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The Co-construction of a Local Public Environmental Discourse: Letters to the Editor, Bermuda's Royal Gazette, and the Southlands Hotel Development Controversy

Peter Goggin
Arizona State University, petergo@asu.edu

Elenore Long
Arizona State University, elenorelong@gmail.com

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**THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF A LOCAL
PUBLIC ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE:
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, BERMUDA'S *ROYAL
GAZETTE*, AND THE SOUTHLANDS HOTEL
DEVELOPMENT CONTROVERSY**

Peter Goggin and Elenore Long

As a distinct geographically situated production of public record of daily events that is often imbued with the ideals of the community it serves, the daily newspaper, and the editorial pages in particular, holds a powerful space in the collective mind as a forum and litmus for community opinion. This essay provides a case analysis of community opinion on sustainability and sustainable development in the small island nation of Bermuda through letters to the editor in the country's daily newspaper, *The Royal Gazette*. These letters, published in that powerful space through invested and dynamic local media literacy sponsorship, illustrate the potential for effective discourse on environmental sustainability that, at least in Bermuda, constitutes productive community activism in its own right and also fosters additional literate social action.

February 22, 2007

Dear Sir,

I am concerned about the "impact" of the proposed Southlands development on Bermuda's economy and environment. I would liken it to the impact of a mega cruise ship —not only staffed by, but built by foreign workers, the entire complex completely self-contained —including restaurants and entertainment (a casino!) —which cruise ship is then run full-tilt (say at the speed of a jumbo jet hitting a high building) and wedged into the shore at Southlands, taking out reefs, foreshore, cliffs, roads, trees, soil and animals. Yet there would be no trade-off, no improvement to our economy in exchange for the destruction of the natural beauty of Bermuda.

The Government will, of course, benefit from its taxes, just as it does with any other cruise ship arrival, but the rest of Bermuda will not.

If given the opportunity to be educated about these very complex issues —from sewage to traffic, from loss of local business to increased cost of living, from loss of habitat to loss of identity —I am certain most Bermudians would strongly object to the Southlands development. Government must provide the people with more time and a full disclosure of the facts, especially as would be revealed by independent impact studies; and then Government must listen.

—ARE YOU LISTENING?

Few information venues have as much outreach and influence in promoting and informing literacies of environment and sustainability in the lives of ordinary people as the daily news media. Generally speaking, online news outlets have become the most proliferate sources for mass participation and, it would seem, have displaced broadcast media and print media as the dominant arena for the public dissemination and deliberation of current events and opinion. Yet, the “older” news sources still provide a significant space for public discourse on current events, and, unlike online media sources which are vastly dispersed, diffused, and temporal to a blink of an eye, the local newspaper provides what might be thought of as “slow news.” Like the “slow food” movement, the local newspaper is indeed local. It is meant to be carefully, and *deliberately* written, edited, anticipated and read for a one day distribution rather than for instantaneous non-stop feed. As a distinct geographically situated production of public record of daily events that is often imbued with the ideals of the community it serves, the daily newspaper, and the editorial pages in particular, still holds a powerful space in the collective mind as a forum and litmus for community opinion. This essay provides a case analysis of community opinion on sustainability and sustainable development in the small island nation of Bermuda through letters to the editor in the country’s daily newspaper, *The Royal Gazette*. This discursive space serves as a powerful literacy sponsor. The letters suggest the potential for supporting effective discourse on environmental sustainability that, at least in Bermuda, constitutes productive community activism in its own right.

Along with online news sources, blogs (mainstream and independent), and television news broadcasts, the printed daily newspaper is a primary conduit through which communities receive, interpret, and participate (consciously or not) in literate practices. These three elements, reception (access to information), interpretation (rhetorical construction of knowledge through literate practices), and participation (dynamic discourse between media outlets and communities that promote individual and social activism) are key to fostering public discussion on environmental issues.

