

Getting the Public Interested in the Public Interest: Collaborative Environmental Problem Solving in the Puget Sound Region

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Last May, the man who over 35 years ago signed the order banning DDT was asked to speak at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. The occasion was an annual forum in honor of Rachel Carson, the woman responsible for the public awakening that led to that historic order. Now, in his seventies, William Ruckelshaus has been called upon to direct another landmark environmental effort, Washington State's Puget Sound Partnership (PSP). The PSP is a new state umbrella agency tasked with coordinating and supervising the restoration and protection of Puget Sound, whose watershed is home to over four million people, two-thirds of the state's population. In his remarks at the Rachel Carson Forum and in a follow-up interview, Ruckelshaus addressed the challenges of that herculean task and spoke of the importance to a democratic society of public involvement and public interest in environmental governance.

Bill Ruckelshaus may not be a household name in most circles, but from his earliest days of public service in the Indiana State Attorney General's office, he has been held in high regard for his forthright integrity and solid judgment. Working as an attorney assigned to the state Board of Health, he gained his first environmental experience interpreting statutes and pursuing water pollution cases. He then moved on to the state House of Representatives, where he became majority leader in his first term before losing a bid to unseat then-US Senator Birch Bayh. Tapped by the Nixon Administration to be the first head of the newly-minted US Environmental Protec-

tion Agency (USEPA) in 1970, he organized and guided it through its first two and a half years, then did a brief stint as Acting Director of the FBI before becoming Deputy Attorney General under Elliot Richardson. At the height of the Constitution-shaking Watergate scandal that brought about Nixon's downfall, first Richardson and then Ruckelshaus resigned rather than obey a presidential order to fire the Watergate Special Prosecutor, and Ruckelshaus resumed private life. Since then, he has held positions with or on the boards of such corporate giants as Weyerhaeuser, Monsanto, and many others. He returned to head the USEPA again in 1983 for President Reagan, working to restore the morale and reputation of an agency fallen into disarray under the leadership of Anne Gorsuch. He has also been chairman of the World Resources Institute and Washington's Salmon Recovery Funding Board, along with a host of other positions of responsibility and public service.

Now, as chairman of the Puget Sound Partnership's Leadership Council, his job is to bring together all the federal, state, and local agencies and government entities in the region, along with businesses, scientists, Native American tribes, and ordinary citizens, in the interest of the long-term health of the vast body of water that virtually defines the Pacific Northwest. By December of this year, the Partnership must assess the current state of the Sound, determine what a healthy Puget Sound would look like, and map a sequence of steps to get there from here. This is no small assignment, not only because of the lack of accurate data, the sheer size of the region, or the number of stakeholders involved. As Ruckelshaus pointed out at the Rachel Carson Forum, the large point sources of pollution that were the focus of environmental regulation in the 1970s have mostly been brought under control, leaving a widely-dispersed and multifarious assortment of non-point sources that are very difficult to reach with traditional regulation.

The present problems tend to be related to agricultural and stormwater runoff, as well as sprawl and careless development that promote deforestation, land-use conversion, and rapid growth of roads and other impervious surfaces. These are essentially issues of land-use management rather than pollution control as such; they require a different and often more complicated set of solutions precisely because they affect so many stakeholders with such diverse needs and interests. A large part of the task will be to increase awareness of the problems, a reality that the state legislature has recognized by appropriating two million dollars for an initial public education campaign. Adding to the challenge is the fact that as a state agency, the Puget Sound Partnership has been given neither regulatory nor enforcement authority. Once its recommendations have been enacted into law, the PSP can only publicize misbehavior and report it to the legislature and the governor, who may then take action—or not—as they see fit.

To fashion effective policies in such difficult circumstances, the Partnership is employing a collaborative problem-solving process. In his speech, Ruckelshaus outlined the steps he believes are required to make the process successful. To begin with, he cautions that this kind of decision making takes time and patience. "People must develop trust in an atmosphere where trust has been eroded," he said, a point to which he would return in greater depth in our later interview. Next, he believes that every stakeholder group must be involved from the very beginning. Rather than worrying that too many interests might splinter the process and prevent consensus, Ruckelshaus says that when everyone is involved, "You almost guarantee the result will overcome the posturing of single interests and that people will listen before passing judgment."

The presence of an authoritative sponsor is crucial, in his opinion, preferably in the form of a major government agency that is

committed to paying attention and implementing the resulting recommendations. Everyone in the process must understand that the end result will become public policy and that they not only have something to gain from participating, but—perhaps more importantly—something to lose as well. The stakeholders, in his view, must all believe that the alternative is unacceptable. As policy theorists have noted, people will usually take the easiest and most fruitful paths to achieve their goals; as long as we can get what we want by other means, we have little incentive to compromise with competing interests. But even with all these pieces in place, Mr. Ruckelshaus cautions, “You have to confront the economics in some detail . . . Make no mistake, these processes are ultimately about who gets what. Their real genius is in discovering that different sides can each get what they need.”

Nonetheless, he has tremendous confidence in people’s ability to come together successfully and make good decisions. As noted earlier, he feels that government has a crucial role. But, he says, “We have to face the fact that lots of people just don’t trust government.” Therefore, although the government can decide what we need to do and why, it should be up to the affected parties to determine how to reach those goals. Ruckelshaus does not believe the public incapable of understanding land-use or environmental/natural resource issues. On the contrary, he asserts that success in regulating them requires people to understand, to commit, and to take control of their own futures. In this regard, he invokes Thomas Jefferson, whom he quotes as saying that “if the people appear too unenlightened to exercise control of government, the solution is not to take away their control, but to inform their discretion with education.”

