Disturbance, Crisis, and Creative Construction

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Abstract

In this session we will focus on the prospect of disturbance as a choice and as a tool. In ecology, disturbance can be understood as an event in time that disrupts system structure and resource availability. While disturbances can be destructive, they can also be important catalysts for growth, innovation and transformation. With this in mind, many phenomena disturb social-ecological systems and can lead to undesirable changes, even crises. As an example, global climate change will give rise to many types of disturbances to social-ecological systems – and correspondingly a host of actions by individuals, societies, and government to manage these disruptions. Actions to mitigate a system’s exposure to risk or cope with adverse circumstances can also disturb other systems or system components, creating new crises. In this way, tools to manage disturbance can also cause disturbance. Unexpected, and potentially unfavorable, outcomes can occur when the tool (i.e., policy initiative, development program, etc.) is applied only to MANAGE disturbance. This has been observed many times. In solving one problem, we create another. However, when tools are also viewed as potential disturbances at other scales or in other sectors, perhaps as potentially useful or constructive disturbances, the prospect for unintended negative consequences may diminish.

In other words, designing tools to manage AND create disturbance may offer a tractable path forward as we attempt to manage and govern complex adaptive systems through uncertain times. In this session we hope to explore this idea through empirical and/or conceptual papers that focus on disturbances as choices and/or tools. Important questions here include: how are disturbances used (wittingly or unwittingly), who creates and who experiences disturbance, and what are the associated outcomes. We are interested in discussing failures, successes, and/or strategies for success.

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