

Mapping and Eco-Activism – Re-Discovering Our Common Ground

Maeve Lydon

[Reference: Lydon, Maeve. (2000). Mapping and eco-activism: Re-discovering our common ground. Alternatives Journal. Common Ground Community Mapping Project.]

When we are lost, a map helps us find our way. We can locate where we are and the possible routes we could take. A map can also point out the important features and assets of a community. The big question is: Who makes the map? The answer will determine who decides what is important, what routes lie open to the user, and, in effect, whose reality counts.(1).

In our culture, mapping is primarily a professional exercise, carried out by planners, geographers, surveyors and others. Although the purposes of maps are as numerous as the maps themselves, it's safe to say that most maps have been produced to further the economic and political purposes of the economic and political elite. In Canada, the history of map-making is intimately tied to the exploration of the land mass and the identification of resources to be exploited, whether that be beaver pelts, lumber, gold or oil. Thus, map making, resource exploitation and the conquering of native land have gone hand in hand since Europeans arrived in this corner of the world.

In recent years, however, a grassroots movement has sprouted that is using maps and the map making process to reflect community values and support socially and ecologically sustainable planning. Community mapping is a partial answer to these question "How can we make the reality of the whole community and ecosystem count?" In doing so community mappers are helping to recover indigenous, community-based mapping traditions.

Maps and Culture

Maps provide unique modes of manipulation and control. They can decide whose worldview and reality count. Harley and Woodward in *The History of Cartography* define maps as "graphic representations that facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes, or events in the human world."(2). Maps are subjective renderings of place and reflect the worldview of the mapmaker. Since the advent of perspective geometry in the 15th century, followed by the rise of colonialism and the Scientific Revolution, mapmaking in the West has followed a utilitarian, scientific and technical tradition.

Maps, rather than reflections of community- and traditional ecological and cultural knowledge - became possessions and instruments of power increasingly in the hands of those with colonial and commercial interests. Cartography soon became an indispensable tool of state and colonial power, while portraying the world with a European bias. In country after country, maps and the associated approach to territory served to overrun peasants and indigenous peoples and subjugated their cultures.

Ironically, it was the indigenous "mental maps", based on their oral knowledge of territory, that aided and abetted the European expansion of North America. Mark Warhus, in *Another America-Native American Maps and the History of Our Lands*, comments that "unlike Western society, maps were not created as permanent documents in native American

traditions. The features of geography were part of a much larger interconnected mental map that existed in the oral traditions. The world was perceived and experienced through one's history, traditions, and kin, in relationships with the animal and natural resources that one depended upon, and in union with the spirits and ancestors, and religious forces with whom one shared existence." (3).

Warhus tells the story of Blackfoot Chief Ac ko mok ki who drew a map of the West for the Hudson's Bay Company. In effect, Warhus remarks, this was a detailed picture of two hundred thousand miles of North America. Lewis and Clark used this knowledge for their exploration and subsequent maps of Northwestern North America. They are considered heroes but little is known of the key informant Ac ko mok ki or the many other Native American informants that Warhus documents.

If map-making by developers and colonial explorers has been a vehicle for the domination of nature and the vanquishing of cultures more sustainable than ours, then perhaps map-making by grassroots groups building can help restore the foundations for a sustainable way of life. A starting point is acknowledging history and the central role of culture in influencing how we see the land and those around us. If maps do express our relation to place then community and ecological recovery depends on re-mapping and re-presenting the worlds around us.

Maps and Community-Based Recovery

The making of community and ecosystem-based maps, is now gaining momentum as part of the worldwide movement for sustainability. At the 1992 United Nations Rio 'Earth' Summit, the Agenda 21 initiative was launched by the International Centre for Local Environmental Initiatives to support sustainable development planning in communities and municipal bodies worldwide. ICLEI's Toronto office produced the Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide,(4) in which community-based mapping using local and computer technologies, particularly GIS (geographic information systems) are identified as key research, community building and planning methods now being used worldwide.

