
Counter-strategies to Risks in Alaskan Oil Development: The Politics of Inclusion and the Potential for Fostering Resilience

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Abstract

*Presentation prepared for the session "Pathways of Resilience in a Rapidly Changing Alaska" ABSTRACT. This presentation reports on our recent study of the Social-Ecological System (SES) that consists of Alaska's North Slope natural resources, local residents, and associated state and federal governance systems. Alaska communities are faced with increased stresses from cumulative effects of industrial development, resource-use, and changing cryospheric and social conditions. Given these multiple pressures, what avenues exist for citizens and decision-makers to exchange knowledge about impacts of oil resource extraction in Alaska, and how do the successes and failures of inclusion affect the resilience of the SES? We focused our research on the risk management process of North Slope oil resources, drawing on literature that has grown out of the risk society thesis, and on the concepts of sustainability science. We chose to survey state and federal initiatives designed to increase local and indigenous stakeholder engagement in science and policy issues because such guidelines and regulations impact on the abilities of local peoples and communities to adapt sustainability strategies. The authors of the study argue that current provisions fail to equitably include the local and indigenous knowledge of Alaska's North Slope Borough communities in environmental risk mediation in proportion with the scope of risks inherent in current oil development policies. The findings of this study underscore the need for new, proactive risk management strategies that build on local stakeholders' rationalities on the tradeoffs of risks and opportunities. Perceived risks and desired outcomes of stakeholders on the front lines of climate change and resource development is information that can enhance institutional capacity to formulate regulations that anticipate future impacts and needed adaptation strategies. Integration of these values in an adaptive risk management approach, in resilience-based ecosystem management is fundamental.

Keywords: social ecological systems, adaptive capacity, stakeholder engagement, decision making, local knowledge, fostering resilience, risk society

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