ESSAY

If wishes were fishes

Hope sustaining action in sustainable marine management

Deborah Cleland

I LISTLESSLY trawled through endless canned quote pages, searching for a line that would capture my feelings and ideas about the links between fun, participation and problem-solving. Where I found it now eludes me, but it was this line from Harvey Cox's *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (1969) that fitted the bill, and it became my refrain: 'the comic, more than the tragic, because it ignites hope, leads to more, not less, participation in the struggle for a just world.'

Why does this sentence hold such attraction? Is it the fiery imagery, the idea that hope, once released, would spread like an inferno, extinguishing poverty and inequality? The promise of leaving behind the endless cataloguing of disasters and documenting of irreversible declines in exchange for something lighter, more palatable? Or because it evokes that irresistible mythology of the '60s: a true people-power revolution?

Perhaps all of these, but above all it made me remember a simple commonsense affirmation, *it's important they see hope in all of this*, that has helped me through times of feeling useless, desperate, pessimistic and irrelevant – emotions that are mirrored in the stories of workers, volunteers, researchers and activists working in environment and development the world over.

I REMEMBER THE moment clearly, as it was surrounded by the flamboyant symbolism of the series of interlocking, globalised processes that brought me, a young Australian undergraduate, together with some of the Philippines' top marine scientists in mid-2007. We were in an American chain pizza restaurant on the top floor of one of the signature mega-malls that pepper Manila's skyline. Disregarding our knowledge of fish biomass trajectories, we ordered seafood pizza, and discussed the dilemma. Our research group needed to create some computer models for coral reef managers, preferably useful ones, but that was secondary. Such is the vagary of international aid and research funding – the cure is diagnosed before the illness, and we are left trying desperately to find problems that can be fixed with the medicine that we have.

Our research site was Bolinao, a coastal town in the northern Philippines. Artisanal fishers, often armed with nothing more than a patchwork sail and improvised bamboo cages, number in the thousands in Bolinao's nearshore waters, perched between the western rim of the Lingayen Gulf and the South China Sea. Happily for Bolinao, we could characterise its situation in great detail. Generations of students and academics from the University of the Philippines' Marine Science Institute and its international partners, based at the coastal campus just outside the township, have collected biological, chemical, ecological and, albeit in much lesser volume, socioeconomic data from the land and the sea that tell a sorry story now familiar to us all: the dismal failure of modern populations to effectively manage the natural resources upon which they depend.

Daily fish catches in Bolinao now number in single digits. These catches are not enough to feed an 'average' Filipino family, still less the often more numerous households occupying the ramshackle slum villages along the skeletal beaches. Household surveys tell us that the fishers are often functionally illiterate, and many do not complete even minimal schooling. Stock assessments document precipitous falls in fish populations. Habitat mapping shows mangrove deforestation, corals destroyed by blast fishing (now uncommon, thanks to an integrated effort by local officials, community leaders, aid agencies and Marine Science Institute staff, but the scars remain) and seagrass meadows cleared for aquaculture.

Some locals have recognised that the seas, like the forests and grasslands before them, can be converted into mechanised production systems once nature's bounty has been razed beyond repair. However, not everyone can access the capital necessary to set up expensive aquaculture pens, nor buy the processed food (often made from the protein of wild-caught fish, whose volume exceeds that of the aquaculture's production, but that's another story). Instead of providing alternative livelihoods, the burgeoning aquaculture production has often further excluded local fishers, who now have to navigate through the murky maze of pens out to the open ocean for their meagre catches.

Back, then, to our seafood pizza, and proximate dilemma. What could be done, and could a computer model do it? Having just been acquainted with the dismal situation sketched above, I can probably be forgiven for exclaiming, 'What's the use? This is *hopeless*.' Dr Porfirio 'Perry' Aliño, a faculty member of the Marine Science Institute, turned to me with an uncharacteristically serious look. 'But Deb. It's important that the fishers see hope in all of this,' he said.

I can't say I saw the significance of Dr Perry's comment straightaway. But his words returned to me over the coming months, as our computer model took shape.