Native American and indigenous groups worldwide are narrowing the information and power gap, and in effect transforming power relations between themselves and their former colonial rulers by creating maps that combine traditional and Western scientific knowledge and methods. Warhus gives examples of the Hopi, the Ojibwa, the Zuni and many other native nations that are blending practical knowledge of the land orally handed down and technical mapping traditions. In Northern British Columbia, the Gitksan people are using GIS technology to combine the traditional ecological and cultural knowledge of Gitksan elders with modern ecosystem mapping techniques. Chief Calvin Hyzims of the Eagle Clan, on whose territory much of the mapping has taken place, was trained and employed as one of the mappers. Much of Calvin's ancestral land, which borders the Skeena River, has been logged, fished and settled despite native land claims to the area.

Calvin believes there is great power in a map. "The government won't recognize anyone without a map. It has been essential for the reclamation of our territory." He reminds us that their approach to territory did not require written maps. "Our culture and the elders did not use or need maps as part of their traditions. They knew who they were and they knew whose land they were on and whose land they could cross over. To make the maps we walked the trails blazed by our elders years ago. We found walking sticks, shelters and food storage sites from the early 1900s. Elders had been living in these areas in 30 to 40 degrees below zero. We are re-blazing the trails and this information about our land has been used in Court as evidence of our title

So what is to be learned from the historical and modern maps of the First Nations of this territory to inform and guide community mapping? Doug Aberley, a pioneer of bioregionalism and community-based mapping has been very active in First Nations, urban and rural community mapping processes. In his extensive documentation of community-based mapping called *Boundaries of Home - Mapping for Local Empowerment*, he reminds readers that,

...all human beings originate from aboriginal cultures. In all of us is some ability to understand relationships of physical space to survival and evolution of stable community life. In admiring the maps of aboriginal cultures, the goal is not to copy others but to rediscover in ourselves a genetic memory of ancient skills. This is no romantic quest. What we seek is inspiration from those who remain close to the land - rootedness, spirituality, and the ability to live in complex harmony with other life." (5).

The Common Ground Mapping Project – Victoria, British Columbia

There are many stories of inspiration from around the world where people are paying careful attention to their own and their community's history and values. The International Green Map System is facilitating the development of community-based maps in many of the world's cities. In Greater Victoria, the Common Ground Community Mapping Project led by a belief in experiential community-based learning and inspired by the Gitksan, is facilitating neighborhood, school and regional mapping projects, including creating its own regional Green Map.

Common Ground is a broad-based initiative involving academics, municipal governments, neighborhood associations, schools, conservation and community groups in the creation of education and training opportunities, and in the production of maps and learning resources which lead to community-based networking, dialogue and action for sustainability. Common Ground is establishing a resource centre with Lifecycles, the local youth and food security project, and facilitates training, education and network building between the neighborhood and school groups.

Common Ground's founders all bring their specific interest and enthusiasm to the group. Derek Gent, the manager of community economic development for the local Pacific Savings Credit Union and a member of the Steering Committee believes " Mapping processes can provide a powerful tool for planning and for communication. The main reason I am involved in and supportive of mapping comes from the potential to very quickly identify assets in a community and to gain insight on the values behind those creating a map. From my experience, these elements form the essential groundwork for appropriate development to occur and for relationships to be strengthened. "

Martin Shore, a retired accountant and the Chair of Common Ground has personally mapped all the greenways and spaces in his Gordon Head neighborhood as part of the Green Map process. "I think mapping is becoming recognized as an underused tool in many aspects of human endeavour. I think people have become overwhelmed with narrative and this applies particularly to "learned" papers on scientific matters. A map is a picture that is worth more than a thousand words"

Neighborhood groups are also part of Common Ground. In the neighborhood of Fairfield the community association has created an extensive community mapping and improvement project called 'Our Fairfield' which is inspiring other neighborhoods. Mapping community

features and values involves a commitment to social, economic and ecological sustainability. Their mapping is diverse and includes social interests such as documenting community history and identifying needs and sites for social housing, conservation concerns such as locating sensitive ecosystem areas and expanding green space, and assessing and creating local economic development by mapping capital flow, home-based businesses and eco-resources (such as fruit trees).

