

Subsidiarity:  
A Whale of a Pattern of Thought, Organizing Principle for  
Community-Based Environmental Management  
By Rob Moir

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Off the coast of Maine an explosive exhalation of air swept my attention over the sailboat's starboard rail. A broad stretch of hide rose like a pebbled sand bar the length of the twenty-seven foot boat. It wheeled forward sliding into opaque water while I stammered and pointed.

I was alone at the helm with three below decks. One ascended the gangway enough to see on the surface of a passing swell, a circle of water that once held whale. All of my oceans sensibilities had been breached. My mind, informed by sea experiences and ocean literacy such as Rachel Carson's *Under the Sea Wind* was inexplicably altered. Where did this come from? How could this be? What does such life mean for an unfathomable dynamic complex system that we simply call ocean ecosystem?

Changed and being young with no where to go but all over the place, I promptly steered into the harbor of a second year of college. Now, I wanted to know all about whales and searched the course listing of five colleges in Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley to no avail.

The following summer found me not at sea. Instead, I was in Amherst working with the colleague who had been first up to see the whale's mark on the waves. We were working on a stipend to gain the competencies to teach a course on whales to our college peers. By supporting a community of two college students, and assisting by funding a college professor to meet frequently with us to gain the skills for teaching classmates, the college was practicing a most basic form of subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity is a very old concept and pattern of thought, surprisingly so given how little one hears of subsidiarity today. It is an organizing principle for

community-based governance in concert with larger forms of government. Just as the surfacing of a whale changed my way of knowing the ocean, I suspect the principle of subsidiarity can change for the better our understandings of community-based environmental management.

Subsidiarity calls for close respectful partnerships amidst all levels of government, local, regional, state, federal and international. Working with respect for the community be they students or resource users, with the principle of environmental subsidiarity we can restore diverse wildlife, healthy ecosystems and even quality of life.

Subsidiarity is a two-fold principle. First, any particular task should be decentralized to the lowest level of organization with the capacity to conduct it satisfactorily. Second, while the higher level of organization reframes from undertaking tasks that could be preformed by a grouping closer to the individuals, it is still responsible for the skill training and competencies of the group carrying out the task to the extent that the lesser groups performs as well as the other. According to the principle of subsidiarity credit goes to the grouping closest to the individual while responsibility is borne by all.

The college practiced the principle by delegating to the student the task of teaching and at the same time took on the responsibility building the competencies needed for the specific task. I, the student-teacher was recognized (and got credit) while responsibility for the quality of college courses was borne by the college.

The subsidiarity concept goes back to Aristotle saying that government should be subsidiary to citizen, meaning secondary. By this he meant government must serve the people, and not the other way around. Subsidiarity is silent about specific purpose, direction or content. Subsidiarity was further articulated, as we shall see, four hundred years ago as “a conviction that each human individual is endowed with an inherent and inalienable worth, or

dignity.” All social groupings should ultimately be at the service of the individual.

In particular, subsidiarity was further articulated in Europe early in seventeenth century to become a part of constitutional laws and legal doctrine. Johannes Althusius (1557-1638), writing in the Catholic Church about 1620, developed the principle of subsidiarity in defense of the rise of sovereignty, and to maintain local autonomy in a wider federative framework that included rapid growth of the Lutheran Church. Althusius was a Calvinist theoretician and powerful Syndic of Emden, a city in East Friesland. Emden had separated from the Netherlands during the Eighty Years (independence) War and became a leading center for interdependent commerce. Emden was one of the first cities in Germany to embrace the Reformed faith. Amidst the turmoil of the Counter-Reformation, the relative autonomy of Althusius’s city was further challenged by a Lutheran provincial Lord determined to establish a sovereign state in East Friesland.

Johannes Althusius began with the Catholic presupposition that no man is self-sufficient and separate from society. It is through the assistance or aid of others, beginning with one’s family, that an individual is made a social being capable of citizenship. One must cultivate and conserve associations at multiple levels including guild, corporation, city, state. None of the associations are self-sufficient; they must cooperate with each other within a universal association.

Althusius wrote of seeking for a “symbiotics” among associations as the essence of politics. From the bible he drew the concept of “foedus,” meaning the alliance or league resulting from the bond between God and men, and secularized it to apply for associations in this world. The word “federalism” comes from this secular application of “foedus” as he tried to maintain both the political autonomy and commercial interests of Emden.

The word “subsidia” was used by Althusius to indicate the supply of all the necessities for life and association. It is the “logic of the supply of mutual needs in an interdependent world.” The word was used more loosely by Althusius than the concept of subsidiarity would be applied three hundred plus years later. Subsidia presupposes diverse and cooperative groups of people, support of local autonomies within a wider federated framework with an ascending series of contracts.

Althusius strove to bring social order to the multiple levels of family, guilds, cities and state, and at the same time, preserve useful and necessary aids and assistance to maintain autonomy and identities of minority religious and political groups in Emden. When sovereignty was declared absolute and belonging only to the King, Althusius responded with subsidiarity insisting that the “ownership of a realm belongs to the people, and administration of it to the king.” Althusius’s sovereignty (paraphrased as “commonwealth”) is instead composed of cities, provinces and regions, which are populated by citizens of a plurality of associations, i.e., families, guilds and corporations. These people come together to form one body that jointly own sovereignty.