Of these three elements, participation poses a particularly provocative site for those interested in the intersection between sustainability studies and community literacy. For when it comes to focused and sustained deliberation about the environment—the kind of local public discourse that Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer argue is needed for “the emergence of a culture with environmentalism at its very core” (265)—public spheres scholars would suggest that participation would mean not simply reading, writing and speaking in a public discourse about the environment that already exists, but rather actively constructing with others a new, alternative discourse. For this alternative discourse to serve as the medium that promotes “people’s public use of their reason” (Habermas 27), it can’t be (what James Paul Gee would call) one of the big-D discourses of industry, business and government—those who typically get to name the terms of environmental discussions and, therefore, the ends in sight.¹ Rather,

it needs to be a more inclusive, accessible hybrid discourse that invites what Iris Young calls “communicative” deliberation (73)—which, by definition is focused on specific issues and thoughtfully sustained rather than scattered across tangentially related topics, but also “untidy” (Hauser 275) in that it neither subscribes to a priori standards of logic nor stipulates the bracketing of reasons from additional commitments, values, and motivations that people bring with them to issues they care about (Benhabib 84; Young 72). But so far, all this is a matter of theoretical speculation. Down on the ground, the issue of participation suggests its own rhetorical challenges.

Such dynamic and inventive local public discourse regarding the environment doesn’t just happen. It needs institutional support. Deborah Brandt defines such support as “sponsorship,” the process by which large-scale economic forces [...] set the routes and determine the worldly worth of [... a given] literacy (American 20). Accordingly, for an editor of a daily newspaper, sponsoring such participation in environmental discussions would involve striking a balance between maintaining an independent press’s autonomy from political interests, while simultaneously serving an advocate (a sponsor) for public knowledge and awareness which may run contrary to that very need for autonomy.

For people who write letters to the editor on environmental issues, participation presents a number of additional rhetorical challenges. Here in the United States, publication practices behind such letters have given readers, including writing teachers, good reason to question the rhetorical integrity

of such prose. This sentiment is reflected in Diana George’s observation: “When I first started teaching writing, the idea of public discourse we had in our mind was to write a letter to the editor. But you’d really get discouraged if sending letters was your only aim. Letters are not published, cut, or sandwiched between two other letters that seem crazed” (6).

And yet, as Charles Bazerman observes, at their best letters to the editor participate in a larger and decidedly public activity system. For Bazerman, letters to the editor epitomize how “textual forms mediate our relationship with others who are part of the activity, thereby giving regularity to our form of participation, our relations to others, and our contribution to the entire” project” (463). He continues: “Thus a letter to a newspaper editor is not only a recognizable form, but it is tied up with many other forms, such as newspaper editorials, news stories, political speeches, campaign

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documents, newspaper subscriptions, and many other elements of the journalistic and public spheres, out of which those spheres are constituted” (463).

And as a public genre, letters to the editor have served to challenge the very terms of public debate, as John Duffy demonstrates in his analysis of Hmong writers publishing letters to the editor to challenge anti-immigrant stereotypes and rhetoric that circulated in Wausau, WI, in the early 1990s: “What the letters did [...] was promote a distinct type of literacy practice in a particular context at a given moment in the history of Hmong literacy. More, they illustrated how public and civic arguments influence literacy practice by offering a set of topics, a genre, a language, and an audience that writers could appropriate and use in their own acts of public writing” (227).

But even if letters to the editor can participate, under circumstances such as those that Duffy observes, in focused and sustained discussion of human affairs, deliberation over affairs pertaining to the environment pose particular challenges. Writing here in the U.S. in 1992, Killingsworth and Palmer noted that scientists had by in large failed to motivate people to give environmental issues their focused and sustained attention. *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America* concludes with a list of features that would qualify public discourse about the environment as focused and sustained,² yet Killingsworth and Palmer cite no evidence that such a discourse yet exists. Instead, the epilogue closes with a depiction of a public forum that they contend is far too typical: as the evening’s featured speakers drone on about scientific evidence of threats to the environment, the audience grows increasingly bored and restless, providing no indication that they are motivated to commit focused and sustained attention to any of the issues the scientists have raised (266).

