The Search for "Common Ground" in Kenora, Northwest Ontario, Canada

John Sinclair and Jim Robson, University of Antanio, Canada jsincla@ms.umanitoba.ca

Abstract

Kenora is a small city in northwest Ontario, Canada. No longer a forestry center of note, moves are afoot to develop a more diversified and sustainable economy, driven by local needs and local decision-making. Yet any collective desire to enjoy a prosperous future is set against a backdrop of historical conflict, discrimination and misunderstanding among local First Nation, Metis and Euro-Canadian populations. Using a range of qualitative data, we discuss the philosophy and vision behind common ground, a term used to front a collaborative land management initiative in Kenora. The common ground lands encompass just over 400 acres of heritage property that lie close to the heart of Kenora and are to be collaboratively managed by local First Nation and city governments. We discuss whether the powerful rhetoric invoked by common ground will likely be reflected in the forging of more equitable and productive relations among the multiple cultural groups that define life in this region and in the context of the varying visions people hold for the future of the land.

Keywords: Kenora, Environmental Planning, Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Introduction

Cross-cultural collaboration, whether focused on environmental planning and management or some other issue, often makes use of specific words and concepts to reflect the vision and philosophy that underpins the collaborative process. This paper looks at one such example from northwestern Ontario, Canada, where the term common ground has been adopted to front a land management initiative that brings together Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian governments and populations. Kenora is a former resource town in social and economic transition, where the City government, Grand Council of Treaty #3 (Treaty 3 government) and local First Nations communities are striving to create new economic opportunities through sustainable development, whilst dealing with problems from the past and present. It is a scenario repeated in other parts of Canada (Chamberlain 2003; Eeyou Istchee Framework Agreement 2011; NSRCF Action Plan 2011).

Successful cross-cultural understanding and collaboration is associated with processes that are open, participatory and democratic (Steins and Edwards 1999; Meadowcroft 2004; Smiley et al. 2010), whereby the concerns, needs and values of those with a stake in management are incorporated into the planning process (Flannery and O'Cinneide 2012). This mirrors the paradigm shift evident among planning theoreticians who have moved from instrumental or rational forms of planning to champion more communicative and trans-active ones (Friedmann 1987; Healey 2006). Central to such developments are transparency and accountability (Pinkerton and Weinstein 1995; Conley and Moote 2003; Dietz and Stern 2009), of which active communication plays a key role (Kooiman 2003). This is particularly important in the case of planning for contested common land that holds a special identity to people and is also a local material resource (Rodgers et al. 2011). In cultural terms, such land is typically the site of multiple uses and connections.
Given the contestations that may exist among and between 'stakeholder' groups (and thus potentially impede the collaborative process), we investigate what local actors, both those currently involved in the land management initiative in Kenora, as well as the wider public, understand by the term common ground and its underlying philosophy. For purposes of cross-cultural collaboration, there is significance in how such terms both circulate and aid or obstruct communication (Poerksen 1991) among collaborators. With this in mind, we ask what common ground signifies in accordance with the ways in which it has been used in Kenora, if the wider community shares those visions and perspectives, and thus speculate on the degree to which the term may or may not facilitate collaboration.

Study Site and Methods

Historical and Present Context

Kenora, northwestern Ontario (Figure 1.1), is located on the northern shores of Lake of the Woods, at the point where the lake flows into the Winnipeg River, and is at a crossroads of historic trade routes; north to south using the waterways (both pre- and post-contact) for trading fur and other natural resource products, and east to west over the past century or so, by means of the Trans-Canada Highway and the Canadian Pacific Railroad.

Figure 1.1 – Location of Kenora, northwestern Ontario, Canada

When Europeans first arrived in the Kenora area, they found that the local Objiway and Cree were a prosperous and relatively unified presence (Freeman 2000). Indeed, through trade and negotiation, there was a period when both broad cultural groups co-existed and shared in what the land had to offer (Cameron 2011); mirroring a sense of inter-cultural accommodation reported elsewhere in the wider region (Berger 1999; White 1991). However, as

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1 We use this term while acknowledging that local Anishinaabe are (or should be) equal partners under a Treaty-based relationship rather than just another ‘stakeholder’.
the settler population grew and the British looked to open up the west of the country, they entered into treaties with Aboriginal people across Canada's central regions. Northwestern Ontario, in particular, was considered a key area as the gateway to fertile farming lands across the Prairies.

