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Community Cultural Capital as a Factor in Economic Renewal: The Anakie Gemfields, c.2004

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Introduction

Competition over access and the exploitation of a community's natural resource has, for decades, prevented the development of alternative economic enterprises for the long-term sustainability of the Anakie Gemfields. Only on near exhaustion of the area's natural resources were alternatives considered and developed by the community, drawing on its cultural capital to produce a prosperous and confident local tourism industry. Cultural capital in this instance denotes unique assets such as the local history and traditions that attract visitors to the community. These assets are then used by community-based businesses to formulate and provide various information packages, opportunities offering unique experiences, and other related services to visitors. Cultural capital is primarily understood in two ways – firstly as it relates to the creative world of the arts, and secondly as it relates to all manner of things which shape our lives (Bourdieu, 1997). Here the term is used to capture the unique history, stories, characters and lifestyle of people who live and work in the

Recently gathered data in the Anakie Gemfields community, and analysis of secondary descriptive data, indicate that regional development based on certain types of capital-intensive and resource-based 'investment' approaches does not always benefit regional communities. In contrast, the data highlighted the way the community's intangible assets provided a basis for more sustainable economic development - meaning development which '...encompasses a set of policies and activities that work together to create economic vitality, environmental stewardship, and social equity' (Rainey, Robinson, Allen and Christy, 2003:709).

This paper discusses the way small communities can develop in more sustainable ways by identifying and using their cultural capital as a serious and inexhaustible resource. However, a community's cultural capital, and its potential, is often hidden by policies grounded in the belief that faster resource exploitation leads to greater community benefit. This is evidenced where state government legislation enables mining development to occur without regard to the links between a community's way of life and the way it uses its natural resources. It is this relationship between people and their environment which generates cultural capital.

To gain a clear understanding of how the influx of large capital-intensive mining operators had affected the community's well-being we employed Australian Census data and the Australian Taxation Office weekly earnings averages for the years 1976 through 2001. This data provided an overview of selected socio-economic indicators of community well-being for Sapphire and Rubyvale - principal towns within the Anakie Gemfields. Such indicators included income, labour market participation rate, unemployment, occupation, and so on. We then used structured interviews with sixteen local tourism-oriented businesses to obtain more specific and current data on how long they have been in operation, employee numbers, the approximate number of visitors catered for each year, an indication of the origin of these visitors (local, interstate, global), what confidence there was about an increase in the number of tourists, and so on.

The structured interviews were followed up with less structured discussions where people spoke freely on a variety of context-dependent topics. These discussions producing very rich data, represented not only as 'stories' of people and places, but also meanings attached to significant aspects of the community's culture. For example, people were asked to talk about the things that 'attracted' them to the place, and what convinced them to start a business. They told robust stories of how they came to know about the place, their earlier experiences as sapphire-miners, the sense of freedom about the place, the lived traditions and lifestyle of the small-scale miner, the enticement of 'striking it rich', and the uniqueness of each precious sapphire they found. They explained in rich detail the connection they eventually made between the things that made the place attractive to them as well as for its visitors, and the possibility of benefiting from such things if they could be packaged for tourist consumption.

Our approach makes much of this qualitative data. In so doing, we question not the validity of objective facts, but their employment as the only legitimate basis for action (Flyvbjerg, 1993). We stress this at a time when so much of the research into sustainable regional development is clouded by methodologies which seem to be designed to miss anything that is not 'measurable'. As Etzioni (1991) and O'Hara (2001) point out, economic and non-economic factors are linked and interdependent.

The community and its history

The Anakie Gemfields is a Central Queensland community situated over what are reputed to be the largest sapphire-bearing alluvial deposits in the Southern Hemisphere. It has been home to a varying number of people who make a living from small-scale sapphire mining, gem crafts, and tourism (Teghe and McAllister, 2004). Its main towns, Sapphire and Rubyvale, are only six kilometres apart. Together they straddle the Tropic of Capricorn at a point some 300 kilometres due West of the major regional coastal town of Rockhampton. Two other communities (Anakie and Willows) are considered part of the Anakie Gemfields, but they are relatively small and will not be discussed here. According to Monteagle (1986), sapphires were probably discovered in the area by a government surveyor in 1878.