Althusian sovereignty is not only one and indivisible, it is also shareable and limited, not absolute. Sovereignty is limited not only by the natural and divine law, more importantly it is limited by subsidia: the logic of the supply of mutual needs in an interdependent world.

Subsidiarity took America by force of reason in 1776 by a recently arrived English excise tax officer from Thetford, County Norfolk named Thomas Paine. In a matter of months, Paine forever altered the political landscape of the American Colonies from a rebellion with the parliament government to a rebellion for a greater good. He found the colonists demanding civil rights for treatment by Parliament, for representation before taxation, all the while

maintaining loyalty to King George. Paine changed the debate from reconciliation to national identity by asking instead for an Aristotelian subsidiarity where as a natural right with moral certainty government should be in the service of citizens. He argued convincingly that better than rule by Kings and sovereign law was natural law where ordinary citizens assembled together and decided what rules would govern. Paine introduced the essence of a democracy that began with government subsidiary to the people and changed the course of history.

*Common Sense* was published and distributed as a pamphlet on Tuesday, January 10, 1776. In a span of just 46 pages, Paine successfully conveyed the concept of subsidiarity government as a natural right and inalienable truth that could be backed up by scripture. Paine succeeded for four reasons: first, he was a skilled and eminently competent political writer; second, he brought to America an indigenous knowledge of and significant experience with British government; third, he reframed the argument from the picayune of civil rights with Parliament to a big-picture argument for natural rights of an independent nation ruled not by the King but by the people; and fourth, he wrote not for the deliberative men gathered in Philadelphia's Congress, he wrote instead for the common colonial in a familiar style that was easily accessible and inspirational for all.

Paine called on citizens to cease the local quibbling over civil rights of taxation and the ministrations by government, to instead act globally for natural rights where even small steps would over time, and for posterity, make a world of difference for the better.

The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent - of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis

not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceeding now. Now is the seed time of continental union, faith and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read in it full grown characters.

Today, ours continues to be the “seed time” for addressing environmental challenges. We practice subsidiarity at all levels of government from the individuals and groups closest to the resources on up. There is now a growing realization of the power citizens have, and the responsibilities borne by all levels of government. The practices of environmental subsidiarity become more effective, more significant, with each action and with every day.

### Environmental Subsidiarity

Environmental subsidiarity combines the organizing principle and pattern of thought (subsidiarity) with the context of environmental studies and natural resource management. Subsidiarity is the policy design; environmental recognizes the policy choice.

Environmental subsidiarity calls for two actions. First, give power and authority to the frontline groups, those people closest to the natural resource. Second, subsidiarity calls for holding all groups behind the front, most particularly higher authorities often state and federal responsible for the competencies and apportioning of powers for all the special forces from front to back. Subsidiarity averts environmental forlorn hope by giving more control and pride to the local groups. Forlorn hope is thwarted by all stakeholders and

interest groups working in coordinated partnership with diverse groups of multiple and increasing capacities to achieve significant undertakings together.

The Republican Abraham Lincoln most clearly evoked the spirit of an American subsidiarity when he wrote in 1854:

The legitimate objective of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do for themselves in their separate and individual capacities. In all that people can do individually well for themselves, government ought not to interfere.

For an environmental subsidiarity, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, government must do for an environment, and for that environment's "community of people whatever they need to have done but . . . cannot so well do for themselves in their separate and individual capacities." Credit is due to those who do the most. Responsibility for environmental management, restoration and conservation belongs to all, from the most local to the most national, near and far. By bringing multiple groups with differing competencies from many levels of authority to manage an environment, and to then bear the burden of responsibility broadly, environmental subsidiarity betters, makes more democratic and competent, the work of environmental stewardship.

## Post Script: Subsidiarity Today

In Plymouth, England, a citizen active with both the local town forum and a coastal town initiative wrote a letter to his local paper titled: "If I Were Prime Minister." On May 4, 2005 the Western Morning News published the letter on page 22:

Firstly, I would give power back to the counties, including far more responsibility for taxation and spending. I would take the EU at its word and rigorously apply the principle of subsidiarity, giving power to the lowest level of government possible. People would soon start to vote again in local elections if parish, town, district and county councils had more power to decide on the local issues relevant to them.

On the vexed issue of energy and climate change, I would progressively enforce tighter carbon dioxide emission limits, but allow communities to decide how these are achieved by conservation, the different renewable sources, with the full environmental costs being paid in each case by consumers.

Finally, I would empower local communities to take responsibility for their futures by giving their parish, town and county plans high weighting in assessing the effectiveness of the public agencies who carry them out.

Initially there would be an outcry against these measures, but as people began to realize that they were being given back

power as well as responsibility, participation in the political process would become more effective.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Langdon-Davies, "If I Were Prime Minister," *Western Morning News (Plymouth)*, May 4, 2005, Section: News; Other; Pg. 22, 246 words.