In other words, many letter writers tend to lack access to the kinds of scientific knowledge that is said to allow participation in environmental discussions (Simmons and Grabill 430). If they are to contribute to focused and sustained discussions about the environment, often they must find ways to “do their own science” in order to earn a place at the table (422).

It is here, around this challenge of everyday people participating in public discourse about the environment that sustainability studies and community literacy intersect most markedly. Both fields of study recognize the need to elicit and validate the local knowledge of everyday people alongside the discourses of policy, science, or bureaucracy that tend to dismiss it. Moreover, scholarship in both fields call people to construct together an alternative public discourse where motivations, values, situated understandings, and personal commitments—along with reasons—have a place at the table.³ If sustainability studies has identified as a priority the need to construct such a discourse for public deliberation on the environment,⁴ community literacy has designed technai to increase the probability that people will together invent a hybrid discourse to give an issue (in community literacy, these issues pertain not to the environment but to urban life) their sustained and focused attention.⁵

Consider, for instance, the Community Think Tank featured in Linda Flower's "Intercultural Knowledge Building." The Community Think Tank uses two textual features—problem narratives and decision points—to focus people's attention on a shared problem (here, welfare reform) and to sustain their deliberation (for instance, regarding specific welfare-to-work policies and practices). Identified and framed in text, problem narratives are carefully contextualized accounts of how people actually experience the issue at hand—whether landlord-tenant relations, school suspension, gang violence or welfare reform. Additionally, decision points ask think-tank participants to project the down-on-the ground consequences likely to follow from taking one course of action at a critical juncture, compared to another and another. Written into the think tank's discussion materials, problem narratives and discussion points invite participants—who may never have met before, let alone spoken at length about a culturally loaded topic—to anchor their discussions in a shared problem representation and to address that issue not by rehearsing pet theories and vague abstractions but rather in a level of detail necessary for open, focused and sustained inquiry and deliberation. But what hope is there of focused and sustained discourse when people work not within a face-to-face, highly structured context of a community-university think-tank but in a more loosely structured and entirely written venue sponsored by a newspaper's letters to the editor pages?

In this paper, we ask: what would a local public discourse look and sound like when people reason together about the environment as an issue of shared concern?⁶ What would such an inventive, alternative discourse be good for? That is, what difference might it make? And to whom? We focus our inquiry into these questions on a set of the letters to the editor published in the Bermuda's *The Royal Gazette*, from December 29, 2006, to December 15, 2008.

The Royal Gazette In Context

Founded in 1828, some 180 years ago according to its own history, "*The Royal Gazette* is Bermuda's only daily newspaper, publishing every day except Sunday and public holidays. With daily circulation of more than 16,000 copies, the newspaper reaches more than 90 percent of the adult market" ("About Us"). Unlike most mainstream U.S. newspapers, *The Royal Gazette* does not employ the practice of editorial review to select letters to publish, nor does it edit or condense letters. All letters to *The Royal Gazette* are published in their entirety and represent a broad demographic cross-section of Bermuda's resident community on a wide range of topics. In a country with a fragile ecosystem, dense population, almost total dependence on imports, and an economy that has dramatically shifted from tourism to offshore banking and reinsurance, *The Royal Gazette*—particularly its letters to the editor—provides an important opportunity for examining community literacy in action on the subject of sustainability.