We had never intended to create a model in the global-climate-change super-computer sense: time was too short, and our epistemological inclinations ran in a different direction. For starters, our understanding of the motivations and barriers affecting fishers' decisions was limited, at best. More importantly, however, modelling the human behaviour at the heart of the fisheries problem reinforced the inevitability of the positive feedback loops that were perpetuating poverty cycles and environmental decline. With limited education, high immigrant populations, low social status and limited financial buffers to allow a risky move out of the fishery, subsistence fishers are often described as 'trapped' into further degrading their livelihood base.

Our model needed to play with this reality. Poke holes in the intractable, loosen up the strings that bind the fishers, just like the rest of us, to their everyday habits. Be fun. Be funny. Be the comedy that ignites hope.

A tall order for a computer model, yes. But maybe manageable for a computer game. Here perhaps we could get closer to Harvey Cox's call for

a return of the role of fantasy in forging better futures. Through this, I saw a new role for my supervisor's attachment to role-play games combined with computer models as a way of encouraging learning and relationship building among diverse stakeholders. From Kiribati to the western wheat belt, to the drug dens of inner Melbourne, the technique has been used to forge connections across disciplinary and societal divides.

So we made the fishers themselves the focus of our exercise, creating a game that aimed to enable them to engage creatively with two core problems – alternative livelihoods and marine-conservation strategies – while encouraging playful interactions with their peers. Fun became an explicit aim. As noted in Westley, Zimmerman and Quinn Patton's inspirational book about making change happen, *Getting to Maybe* (Vintage, 2007), 'social innovation requires that while we may not be able to predict outcomes, certain kinds of interactions are more likely to result in transformation than others.' While boredom is not specifically addressed, it seems self-evident that bored people are unlikely to come up with new and interesting visions for their future, nor will they form the kind of interpersonal relationships we think are important for successful resource management at the local level. Without vision and peer support, hope would truly be lost.

In the recent book *Tackling Wicked Problems through the Transdisciplinary Imagination* (Earthscan, 2010), Emeritus Professor Val Brown of the Australian National University's Fenner School for Environment and Society points to the importance of 'creative leaps' of the imagination in finding solutions for our 'damaged planet'. Nearby, the co-founder of the Regulatory Institutions Network research group, Professor Valerie Braithwaite, spearheaded a project that linked hope and imagination to renewal, improvement and progress in areas as diverse as rehabilitation programs, tax systems and post-apartheid reconciliation, showing hope's surprisingly broad utility.

Hope enables us (the researcher, the activist, the philanthropist) to enter a 'problem space' open and ready to find solutions, rather than despairing and inclined to see the fishers and their analogues around the globe only in terms of what they lack, rather than what they have and can make use of.

This is the beginning of a framework that reaches far beyond the idiosyncrasies of our Filipino fisheries model dilemma. In a blog post from

2007 Julian Assange pondered the quandary of our bird's eye knowledge of the planet and its problems: 'To exercise your instinct for saving the world requires saving what you perceive to be the world. Being modern, educated and worldly, the world you perceive is immense and this is disempowering... Your perception is of a world so vast that that you can not envisage your actions making a meaningful difference.'

Assange suggests that we often deliberately limit our horizons – choosing self-delusion in order to be able to conceive of our own impact, and then act accordingly. Braithwaite and colleagues, however, offer a more encouraging path, through 'collective hope' – made possible through our trust and belief that others have marked out their own patch, share our vision, and are somehow extending the reach of our impact. Such collective hope reconciles our need for global change with that for local action.

Many have recognised the importance of paying attention to the possible. After John Braithwaite's gloomy assessment in 2004 of the preponderance of pessimism and negativity in research, it seems the tide turned. Positive psychology is probably the best known manifestation of a groundswell movement of people convinced of the benefits of rose-coloured glasses. It is possible that positive and pop psychology only share an unfortunate alliteration, but I'm instinctively (and perhaps unfairly) turned off by the chirpiness on display as I wander through the self-help websites produced in this vein of study. Hope seems more solid, fun more genuine and comedy more timeless than a glib justification of the pursuit of happiness.

BUT DOES IT really work? And what of our fishers? ReefGame, as our game became known, has now been played by around 250 people around the Philippines, thanks to a subsequent grant from the David and Lucille Packard Foundation's Ecosystem Based Management Tools Demonstration program to the Marine Science Institute's in-house foundation. In multi-stakeholder workshops conducted in the sub-zero environment of hotel convention centres you can feel the temperature of the room rise several degrees as people jostle for space around the game board, laughing and joking about their relative misfortunes and attempts to borrow money from neighbours. Participants

would often ask to play extra rounds, even if it were snack time – almost unheard of in a culture that venerates its mealtimes, and in communities who have been left more than a little workshop-weary after several decades of participating in projects run by a plethora of international donor agencies.

