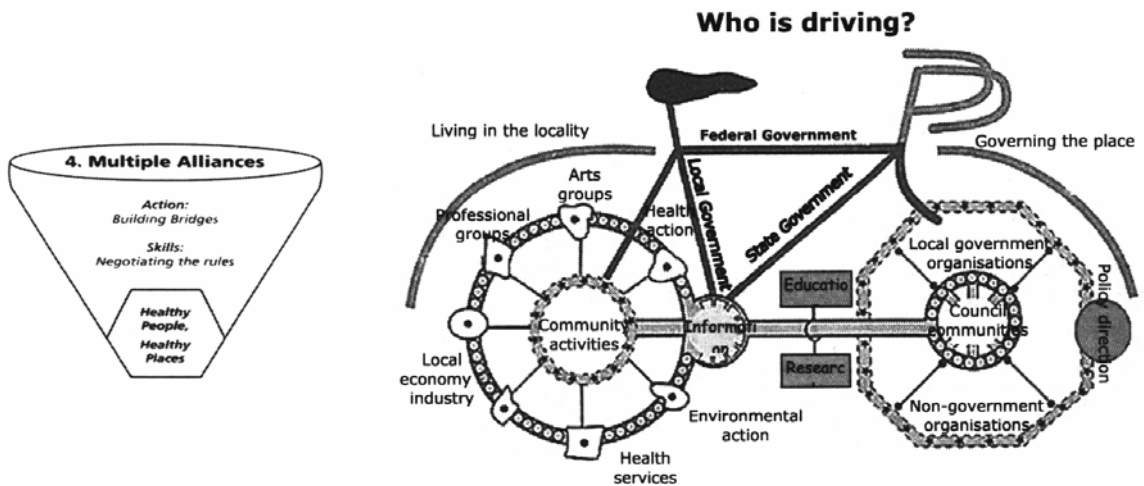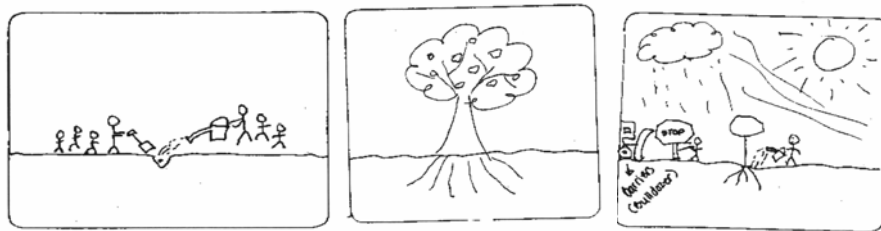
Example 2 – Exmouth, A Global Village: Setting Up a Townscape Advisory Committee – a Town Planning community reference group with minimal relevance to environmental health.

Example 3 – Acacia-Larrakia Community: Seeding the Future: Developing a Community Plant Nursery – With due deference to the 38 residents of a this new little homeland, just off the National

Highway, 30 minutes from the City of Darwin, this example is of a small CDEP activity on a scale slightly larger than a domestic garden plot and is inconsequential to the catastrophe that is environmental health in the rural & remote communities of Northern Australia.

Part 2 – Making a Difference

This chapter deals with a long list of governance issues that would perhaps be of use to organizations experiencing planning difficulties, but which may fall in the realm of over administration over management and repetition of the obvious. The succeeding six repetitive sections are the product of the six workshop groups, prescribing the same 'single solution' focus group methodology as the Writing Workshop itself. There are some interesting examples given and some useful information, but it is overwhelmed by the instructional tone and sheer volume of superfluous matter. This community group approach is a valid and worthy manifestation of 'community' – local action for local issues - but it could have been dealt with in pamphlet form. Some might perceive environmental health to be trivialised by the puerile, underwear-inspired and Heath Robinson-esk illuminations.

Part 3 – Resources for Action

The 45 pages of Exercises and Activities suggest that the document has been prepared for individuals with limited knowledge of how to participate in community group meetings. Most people involved in such groups would thus find it tedious and simplistic.

The four-page Ecological Footprint Survey [3] presents environmental concerns in the shock-based approach, typically used in governmental preventative programs, and labels most people as an American or an enemy of the planet, which is reminiscent of current international politics.

Of some interest is Cruickshank's 2001 survey of people working in the field of environment, health and/or environmental health [4,5]. In the graphs of Need-for-Assistance with both Actions & Resources, the issues of volunteer support, lobby groups and like concerns of this Handbook are noted to be amongst the least significant.

Conclusion

A great many people have contributed their time to this Handbook and it is disappointing that the subject has not received the tightness that it deserves. Whilst I was hoping for an empirical volume, somewhere between the Bush Book and the Handbook of Public Health Methods [6], it seems that the editors have been drawn into the 'social' position that reflects the concerns of their socio-geographic position, well away from practical outcomes, through scientific process, in the epidemiology of environmental health.

Some readers will find it curious that the Handbook, in its bid to ensure a sustainable future, fails to address the Indigenous Australian predicament. In a recent article on indigenous mortality, some health practitioners have explicitly recognised that the "loss of roles, loss of mastery and hopelessness among indigenous people, and disempowerment … are the fundamental cause of the poor health status of Indigenous Australians" [7]. This does not bode well if this Handbook is any indication of future government funding.

The Handbook exemplifies the dilemma of positioning Environmental Health as a serious discipline within the extremes of ecological worthiness and the hard clinical paradigm of the institutionalised Health Industry. It evinces the imperative for research, policy and decision making to emanate from those areas that are directly implicated. Otherwise Environmental Health, in remote communities, will join the basket cases of Health, Housing & Education. If this methodology were to be attempted in rural & remote Aboriginal Communities, it would further weaken the traditional social mechanisms that are the sole conduit to community consciousness and as such require understanding and are deserving of support.

1. DHCS (2002) Public Health Bush Book. Department of Community and Health Services, Northern Territory Government http://www.nt.gov.au/health/healthdev/health_promotion/bushbook/bushbook_toc.shtml

2. Cumings P (1996/1998) no reference available in the Handbook or elsewhere.

3. New Scientist (undated) Global environment report. Angel or Devil: is one planet enough? Reed Business Information Ltd. http://www.newscientist.com/hottopics/environment/quiz1.jsp. http://www.newscientist.com/hottopics/environment/quiz2.jsp.

4. Cruickshank M (2001) Links and Partnerships: the cornerstone to a 'new' environmental health, Unpublished Honours Thesis, University of Western Sydney.

5. Nicholson R, Stephenson P, Brown VA and Mitchell K (2002) Current environmental health practice: survey of people working in the field of Environment, Health and/or Environmental Health. In, Common Ground & Common Sense Community-based Environmental Health Planning. An Action Handbook. Publications Production Unit, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging, Canberra. www.uws.edu.au/rimc/cehaps/hb_survey.pdf

6. Mylvaganam A (1998), Environmental Epidemiology pp. 610 - 622. -In: Handbook of Public Health Methods, (eds) Kerr c, Taylor R and Heard G. McGraw-Hill Book Company, Australia.

7. Paradies Y and Cunningham J (2002) Placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mortality in an international context. *Aust NZ J Public Health*, 26:11-16.

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