Until the mid-1960s, sapphires were located by self-employed miners who worked singly or in partnerships, most often with hand tools, to sink shafts and process sapphire-bearing 'washdirt'. Anyone could get a Miner's Right, which allowed a person to prospect for sapphires on Crown land, mark out a mining tenement and build a residence on it, and to use public resources such as timber, gravel and water. As in other Australian regional and rural areas, the Gemfields population fluctuated according to notable national and world events. In the wake of the gold rushes in its vicinity (e.g.,

Clermont and Charters Towers) in the 1890s the Gemfields supported some one thousand miners and their families. By the 1900s its population declined to about two hundred. Between 1907 and 1925 the number of miners soared again to about one thousand; then, because of the Great Depression and the Second World War, it again declined – only to climb again after the 1960s, to reach about two thousand persons by 1995 (Mumme, 1988:79; Teghe and McAllister, 2004).

As Adler (1992) points out, because of its circumstances and history, the Gemfields' community developed and refined a unique lifestyle and mining culture, reflected in mining implements, buildings, stories and sapphire-mining lore, and especially in the methods through which sapphires are recovered from the 'washdirt' (As we will argue later, these are important components of the 'cultural capital' of the community). However, by the 1970s Thai gemstone merchants, who looked to Australia as the next major sapphire supplier, came to control the world's coloured gemstones market. Soon after, these merchants arrived on the Anakie Gemfields and began to undercut local gem buyers with short-term price inflation, and through a sapphire-buying spree helped spark a capital-intensive mining boom which brought many large earth-moving machinery and processing plants to the area. The ensuing jump in sapphire production undercut the small-scale miners, who then were seen by the state regulators as 'anachronistic'. A few years later, this large sapphire production even affected the limited world market for gemstones, leading to a drop in prices, which in turn destroyed most of the large-scale mining industry. By the 1990s there was a general downturn in the community's economic and general well-being, while the area was now criss-crossed by wholesale excavations and other unsightly environmental scars (Teghe and McAllister, 2004).

The impact of large scale machinery mining on the Anakie Gemfields community

The interdependence between natural resources and societal norms and practices has been explored in such classics as Landis's (1997) *Three Iron Mining Towns: A Study in Cultural Change*. Recent literature is also replete with discussions on the link between mining-dependence and community well-being, and tends to point to the negative impact that this relationship can have on income, poverty and unemployment rates (Nord & Luloff, 1993; Freudenburg & Wilson, 2003; Stedman, Parkins & Beckley, 2004; Wilson, 2004). Studies by rural sociologists indicate that there is a strong relationship between large scale, often monopolistic, and capital-intensive economic development in regional communities and deterioration in community well-being. For example, the classic comparative study of two rural Californian towns conducted by Walter Goldschmidt (1978 [1947]) between 1940 and 1946, showed that one community, surrounded by large farms, did not do as well on a range of social indicators as another community supported by small, mainly individually operated farms. The Goldschmidt thesis is important because it raises the possibility that the 'scale of operation' can have a deleterious effect on the quality of community life (Goldschmidt, 1978: xix). Subsequent studies have generally supported this thesis (for a review of the relevant literature, see Wischemann, 1990).

Before discussing how capital intensive and large-scale economic ventures (i.e., large-scale sapphire mining activities) have affected the Anakie Gemfields community, we here outline the sense in which we use the concept of well-being. As Brehm, Eisenhauer & Krannich (2004) point out, community well-being is a complex concept. Wilkinson (cited in Brehm et al, 2004: 411) defines well-being as a concept that '... involves the social, cultural, and physical needs of people, their families, institutions, and communities'. However, the levels of a community's well-being can also be discerned

by looking at some standard socio-economic indicators, such as labour force participation rates, unemployment, income, and occupation status.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Urban Centres and Localities (UCL) data show significant changes to the Anakie Gemfields' community profile in terms of these indicators between 1976 and 2001 (ABS, 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001). This period coincides with a rapid growth in capital investment in machinery mining on the Anakie Gemfields between the early 1980s and 1990s, followed (until present day) by a rapid decline in such mining and a growth of a tourism-based industry.