The story of treaty making has been well documented (Berger 1999; Ralston Saul 2008). Suffice it to say that Aboriginal signatories to the local treaty (‘Treaty 3’) believed that they were entering into an agreement to share the resources contained within their customary lands. History tells us that non-aboriginal industrial actors and labourers, backed by the British Crown, appropriated the local Obijway's traditional lands and waterways (Grand Council Treaty #3 2011), and introduced new forms of large-scale resource exploitation; namely mining and forestry (Davidson Hunt 2003). Kenora, known then as Rat Portage, acted as a regional hub (services and transportation) for these activities. What followed the signing of Treaty 3 in 1873 was over a century of traditional livelihood loss, the residential schools program, other attempts at cultural assimilation, and rising resentment and tension between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal (settler) groups (Freeman 2000). Although it is a story repeated across Canada (RCAP 1996), problems were particularly acute in this part of the world. By the 1970s, Kenora was considered the most racist town in Canada, the "frontline for race relations and human rights" as local historian Cuyler Cotton recalls.

Fast-forwarding to the present-day, the town and region finds itself in a transitional period. From an economic standpoint, Kenora has lost its pre-eminence as a forestry town, with the town's pulp and paper mill closing down in 2005. Demographics have also shifted, with many First Nations members from surrounding reserves moving into Kenora to live as urban aboriginals (Wallace 2010). These processes have increased the ethnic diversity of Kenora over the past decade, as well as encourage the diversification of local and regional economic activities.

The 'Common Ground' Land Management Initiative

The land management initiative in Kenora that takes common ground as both its name and guiding philosophy very much reflects these historical and present-day contexts. Its goal is to bring together Aboriginal and settler populations to collaboratively manage just over 400 acres of heritage lands that lie close to the heart of Kenora. Figure 1.2 shows their location along with four of the five 'Common Ground' partners; the City of Kenora and three adjacent First Nation communities – Wauzhusk Onigum, Obashkaandagaang and Ochiichagwe'baigo'ining – that have long standing links to these lands and surrounding waterways. The fifth partner is Grand Council Treaty #3, historic government of the Anishinaabe Nation in Treaty #3 and political government for First Nations located in the treaty area, including the three partner communities listed above.
Figure 1.2 – Location of the 'Common Ground' Member Communities and the Rat Portage-Tunnel Island Lands.

Located at the bottle-neck between the Winnipeg River and Lake of the Woods, these lands incorporate Tunnel Island, Old Fort Island and Bigsby's Rat Portage (inset, Figure 1.2), an ancient carrying place (the portage) and key link in the transportation routes of the Obijiway, French traders, the explorers, English and Scots traders, and finally the Canadians. The history of human activity in this area can be traced back to at least 6000 B.C.; thus covering the Palaeo-Indian, Archaic, Laurel, and Blackduck and Selkirk cultures, right up until the first European contact in the late 1600s (Forest Capital Report 1999).

Of great cultural significance to local First Nations, these islands were resided upon and actively used by Aboriginal people up until the late 1960s. In terms of current usage, the land on Tunnel Island has become a de facto commons for local City residents (and tourists) who use it predominantly as a recreational space. In the case of Tunnel Island and Old Fort Island, use by First Nations and City residents during the latter half of the twentieth century had taken place despite the land being the private property of a series of pulp and paper companies, underscoring the importance of access over property rights. Abitibi Consolidated was the owner when Kenora’s mill closed in 2005. Because of their heritage status, neither Tunnel Island nor Old Fort Island was considered appropriate for private sale, and so Abitibi gifted the land to the City of Kenora and Treaty 3 governments. This was done on the proviso that a joint management corporation be established and, once appointed, this body be given legal responsibilities to administer the lands on behalf of all First Nation and non-First Nation beneficiaries. Although the process began six years ago, the corporation, while now appointed, has yet to begin functioning and planning decisions for the Tunnel Island lands have still not engaged the wider public.

Kenora’s 'Common Ground' thus constitutes something of a novel experiment in the Canadian context – a recreational space, shared lands, and political landscape where ideals of cross-cultural relations, collaboration, social cohesion and nature are being tried and tested.
Study Methods

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted from June to September 2011. Respondents included: (i) active members in the 'Common Ground' land management initiative; (ii) councilors from Municipal and Treaty 3 governments; (iii) representatives from the partner First Nation communities; (iv) community development institutions; (v) educators; (vi) the business community; and, (vii) and local media (radio and newsprint). Twelve of the respondents were women, and 20 were men. Nine were members of First Nations, two identified as Métis, and 21 were Euro-Canadian in ethnic origin. Collectively, we termed these individuals as "those in the know", while aware that their understanding of, and involvement in, the 'Common Ground' initiative varied. Our questions centred on uncovering respondents' specific use and understanding of common ground, whether discussion had taken place with others about what the term meant, and how their understanding tallied with that of their colleagues and among the wider community.