The Southlands Hotel Development Controversy

On December 29, 2006, a group of four property owners, under the name Southlands Ltd., announced its intent to sell 37 acres to a luxury hotel management firm, the Jumeirah Hotel group,⁷ who proposed developing Southland's limestone cliffs and wild coastline into a resort hotel. The plan also entailed rerouting a scenic section of the South Shore Road (a main thoroughfare along Bermuda's south coast beaches) as a highway-style underpass.⁸ Just a few months later, on March 9, 2007, the Environment Minister of Bermuda authorized a Special Development Order (SDO) to facilitate the land sale and development plan. Under Bermuda law, the government may authorize an SDO when it judges that a project is in the country's best interest. An SDO allows developers to bypass a rigorous review process, including the environmental impact study otherwise required before building on the island. In the months that followed, public protest against the SDO mounted, as evidenced by the growing number of letters to the editor published on this topic.⁹

From December 29, 2006, when the sale of Southlands was announced to the public, until the end of Dec. 15, 2008 (the end point for our research), *The Royal Gazette* had published 505 letters to the editor. Roughly one fifth (91) of these letters pertained to the Southlands Controversy, and more than half (49) of these letters positioned the controversy as an environmental

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issue. Though the question—whether/how these letters co-construct with the editor of *The Royal Gazette* sustained and focused public deliberation on the environment—could be studied by approaching the larger body of letters from any number of angles, these 49 letters provide an illuminating case in point.

Letters concerning the Southlands hotel development controversy and the larger context in which they circulate hold

special significance for the likely audience for this essay, most of whom are likely situated in urban and suburban academic settings in the North American mainland and are likely unfamiliar with actually residing on tropical or sub-tropical islands.¹⁰ For such readers, the very idea of Bermuda may evoke that of a vacation destination—balmy weather, shorts, palm trees, pink beaches, turquoise waters, an idyllic lifestyle. This is not an unreasonable expectation as travel industries have long heavily marketed the island through “tropical paradise” imagery and metaphors, as has

Bermuda's own department of tourism—what Krista A. Thompson in her examination of crafted aesthetics by colonial and postcolonial governments in Jamaica and the Bahamas refers to as “tropicalizing images.”¹¹ She makes the case that ultimately the cultures and lifestyles are drastically altered as the populations of these islands buy into the very marketing imposed by such economic interests. This is not to suggest that such imagery necessarily holds negative connotations for island residents themselves. For many Bermudians, even if it is an economy-driven colonial product, the “paradise” ideal is a significant aspect of national identity and, in terms of sustainability, provides a powerful incentive for actively protecting a maritime culture and environment that is collectively viewed as special and unique.¹²

Still, the day to day realities of living in a small island community are not the same as those of visiting,¹³ and, as Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell point out in their study of *Rural Literacies*, there is an tendency by the urban ideal of mainstream (and we would add here, mainland) society to view, and thus limit and reduce, island society through lenses based on commonplace assumptions about such small communities. Donehower et al. state:

For those who can't imagine life in a town with a population under 10,000 or a career dependant on the vagaries of the weather, rurality can seem such an odd state of being outside that of mainstream urban and suburban America, that it can be understood only in terms of not-urban, not-us, not-me. There is a tendency to see rural people and rural places as “other.” (14-15)

Bermuda (and small island cultures in general), while obviously not the same context as “rural” communities, likewise is constructed as “other” and therefore any study of literacy (other than those conducted natively in Bermuda itself) is likely to be viewed in terms of how its findings might be extrapolated as relevant to mainland concerns. We resist such a perspective on the basis that our study is not an attempt to come to a resolution about what sustainability and community literacy means to “us,” but rather what our study can teach us about the limits and possibilities of constructing democratic discourse about the environment that is at once focused and sustained and also accessible to local people.