WE SEEM TO have ticked the box for comedy and fun leading to participation. What of hope? As catches declined and incomes dropped in the initial stages of ReefGame, facilitators were often met with disbelief: 'Why is the coral dying? What is happening to our catches – are there illegal fishers?' Fishers have a tendency to blame other people for the problems of the sea: 'the illegal fishers', 'the encroachers', 'the government'. But as the game progressed, fishers usually took control of their situation, inventing livelihoods and small-business activities to supplement and replace fishing income, and convincing local government representatives to pay them to become part-time coast guards.

Hope springs from a realisation of our power to act. Once we realise the world is malleable, we can begin to articulate a vision to change it. Herein lies the value of our game – if it could function as a viable metaphor for the world outside, the lessons learned would be transferrable.

However, the 'hopeful' reaction was not universal. Like the bird that does not perceive the open cage, some participants did not play with the open boundaries I thought we were offering. A few, faced with catch declines, chose to opt out altogether, 'staying home to eat cassava' rather than dreaming up alternative occupations or participating in the conservation and rehabilitation of the fisheries.

Worse was my own realisation of how limited our vision was. Yes, the fishers could capitalise creatively on their diverse skill sets to come up with their own ideas about possible livelihoods, and yes, the virtual world removed (at least temporarily) some of the barriers to change that exist in the real one. But I had been too dull, too co-opted, to recognise how we presented mixed-market western capitalist solutions as the clear, logical pathway out. The vision of trickle-down development and a worker economy was never far from the surface. We had made very little space for co-operatives, for

volunteers or for cashless transactions. With such blinkers, surely we were presenting the fishers with a nail and asking them to come up with an appropriately shaped tool?

And what relationship does it have to reality, anyway? Were we just encouraging a latent 'monopoly' personality in our participants that had only coincidental congruence with real-world decision patterns? It was hard not to wonder whether hope, fun and comedy really have anything to offer in the face of such large-scale destruction, desperation and despair.

AM I RIGHT to continue from where I find myself, building models and playing games, or should my need to perceive 'meaningful difference' be relocated? My natural antonym is the community-led restoration program run in Bolinao by the visionary founder of the Marine Science Institute, Dr Edgardo Gomez. Marine biologists train locals in the delicate art of coral husbandry and transplantation. Using improvised goggles they carefully wedge the juveniles onto the reef substrate, praying they survive the next typhoon, boat grounding or crown-of-thorns starfish invasion. Sister projects led by Dr Annette Meñez have communities rearing high-value species, for now just to restock natural habitats and supply local buyers but with the idea of tapping into global ornamental markets. Isn't this the altogether more practical and efficacious way to go? When the problems are so urgent, can we justify playtime – experimenting with people's hopes and dreams, with the growing feeling that all we will achieve, in the end, is to make them laugh?

I asked myself if it was disingenuous, then, to incorporate hope into fisheries, an area where economic and environmental catastrophes are the canaries in the coalmine of our ailing planet. With the right mix of realism and optimism, action and attitude, David Ritter offered in these pages (*Griffith REVIEW 31: Ways of Seeing*) the perfect answer: 'beneath the surface and sinking, with hope and will we can still strike back upwards toward the light.' For the researchers, development practitioners, government officials, conservationists and, above all, the fishers themselves, hope is the critical ingredient that enables the imagining of an improved future, puts wind in the sails of flagging spirits and tides us over until action is possible.

Those of us aspiring to change have our favourite weapons that we brandish at the world. Armed with keyboards, facts, thermometers, nubbins and placards, we choose our paths and our horizons.

I think I will cling for a little longer to my armament of choice. What we are trying to do is tip the scales in favour of change: to gather together those who have the power to flip the system, and give them a chance to piece together a new image. If we insist that people always work within the tactile world, we lose that incendiary power of fantasy to take us to solutions 'outside the given'. And even if all we are able to produce is glimpses of a radically different future, this may be enough to generate momentum in the present.

References at www.griffithreview.com

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