Additionally, 31 "sidewalk interviews" were held with members of the general public at the end of September 2011. Eighteen of the respondents were women, 13 were men, seven were from First Nations, three identified as Métis, and 21 were Euro-Canadian. The line of questioning differed considerably from the sit-down interviews since the public's level of knowledge of common ground was unknown. The language was simplified; a mix of open and closed-ended questions was used, with key topics covering not only people's understanding of common ground, but their more general opinion regarding cross-cultural collaboration, their knowledge about Treaty, and what Treaty meant in the context of life in Kenora.

The sit-down interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and these data coded for detailed analysis using QSR NVivo. Responses to the sidewalk interviews were recorded on a survey form, and then organized using Microsoft Excel.

Findings

Locally, 'Common Ground' has become a kind of umbrella vision manifest in an assortment of practical initiatives in Kenora. Yet the term common ground has never been publically advertised or articulated as such by any of the stakeholders including the local government leaders. Rather, people have been left to make up their own mind about what this vision entails.

As such, common ground is a term that has no precise definition locally despite its widespread use. This certainly limits its significance as a definition-bearing concept, and raises concerns that, as a powerful signifier (open to both denotation and multiple connotations), the term is being used to drive a discourse of cross-cultural collaboration that is not readily understood by a representative sample of the local populace. As with all connotations, images and associations are socially constructed and thus reflect the degree of involvement people have had in developing such meanings.

In Kenora, the term's adoption by a small number of well intentioned people has resulted in it taking centre stage in promoting an ideology of collaboration that, as our sidewalk survey and interviews show, is not always recognizable to many among the general public. While there is a presumption that people will share in what common ground is being understood to mean, our findings show its multiple uses locally have resulted in differences in comprehension – a variation that is weakly associated with ethnicity. Of course, the question this raises is whether any of it matters in terms of collaboration for the (eventual) management by local and First Nation governments. Findings from studies conducted elsewhere suggest that it does; highlighting the need for
deliberative democratic process and transparency in communication (Meadowcroft 2004; Wilding 2011), where stakeholders are aware of others' perspectives and conceptualizations (Dietz and Stern 2009; Steins and Edwards 1999).

Such lessons infer that when a term like *common ground* begins to circulate and is wielded to accomplish goals, it is important to be clear about what people understand by it and the intention inherent in its use. When there is ambiguity in meaning, then a danger exists that activities could be "commons-washed" if and when the term gains broader currency. In other words, the term could be 'spun' or used deceptively (after Poerksen 1991) to promote the perception that a certain practice truly reflects the ethic or philosophy of common ground, when, in actual fact, its meaning has been either watered down, co-opted or used as cheap moral posture. Without going so far as to say that such occurrences typify the Kenora experience, it is true that the 'Common Ground' initiative at Rat Portage-Tunnel Island is not currently a broadly citizen-led process.

Our findings, point to a critical distinction in people's conceptualisation of common ground as beginning or end point. In other words, is common ground to be considered the foundation needed for successful collaboration (i.e., a basis of mutual interest or agreement), or is it something to work towards? If we understand it as a foundation, then one can question Kenora's current level of preparedness given the divergence in people's visioning and a clear lack of public involvement in constructing the 'Common Ground' discourse and dialogue. Or perhaps there is a third conception, a more fluid one, in which common ground is sought, discovered, and used as a stepping off point, before being sought again and rediscovered down the line; that it is through the 'doing' that you build relationships and trust. This falls in line with lessons from other places that show how substantial time and effort is necessary to build respect among partners in collaboration, as well as for jointly agreeing on and elaborating initial frameworks and procedures (Reid et al. 2006; Singleton 2000).

Which of these best capture the 'Common Ground' land management initiative has not been openly discussed in Kenora. Interview data show that while there are commonalities in people's views of what the concept captures, there is also difference and cynicism. Consequently, more than one respondent felt that there was an obvious risk in making the land management initiative "Kenora's great stab at cross-cultural collaboration". The concern being that, upon building up hopes, any sense of failure would leave the community in a worse-off position. Others, however, were keen to push matters along, in a belief that things "will fall into place". Yet such a strategy – backed by rhetoric of inclusivity, democratic deliberation and transparency – runs the risk, in the absence of widespread community involvement and dialogue, of failure.