From mining to tourism

While the labour force participation rate was highest during the heyday of machinery mining, the unemployment rate rose quite rapidly, and only began to fall over the period in which machinery-mining also declined. In effect, the unemployment rate rose to almost fifty percent at the height of machinery mining (see Figure 1). At the same time, what was the principal occupation group (miners) before the arrival of machinery mining in the community declined quite rapidly as a proportion of the local labour market. Where in the mid-1970s over forty percent of those counted as being in the labour market identified themselves as miners, by early 1990s this proportion fell to less than fifteen percent.

FIGURE 1

Figure 1: Comparison between two representative selected occupational trends as proportion (%) of labour force, and rates (%) of labour market participation and unemployment for the Anakie Gemfields (1976-2001); 'Retail' comprises 'accommodation services', 'retail', 'restaurants'.

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing (1976 – 2001)

Interestingly, the number of people in the Anakie Gemfields community who worked in the areas traditionally associated with tourism – including sales, accommodation and catering – grew steadily over the period covered by this research (We use one category to include all of these occupations, 'Retail'). As Figure 1 indicates, the proportion of those in the labour market who were engaged in retail work over the period grew from an insignificant proportion (of a few percentage points) in the mid-1970s to over twenty percent by 2001. This is apparently due to an increase in the number of tourism-related, but small-scale, commercial ventures that have appeared during the decline of large scale machinery sapphire mining on the Gemfields and the local activities which service them.

Besides the associated types of businesses like accommodation and restaurants, the Anakie Gemfields sapphire mining tourism industry includes fossicking parks (where tourists can 'dig' through sapphire 'washdirt' and look for gemstones), underground and surface mine tours, guided fossicking tours to outlying sapphire fields, jewellery-making shops, sapphire faceting outlets, and art and craft shops. The tourist businesses in this community are 'small'; none of those included in our research (including some which the locals considered as 'big') had more than six employees, while the average for the group studied was just fewer than 2.5 employees. During our structured interviews (conducted in 2004), we also asked the respondents how long they have been in business. The average was just under 10.8 years, which indicates that many of the

owners established their business in the early 1990s, well after the decline in machinery mining began.

Community cultural capital

Our discussion thus far has focused on some empirically discernible aspects of the Anakie Gemfields' experiences as a community affected by economic factors that were largely outside its control. Now, we will elaborate the sense in which we use the term 'cultural capital' to describe the intangible but nevertheless useful assets which became fundamental to the community's tourism-based economic life following the collapse of the capital intensive sapphire mining industry (For a useful discussion of the literature on intangibles – albeit provided from a business perspective, see Kaufmann and Schneider, 2004; for a discussion of intangibles and their links with other non-economic capital, see Bradburn and Coakes, 2004).

Bourdieu (1997) uses the term 'cultural capital' to represent the totality of those non-economic factors upon which individuals can draw to enhance their chance of success in their lives. These factors include education, family background, access to social resources, social class, and so on. Here, we adopt and then use the term in a less personal sense to refer to the specific and often unique collective cultural assets of a community, upon which it can draw, and exploit commercially. Cultural community capital thus differs from, but is interdependent with, other forms of capital such as social capital, public capital and human capital (for a discussion of these forms of capital, see Rainey, Robinson, Allen, & Christy, 2003). A body of literature considers a community's cultural capital to consist of such things as art exhibitions, musical festivals and historical buildings (Cheshire & Malecki, 2004: 260). However, this rather narrow view of community cultural capital needs to be expanded to include such resources as local lore, local histories of interest to visitors, lived traditions and experiential opportunities (such as when visitors are invited to take part in local custom-based activities, or when they are allowed to explore interesting and significant local places and activities).