To ask whether (and how) the letters to the editor co-constructed a local public environmental discourse is not to claim they are the first to introduce such issues into Bermuda's public dialogue. Quite the contrary. The issue of sustainability, particularly in terms of environmental conservation and protection, has been a major factor in the island nation's political and social/public spheres for quite some time. Consider, for instance, that the current government implemented a major initiative towards sustainable development that addressed environmental issues, yet has subsequently been heavily critiqued over decisions for development that appears anything but environmentally sustainable. In March, 2008 the government issued a report, titled *Charting Our Course: Sustaining Bermuda. Bermuda's Implementation*

Plan for the Future Objectives and Actions to Achieve the Sustainable Development Strategy. The report was met with some skepticism from a local environmental organization, Greenrock, which argued, among other things, that while it is a start in the right direction, the report is notably vague in terms of its plans for sustainability, that there was no transparency in the process, there is no plan for water conservation, and that a number of government actions in the prior four years were actually contrary to the plan's original draft. For example: plans to build a new hospital at the Botanical Gardens one of Bermuda's few remaining open public spaces; Southlands, the hotel development project featured here; larger fossil-fuel trucks and cars being introduced to the road; and Government building projects that don't incorporate any "green" building techniques. Premier, Dr. Ewart Brown claimed that the Government had prioritized the initiative for the good of the island. According to a report in the *Bermuda Sun* bi-weekly news, he also hinted that the green lobby had been willfully obstructive in many areas and "challenged them to get on board or get out of the way" ("Greenrock").

Additionally, an ongoing controversy over environmental remediation during the U.S. military base closure from the mid 1990's continues to make headlines in national newspapers as "new" issues emerge, such as asbestos disposal negotiations with Cuba, the revelation of possible Agent Orange dumping by the U.S. military in the 1960's, unforeseen clean-up costs, and so forth.

Suffice it to say that prior to the Southlands hotel development controversy, themes regarding sustainability already circulated in Bermuda in the discourses of business, industry and government. The problem that concerns us is the extent to which the letters to the editors—in conjunction with the newspaper's editor, William (Bill) Zuill—co-constructed an alternative, focused and sustained public discourse where everyday people could reason together about the environment. We're concerned with the features of such an inventive discourse—the stances it takes, the questions it raises, whom it holds accountable and for what.

The Co-Construction of an Alternative Public Environmental Discourse

To the extent that the letters to the editor regarding the Southlands hotel development controversy represent an alternative public discourse on the environment, they do so because of the rhetorical efforts of both the editor of *The Royal Gazette* and residents who submitted letters to him to voice their concerns.

The Sponsor

The Royal Gazette's Editor, Bill Zuill, is keenly aware of the paper's influence as a primary news source for Bermuda's population (see information about circulation above), and therefore his role and responsibility, as a literacy

sponsor, in serving as director, moderator, and gatekeeper for community voice in the editorial pages. Zuill acknowledges that under his leadership, he has shifted the newspaper's role from that of primarily public record to one of more community embeddedness. "The paper is here," he states, "to serve the readers." Zuill says that he "tries to be as balanced as possible and tries to not take sides." This is a perspective that those who do not share *The Gazette's* (and Zuill's) concept of "balanced" would certainly take issue with. The government (PLP), which is often called to task by the paper for its decision-making processes, has frequently made the case that *The Royal Gazette* serves the interests of the Opposition party (UBP) and thus the interests of the old colonial establishment (as the UPB is often described by the PLP and its supporters). Whether this critique is warranted or merely the complaints of those in power subject to scrutiny by the press is grist for some other time. Zuill is upfront in pointing out that as someone who remembers growing up in a less-developed Bermuda, he identifies closely with the island and has a sense of both personal and professional involvement with its ecology. As a result of his personal connection, as well as public interest, he therefore provides some prominence in the publication to the environment and issues of sustainability. In this regard, he says that *The Gazette* is perhaps a little ahead of the curve before the local public. That is, *The Gazette* serves not only as a space for public response, but also as the sentinel for public knowledge and awareness on environmental issues.

This is not to say that *The Royal Gazette* should be considered an "environmentalist" publication. It is primarily a newspaper and as it states itself, "*The Royal Gazette* aims to cover the whole community fairly and accurately to act as an independent voice. It is not affiliated with any political party" ("About Us"). However, within this context, Zuill sees himself as an environmental advocate—to a certain extent—but also recognizes the need for development, that is, he does not view himself as an environmentalist in the preservationist sense, thus remaining cognizant of the potential pitfalls of "ecospeak."