It is worth noting how members of some important cultural and interest groups have expressed displeasure about how the 'Common Ground' land management initiative has unfolded thus far. For one, a number of First Nations interviewees were unhappy with how early decisions regarding the future use of Rat Portage, Tunnel Island and Old Fort Island were taken by Treaty 3 and City of Kenora governments. This, they claimed, was far from an inclusive process. While some interview respondents felt that "we have to forget the past and move on together" others were adamant that "we have to remember the past, admit to our mistakes, and then move on together". Similarly, the Métis community in Kenora is still upset at having been left out of much of the decision-making to date. Regular recreational users of the Tunnel Island site form a concerned interest group that feels left out of early planning discussions.

This finding simply reinforces the belief that far more public participation is
required for the 'Common Ground' land management initiative to be congruent with calls for deliberative
democratic engagement in governance (Meadowcroft 2004). It is also through greater and more meaningful public
participation, via a combination of communicative planning (Friedmann 1987; Healey 2006) and social learning
processes (Blackmore 2007; Keen et al. 2005; Maarleveld and Dangbegnon 1999), that the crucial relationship
between what Eames (2005) calls bonding social capital (shared interests and networks that hold cultural groups
together) and bridging social capital (those shared interests that exist between cultural groups) could be
strengthened.

And such engagement appears to be entirely practicable in the Kenora area. Our findings show that for
the general public, the philosophy of common ground does have a broader relevancy. The term's use to front
multiple initiatives may confound its meaning in many ways, yet all such usages do share one thing in common –
a wish to improve relations among the cultures that inhabit the Kenora area. Indeed, the dominant strand that
connects people's understanding of common ground concerns this powerful idea of sharing and inclusivity, about
which there was a great deal of positivity among interview and sidewalk survey respondents. This would suggest
a strong platform from which to build.

Conclusion
All levels of government in Canada, including local, are coming to grips with the "economic, demographic and
moral imperative to fix [the country's] troubled 500year relationship with Aboriginals" (CBC's The 8th Fire, 2011;
Ralston Saul 2008; RCAP 1996). The 'Common Ground' initiatives in Kenora, northwestern Ontario, provide
localized examples of this. In particular, Tunnel Island, Old Fort Island and Bigsby's Rat Portage offer a useful
focal point for such efforts given their status as multifunctional resource, where the interests of different user-
groups make the land one of both contest and possibility. Historical access rights for First Nations, enhanced
accessibility for City residents, and both differentiated and shared processes of creation have endowed these lands
with special significance. The 'Common Ground' land management initiative in Kenora is an attempt to bring
environmental stewardship, community benefit, and cultural cohesion together under a single vision. It is what
Shiva (2005:1) would see as an example of Earth Democracy, a "political movement for peace, justice and
sustainability".

In investigating local people's understanding of the term common ground, one finds a narrative that
consists of multiple locally rooted examples. While often connected, these perspectives can also be different in
their own way. The Aboriginal and non-aboriginal local governments of today are the inheritors of a complex
cultural legacy, and while the 'Common Ground' initiatives require them to negotiate diverse and sometimes
conflicting objectives in their pursuit of a potentially unifying goal, tensions still exist between people's views,
interests and values regarding nature, economic development, property rights, cross-cultural relations, recreational
land use, and spirituality.

This study has pointed to the potential danger of leaders using a powerful and value-laden term such as
common ground when discourse has not been broadly constructed; where the intention inherent in its use is not
recognised by all. This is perhaps inevitable when planning of a public domain issue takes the form of a private
process – local discourse surrounding common ground having been developed and driven by a small group of
concerned citizens and government players and not the community at large. Rather, for a broad-based 'Common
Ground' to become reality, planning needs to enter an arena of creativity and communication (Wight 2005), and
become a clear example of deliberative democracy and environmental governance in action. This would enable the images, associations and meanings attached to common ground to emerge and shift through public dialogue, such that they are able to hold connotative as well as denotative power. In this way, the necessary range of public values can be communicated and thereby motivate local people as to the relevance and importance of such initiatives, from both individual and community perspectives.

Unfortunately, without that full and frank discussion of what common ground means in practice, there is a risk that Kenora will be left with little more than 'middle ground', a place associated with false compromise, where no party emerges happy. Under such conditions, any collaborative advantage will be lost and the City, Treaty 3 and a culturally diverse population base will remain some way short of the cohesive and prosperous future for which many yearn.

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ISBN: 978-0-900259-82-1