Earl Levin, a retired professor and city planner, is the co-coordinator of 'Our Fairfields' and on the Steering Ctte. of Common Ground . For Earl, mapping is an excellent means to connect community will and political will in the creation of a comprehensive community plan for the future. As he believes, "Mapping is critical as the first step and foundation of the community planning process for data-gathering and to create a community inventory about the existing and historical situation."

Creatively involving the wider community of various ages and cultures is considered critical to the success of Common Ground's trainings and annual mapping days where over 100 individuals of all ages and backgrounds have come together to share and celebrate together. Last year John Elliot from the local Tsartlip First Nation shared the story of the creation of their own map of the Coast Salish territory, which includes Greater Victoria. Called the Saltwater People's Map it includes the original indigenous place names with a guide describing the stories behind the land and water forms. His presentation and maps sparked a great deal of interest by community members and schools who intend to bring this knowledge to their own mapping work and create a critical historical bridge with local First Nations.

Conclusion

What can community mapping offer sustainable development and eco-activism? The stories of the indigenous and community mappers teach us that it will be up to those who care for the people and land of their home place to make their own worldviews, their own maps and realities count. We need to create new maps and theories about the places we call home, a new terrain not based on conquest but one of caring. Map-making is a key vehicle and tool for transforming the way we see our world, our ecosystem, our neighborhoods. Undertaken together as communities, mapmaking can help us find our way together.

Maeve Lydon is the Coordinator of the Common Ground Community Mapping Project based in Victoria, B.C. She is also a Master's student with the University of Victoria Eco-Research Chair.

Common Ground is documenting and networking national and international community mapping efforts.

Notes

(1.) Chambers, Robert. *Whose Reality Counts?-Putting the First Last*. (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999) This book gives an in depth look at participatory planning and international development. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is considered a cornerstone of alternative development with mapping the most widespread PRA methodology.

(2.) J.B. Harley and D.Woodward, eds. *The History of Cartography*, vol.1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. xvi

(3.) Warhus, Mark. *Native American History and the History of our Land*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p.3

(4.) International Centre for Local Environmental Initiatives. *The Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide*. (Toronto: ICLEI, IDRC, UNEP, 1996) This book offers case studies of sustainable planning initiatives around the world. ICLEI now has 1800 local governments in 64 countries involved in their network.

(5.) Aberley, Doug. *Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment*. (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1993), p.5. Doug Aberley is a pioneer in linking bioregionalism to community-based mapping and planning. This book is a primary source for community mapping information.

Other Books/Resources

Brody, Hugh. *Maps and Dreams - Indians and The British Columbia Frontier*. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre. 1988

Flavelle, Alix. *A Community Mapping Handbook*. Vancouver: Lone Pine Publishing, 2000

Harrington, Sheila, editor. *Giving the Land a Voice - Mapping Our Home Places* SaltSpring Island Community Services Society, 1999

Looney, John. *Mapping Communities: Place-Based Stories and Participatory Planning* in Journal of Community Development Society, Vol. 29 No. 2, 1998

Lydon, Maeve *Mapping: The Recovery of Natural Knowledge and the Creation of Sustainable Communities* University of Victoria: Eco-Research Chair, 2000

McKnight, John and John Kretzmann. *Building Communities From the Inside Out*. Chicago, ACTA Publications, 1996

Monmonier, Mark. *How to Lie with Maps*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996

Wright, Ronald. *Stolen Continents: The New World Through Indian Eyes Since 1492* Toronto: Viking Press, 1991

Websites:

International Green Map System - www.greenmap.com

Aboriginal Mapping Network (EcoTrust Canada) - www.nativemaps.org

International Centre for Local Environmental Initiatives - www.iclei.org

Common Ground (United Kingdom) - www.commongrounduk.org

Common Ground Community Mapping Project

<http://www.commongroundproject.ca/>

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/>