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Do big and sudden actions distract us from nurturing effective EBM?

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Recently a radio news story got me thinking about the blind faith we put in the transformative power of big investment, and how that may distract us from the small and steady investments that often underlie durability.

The story: this September, Amazon, the online retail behemoth, announced that it would seek a location for a second North American headquarters. The result: A feeding frenzy of municipal suitors (more than 200) falling all over themselves to win the grand prize. And the prize is grand indeed – Amazon claims that the new operations center will employ up to 50,000 people over 15 years.

Even the small hill towns in the remote New England region where I live salivated at the prospect of being within the chosen area. This is a region where people own small businesses, moonlight in second jobs, and adapt to new opportunities – or create their own. The hill towns are full of entrepreneurs – farmers, foresters, writers, artists, and consultants – sometimes many of these wrapped up in a single person. But unemployment has become more pervasive, and the hardscrabble life many are accustomed to has gotten harder. The lure of Amazon's jobs is just too tempting to ignore.

And it is not surprising that many other parts of North America were similarly tempted. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which towns and states decided to invest in the bid to seduce Amazon. The proposed plans for infrastructure improvements and tax breaks are in effect local governments and taxpayers offering to subsidize one of the largest companies in the world.

Better to invest in long term, organic development?

Does that make sense? And is it fundamentally risky since automation will undoubtedly reconfigure the jobs landscape, even in the short term? More importantly, by offering tax incentives and the promise of infrastructure built to Amazon's needs, do these bids divert money and distract attention from the hard job of building strong, resilient, economically sustainable communities?

Look at what Amazon did for Seattle, some say. But I would ask: did Amazon create the vibrant Seattle of today, or did Seattle allow the creation of Amazon (and Microsoft and Starbucks)? Are large influxes of capital and the sudden creation of jobs the recipe for sustainable development, or a disruption that shakes the foundations of society by creating an illusion of prosperity?

Instead of luring a company that will impose its culture – a culture that is, by default, foreign as it evolved in a different setting – on whatever area it decides to pick for its large-scale investment, local governments might do better to invest in the long term, organic development of strong, resilient communities. This means investing in human and social capital to fit the needs and expectations of local people, not massive corporations.

As I listened to stories about the Amazon proposals, it made me think back to the debates that raged over the tax incentives US states and municipalities offered to the film industry to lure its business – something that my state of Massachusetts tried without success. U.S. News & World Report analyzed film industry incentives across the US and determined that the industry rarely delivers to economies what the incentives cost treasuries and taxpayers. Ditto the bids to lure casinos to my part of New England, with all the societal risks that state-sponsored gambling entails.

Large-scale marine investments can divert attention from day-to-day management

By now you are probably wondering what this has to do with marine ecosystem-based management (EBM). To me, these dynamics are similar to the large-scale investments that subsidize wealthy corporations in the maritime sector, as well as large-scale investments that divert planning and management attention away from small-scale but necessary day-to-day marine and coastal management.

Subsidies to big fishing companies that maintain large profit margins is one example of large-scale investment in the marine realm that may detract from smaller sustained investment, in this case, investments in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture. I won't discuss the issue of perverse subsidies in fisheries here, but it is important to note that the large and disruptive investments that undermine community resilience aren't always investments of money. Take for example the State of Virginia and its treatment of Omega Protein – a company that harvests menhaden for omega oils, liquid protein concentrate, bait, and fishmeal products. The country's only menhaden rendering plant, based in Reedville, Virginia, employing 250 local people (and another 400 foreign workers, paid lower wages than residents), does indeed have other knock-on effects on the economy. But the amount of political posturing the State of Virginia does to keep Houston-based Omega operating in the state is out of proportion to what Omega returns to the community. The vast majority of the quota allocation of menhaden along the Atlantic seaboard goes to Omega, essentially giving it a monopoly over the product. Virginia has been lobbying to significantly increase menhaden catch limits a move that would greatly benefit Omega but would also contribute to the alarming phenomenon of forage fish overfishing and have negative impacts on marine species upon which other communities rely. Here the large-scale investment is in political capital, and that political capital benefits the few, not the masses.

Sudden actions are sometimes short-lived

Another example of how sudden, large investment of capital in management can counter slow and careful planning and management can be seen in the US news this week with the severe downsizing of two national monuments and the recommendation to dramatically scale back many more including three marine monuments. The current, anti-environment US presidential administration is hell bent on undoing the conservation actions of previous administrations and may be able to erase national monument designations almost as quickly as they were declared. Perhaps if the designation of these marine areas had resulted from a more participatory process with more negotiation

and compromise, they would have a wider base of constituents to defend them.

Sometimes the large-scale or sudden actions that are short-lived or counterproductive have nothing to do with government. I recently spent time in a remote island country where the private sector spearheaded a major campaign to stop the decline of an endangered species. The campaign was well-intentioned, but traditional governance institutions, other than the government agencies that regulate wildlife trade, were bypassed. The outcome seems to be disastrous – poaching by locals seems to have increased as a result of the campaign and is widely believed to be a backlash against a perception that norms and directives are being imposed on local societies from outside. This is particularly concerning because societal norms had been steadily moving toward the strict conservation of the species, reflecting its importance to traditional culture. Instead of looking for ways to expand a growing conservation ethic built on traditional community leadership, the sudden investment of capital seems to have undermined the potential for lasting conservation. This suggests that large and fast interventions – even when they seem warranted – may not lead to the desirable outcomes that would be expected.

In the end, we need both large-scale investment and sustained, small-scale strengthening of domestic institutions that are locally appropriate to achieve lasting positive outcomes. EBM isn't possible when the big picture is ignored, but neither is it possible when the values that support it aren't nurtured in the societies that use and treasure the sea.

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