A community's cultural capital becomes of commercial value when the members of that community discern not only what it actually consists of, but also its potential as an economic resource. In the words of an owner of a local tourism-based business,

The sapphire fields is a resource, is a resource of people digging, of people skills and producing and cutting [i.e., gemstone faceting]. And the fact that sapphires are just a small part of this resource – it's the people and the characters, and the place, and the lifestyle. ... It's hard to quantify, it's hard to put your finger on. What the attraction for tourism is, and the association between hand mining or the way that people got here, to get started in hand mining or fossicking and the allure, the attraction. First of all, the actual digging and the lifestyle and the pace, all go hand in hand with the tourism development. Or, ... it came from people just coming here and even though some of it was alternate lifestyle, you could get the freedom to come and dig some sapphires...(Jewellery-maker and café operator, responding to the question: 'Could you talk about what you think the Gemfields offers visitors?').

On the Anakie Gemfields, the link between small-scale mining and cultural resources tourism is also a 'lived' one, in which business people catering for visitors had formative experiences as small-scale miners and gem craftspersons, which then led them to exploit these experiences and eventually build businesses around them. An extract from a typical story exemplifies this:

(Question: How did you first 'make a living' on the Gemfields?)

... just mining to start with. We started surface digging, then got an underground claim; then, towards the end of the first year, I bought a faceting machine and sat down and taught

myself how to cut, because (you know) we couldn't make a living selling rough [sapphires]. Once I started cutting, then we started looking for an outlet for it. So we thought we'd set up the shop, and then we started running the shop in conjunction with my brother who does the fossicking tours side of it...(Faceting and jewellery shop owner and tour operator).

Such first-hand experiences and knowledge of the traditions of small-scale mining and associated crafts create meaningful links between the local tourist operators and their community's cultural capital (which, as pointed out above, includes the traditions and lore associated with small-scale sapphire mining). The tourist operator can then draw on such experiences (the 'lived' culture) to provide the conditions through which visitors can experience this culture for themselves. This phenomenon is hard to quantify, yet despite its intangibility, community cultural capital can be a significant asset. For example, when describing what tourists on coach tours did at his place, and what kinds of services he provided, a tour guide and owner-operator of a fossicking park indicated the importance of 'explanation' of the Gemfields' history and lore:

Most of them will do a bucket [i.e., buy a ten litre bucket of washdirt and then process by hand to look for sapphires in it]; we supply smoko and lunches. Then I'll hop on the coach and I'll explain the history of the fields, the colours, the stones. I go on the coach with the mike and explain it all to them – through the fields and then back here. We can link up with an underground mining tour, or we'll also take them on to one of our [mining] claims, and do specking [looking for sapphires on the ground] and ... whatever

Moreover, a capacity to draw on the community's cultural capital can establish the authenticity of services offered to visitors by providing the substance for 'answers to questions' – often posed in an ad hoc manner by visitors. Thus, when asked whether visitors ask unusual questions, one tour operator noted:

Yes, quite a few of them do. [They are] quite interested in lots of things.... Well we usually (on the tour) take them through how the gems were formed (you know – volcanic activity), and then the history of the fields. You know – how they've been mined, hand mined, then machine mined, you know – the heydays and that sort of stuff

Impediments to sustainable development

Although the consensus appears to be that regional growth depends mainly 'on attracting and keeping capital and labour – to become "sticky" places' (Cheshire & Malecki, 2004: 251), sustainable development may also be promoted by such factors as the capacity of locals to make innovative use of intangible assets. This is not an entirely new observation. Others have noted that the resilience of a community can be assisted by what Turner, Davidson-Hunt, & O'Flaherty (2003) call a 'cultural edge', constituted by the community's knowledge and practices. People can take advantage of their community's cultural edge to create demand for new and unique culture-based services and to produce and sell these services (Cheshire & Malecki, 2004: 260). However, as van Fossen and Lafferty (2001) discuss in a comparative study of the effects of different governance approaches to tourism-based land uses in Hawaii and Queensland, a lack of consultation with local interests can hinder the sustainability of tourism-based development.