This point is another that we would revisit in our later conversation, because it has broad implications not only for the making of policy, but for its implementation, and Ruckelshaus is justifiably emphatic that implementation is the hardest part of the process. The problem is that successful implementation depends on widespread public support, which is dependent upon public awareness of the problems, an acceptance

of the need for regulation, and a willingness to share in the costs, not to mention a certain level of trust in government. In recent decades, all of these have become increasingly problematic.

Public awareness of environmental concerns may seem like a fairly straightforward matter when the question is protection of wilderness or charismatic animals like polar bears. But when the issue is the overall health of a large body of water like Puget Sound, people see a sparkling blue scenic vista and tend to think that all is well. And most of them certainly don’t make the connection between their farming and logging practices, their lawn fertilizers, their driving habits, their new dock or new housing development, and declining water quality, shellfish die-offs, or the disappearance of native salmon populations. Over fifteen years ago, Bill Ruckelshaus told an interviewer that “public opinion remains *absolutely essential* for anything to be done on behalf of the environment.” He has also remarked, at the Rachel Carson Forum and elsewhere, that “on these kinds of issues the American people are ideological liberals and operational conservatives,” meaning that they favor environmental regulation until it directly impacts their lives or their pocketbooks.

When I asked Ruckelshaus how the PSP would deal with the implications of those two observations, he said, “I think that’s the central question of the whole effort we’re undertaking . . . I think if we can’t get those people to agree that [the task] is important and it’s worth their own personal attention and that they will do their part to support funding for major undertakings . . . then our chances of succeeding are not high. I think that people in the abstract will be in favor of the steps necessary . . . until it comes down to them actually doing something themselves . . . If they’re not willing to do that then I think we’re in real trouble trying to get it done.”

The problem is exacerbated by slow but broad societal trends over the past forty years toward anti-tax and anti-government attitudes. Some of these changes have been driven by right-wing ideology, some by political events or shifting economic realities, but whatever the causes, the end result has

often been to make regulation hard to enact and even harder to pay for. Ruckelshaus told me, at one point, “The level of confidence in and support for government is really at a very dangerous low in our country right now.” He believes that the antidote lies in the principles of Jeffersonian democracy—the fostering of an educated, informed populace that will understand that protecting the environment is in their own best interest. “It may be—I don’t even like to think this, but it may be,” he said, “that these kinds of chronic environmental problems are very difficult for democracy to deal with. And my response to it is more democracy, not less, because the more you escalate the responsibility . . . for an issue . . . up the ladder of government, the less responsive the local people are. And unless you can convince them it’s in their own long-term interest to improve the place where they live . . . and make it habitable for other living things, then I don’t think you can get it done.”

And yet, in a time of rising deficits and shrinking budgets, Ruckelshaus also insists that we have the money to pay for it. When I asked him why, he replied, “Because we do; it depends on what we want to spend it on. If you want to spend it on bigger cars and all the things that we consume, then no, we don’t have the money.” But we find the money, he noted, for the things we really want. “People define freedom as the absence of rules, but that’s a *wrong* definition. Freedom is a system of restraints,” he said, and went on to say that as our population and impacts grow, “we need more restraints on our individual and collective conduct in order for the environment to be protected. And those restraints cost money. They cost some portion of our individual income, to be devoted to our collective good.”

Unfortunately, the very concept of the collective good has come under attack in recent decades by those who use economic abstractions to argue that there is no such thing as a public good, just a collection of individual preferences and desires. But Bill Ruckelshaus seems to hold the opposite view. What is more, in his speech at the Rachel Carson Forum, he deliberately digressed to make a case for pursuing a life in public service, a life spent “working for

a cause that transcends your self-interest and is larger than the goals people normally pursue . . . You're not there for the money; you're there for something beyond yourself." This isn't just something he says to inspire college students; he's been saying it in some variation for many years, to many audiences. It brought to mind John F. Kennedy's famous 1961 inaugural speech, in which he said, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Reflecting, it occurred to me that our environment (as well as our society) could benefit from a rejuvenated ethic of public service. I asked him about it, commenting that I thought it might be crucial, if it could be done. He

agreed, and added, "I think it's particularly crucial when the level of trust in our basic institutions has been so badly eroded over the last 35 years . . . I think it's a central problem of our democracy that if we don't trust our institutions, then there's a real question of whether free society has worked very well."

Nevertheless, at 75, Bill Ruckelshaus clearly retains his optimism; he remains willing to lend his name, his gravitas, and his still-considerable energy to the cause of restoring and protecting the ecosystem he and four million others call home. During the question-and-answer period after his speech, someone asked him if he really believed we could do it. "I wouldn't be

here if I didn't think we could do it," was the brisk reply. "Of course we can do it, but the question is, do we want to do it?" Over the years I've heard countless people blame our environmental ills on greedy corporations, corrupt governments, and inept bureaucracies; I've been one of those people myself. Those charges have far too often been true, but when the fingers have been pointed and the blame all assigned, that one little question still hangs in the air unnoticed: *Do we want to do it?* Bill Ruckelshaus, for his part, is betting we do.

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