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**The Path to Washington**  
*Convening leaders for an ecologically sustainable America*  
**Report on a dialogue**  
**The Odum School of Ecology, University of Georgia**  
**Athens, Georgia**  
**April 10, 2008**

With roots that date back to the 1950s, the Eugene P. Odum School of Ecology at the University of Georgia is the first stand-alone school of ecology in the world. Its faculty and programs are noted for addressing complex issues from global climate change, to water policy, to infectious diseases.

Faculty and students at the Odum School, joined by federal and local officials and employees, voiced the need to generate a strong community “ecological ethos” that brings people together to set local ecological goals, generate government policies that support achieving those goals and produce a means to measure progress. They acknowledged that while there are some impressive local initiatives in the United States, the system, for the most part, is not working effectively for them.

As a result, ideas emerged that attendees said, if developed, would produce more hope for states and communities that saw the federal government and Washington as too distant to understand complex local problems and the means required to solve them. Several people mentioned how state and federal government have tried to weaken local governmental policy in Georgia, particularly with regards to water efficiency and biodiversity.

That’s not to say the attendees passed over their own shortcomings as members of the public and academia, especially on issues such as inefficient water use, urban sprawl, inadequate ecological education and disconnects between ecology and economics.

On the point of needs that are eluding the current regulatory and government systems, the attendees offered these thoughts:

- Water, water and more water. The existing legal and political systems are unable to deal with quantity and quality issues and its getting worse;
- Biodiversity slips through the programmatic cracks as attention is focused on a species by species basis;
- Exurban sprawl is not only harming the environment but wasting billions of dollars in infrastructure investments can be made more efficiently. Policies must effectively support green infrastructure in an ecosystem service approach;
- The disconnect between natural resources economics and market economics that masks real business risks and causes real damage to the environment. Ecological cost analyses are woefully inadequate;
- Inadequate enforcement of existing laws reduces the desire for policies that push for greater performance because many see the need to punish violations.

After listing shortcomings, the attendees gradually turned to generating ideas on how to change the system, or at least provide opportunities for those businesses, communities and citizens that wanted to break out of the current gridlock to find better ways, whether they be through performance-based regulations, sustainable communities or wholesale transformation into ecosystem thinking on a project scale. Here are some of their key positive points:

- Local taxing (and spending) flexibility could allow local governments to discuss, define and make choices over real problems instead of top-down problems that may or may not connect with grass roots realities. Local governments are responsible for quality of life. Give them the tools;
- Education and community-building could support cultural ecosystems that re-connect people to natural resources and help them appreciate the folly in short-term decision-making, be it by business persons, politicians or average citizens;
- Ecosystem service revenue from the easy connections, such as drinking water and flood protection, could be bumped to create a fund for those ecosystem services such as bio-diversity that are less easily supported through fees and payments;
- Ecosystem indicators are essential but also can be useless if the average person does not understand them. Indicators and performance metrics should connect with system complexity but be simple enough for public understanding. Use auto performance as a lesson? Perhaps connect ecosystem health, to public health, to workplace;
- A new ecosystem-based vocabulary is necessary for policy making, as are new performance metrics and can be done. But be careful of green-washing;
- Federal farm, infrastructure and forest programs could be a way into fresh policy thinking through dialogue about ecosystem services, natural capital and investing in green as well as grey infrastructure in rural and urban settings;
- Incentives could leverage performance from everyone across the board from citizens to business to local government. But they can be creative like using time and regulatory certainty to help business or temporary financial incentives to support property owner ecosystem service investments;
- Existing programs like state wildlife plans and the Clean Water Act's demonstration program could be transformed into green infrastructure plans for local governments.

\* This dialogue was organized by Bob Donaghue Ecological Futures Consulting, LLC, Atlanta and Atty. Laurie Fowler of the Odum School. The scribe was Jeff Smoller, President, MSWG.

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