One of the issues faced by the Anakie Gemfields community is the regulations governing mining activities in the area, and their interpretation by enforcing agencies. Even though mining with heavy earthmoving machinery has been banned from the township and from 'declared' fossicking and small-scale mining areas, these activities continue almost unimpeded. The tourism industry is interdependent with small-scale mining because of fossicking (which in important respects is similar to small-scale mining) for which many visitors come to the area, and upon which many of the tourism business depend for providing such services as guided tours, mining expeditions, and

mining equipment hire. In turn, these activities depend on proven and easily accessible sapphire-bearing alluvial deposits, such as the ‘shallow wash’ areas of Ruby Hill, Little Bessie, Goanna Flats, Norman Hill, Russian Gully and Rifle Range – all located within or near one of the two townships. Visitors also like to meet and form friendships with ‘the locals’, many of whom are ‘characters’ who live and mine in these reserved areas. The large-scale miners take advantage of favourable clauses within mining regulations that allow them to take out mining tenements (often displacing local ‘characters’ who live in temporary accommodation arrangements), and to excavate large and unsightly gouges in the areas most frequented by visitors.

When applications for mining tenements are made, the Queensland mining regulations take no account of anything other than mining issues; there is no possibility of considering the wider context of factors that might affect community well-being. For instance, the possibility that machinery mining may affect the local tourism industry will not influence the success of mining tenement applications. Moreover, special conditions attached to mining tenements can easily be interpreted to allow for machinery mining in an area reserved for small-scale (or ‘hand’) mining. For example, one can use earthmoving machinery to excavate a water-holding facility on a hand-mining claim. Machinery miners often use this clause to excavate the shallow sapphire bearing deposits within the reserved areas, and when tourists come or return and encounter the wholesale destruction of fossicking areas, they often become disenchanted and cut short their visits, vowing never to return (Interviews with significant locals). Figures 2a & 2b show how a reserved area near the township of Sapphire looked when visitors were able to fossick there, and then, a few months later, how it looked after a machinery miner excavated it under the pretext of digging a water ‘dam’. It is hard to see how the still fledgling tourism industry on the Anakie Gemfields can develop in a sustainable way if such mining activities continue and amendments to mining ordinances in the interests of industrial diversification would seem to be in order.

FIGURE 2/3

Figure 2a: Sapphire fossicking area, with tourists, July 2003 (D.Teghe).

Figure 2b: Exactly the same area, excavated by machinery miners, December 2004 (D.Teghe).

Conclusion

Much of the current regional development literature focuses on natural resources as a basis for development, while the recent community development literature tends to make much of social capital and participatory processes as positive drivers in small town sustainability. However, there is little written about the role of a community’s cultural assets in promoting its sustainability and well-being. The belief that there is always a ‘natural’ link between the exploitation of economic ‘objects’ (that is, empirically discernible ones, such as natural resources, infrastructure, human capital, and investment capital) and sustainable development sometimes leads policy-makers and statutory resource managers (like public service interpreters of government regulations) to ignore the less tangible developmental needs of regional communities. This can endanger the sustainability of communities which rely for their survival not only on the judicious use of their natural resources, but also on a specific way of using them. This problem is especially aggravated when the management of those resources is subject to external and inflexible policies and regulations (such as state mining

legislation), and to ideological drivers (such as the notion that any developmental investment is inevitably 'a good thing').

Rather, effective development results from a range of factors that allow the resources of a community to be used in the most efficient ways by members of that community to ensure sustainability and well-being for themselves and their families. Certainly, such factors include the capacity to be flexible and innovative, and to adopt technology and learning to promote economic activities (Teghe and Rolfe, 2003). Often, however, a community also has assets that are the effects of its particular historical and cultural development – though these assets are intangible from a traditional economic viewpoint. From that perspective, they may not be identified as ‘real’ assets, and therefore not accorded significance by those outside the community who see their role as determining its well-being through research, economic planning and policies intended to guide the exploitation of natural resources. In an era of intense economic competition and rapid social changes, this inflexibility may lead to some community-driven development being stifled or even extinguished. It is therefore useful to build our knowledge of what economically non-traditional resources might be, and to this end, we have provided here a case study and history of the use of community cultural capital creating sustainable development activities at the local level.

The Central Queensland Gemfields seem to have a relatively prosperous future, which is once again based mainly on small business dynamism and distributive equity. This is due to a creative use of the past and what remains of local natural economic resource, the sapphire deposits. Imaginative mixing of natural and cultural capital, combined with strategic marketing, offer cause for optimism for the long-term sustainability of the Gemfields’ community and reason to believe that they will make a valuable contribution to the region’s economic health.

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