As to the editorial component of the newspaper, Zuill states, "There is no doubt that the letters section is an important part of the paper and an important part of the community," and the letters section is, "a useful community activist tool." If someone is nervous about going to an authority on an issue, they will come to the paper instead to get the ball rolling. A good example, Zuill points out, where the "Letters to the Editor" was effective in demonstrating the breadth and depth of concerns within the community on a key issue was the debacle over the Southlands development plan. This, he says, was "a huge letter writing campaign," though Zuill is quick to qualify that it was not a directed campaign, i.e. he is careful not to let the letters to the editor be abused by organized special interests or political groups. On the government's Southlands development plan *The Gazette* itself didn't campaign, but did "a lot" of coverage beyond a typical news story and acted as a catalyst for public opinion on the government's decisions on controversial development plans. This was a ultimately a case

where the paper's letters section served as a medium for the community and through this encouraged the government to re-think and reverse what had been essentially an already closed decision. Thus, in the same way that Jeffery Grabill describes his own work cultivating a public forum and facilitating the knowledge work of those assembled there, Zuill—as public rhetorician and literacy sponsor in his role as news editor—both engages with the public and fosters the public engagement of others. Zuill's position on the role of the paper/letters/community in the Southlands case and in general on environmental/development issues is that of an integrated voice. As the “fourth most read” section of the daily paper, the letters to the editor “should be something that politicians take into account” (Zuill).

The Letters

If public discourse about the environment needs to be not only accessible but also focused and sustained, what's most notable about the Southlands hotel development controversy—as a rhetorical situation to which some readers of *The Royal Gazette* responded by writing letters of their own—is that the controversy structured within its discursive contours features that community literacy has created as interventions to focus and sustain people's attention on a complex social issue. The controversy constituted a paradigmatic scenario for letter writers where once again the discourses of big business and government threaten to bypass the concerns and priorities of everyday citizens—here, as is so often the case, under a paternalistic argument, this one maintaining that development of high-end tourism on one of the island's last pieces of open space is indisputably in the public's interest. Furthermore, writers of the letters frequently focused on the SDO as a decision point, asking what down-on-the ground but as of yet unspecified consequences could follow from it (“Do you realize the amount of waste, pollution and damage to the environment that will be caused by the building?”)¹⁴ and what other alternatives might likewise be viable but heretofore have been under elaborated? (“[T]he Southlands Estate would serve Bermuda better in the form of a national park and museum”).¹⁵ Perhaps more than any other element, these structural features catalyzed the focused and sustained attention that letter writers dedicated to the controversy.

Our analysis suggests that within this context, “focused and sustained attention” means that letter writers used their reasoning to circulate specific objections to the SDO; to qualify bold claims to challenge readers to balance competing environmental concerns and economic interests; to call for additional information to inform better judgments; to critique the existing public discourse in Bermuda that had informed environmental decisions; and to speak for an alternative worldview that prioritizes not profit but open space, accessible to all—rather than the wealthy few.

Circulating Objections

Letters circulated one or more of twenty reasons to object to the SDO. Seventeen of these objections are enumerated and elaborated in a single letter submitted by Jonathan Starling of Hamilton Parish. Most of Starling's reasons focus on the environmental impact of the plan as evidenced in his thirteenth and fourteenth objections: "The development threatens to rezone a protected coastal zone"; and "The development threatens to override the protected status of open spaces and woodland contained within the Southlands estate." Although Starling gave some reasons that are not mentioned in other letters (most notably that a human rights commission has charged the Jumeirah Group with violating human rights set down by United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination), the reasons that Starling identified continued to circulate in other citizens' letters in the months that followed.

Yet even Starling's comprehensive analysis did not contain all the reasons that residents voiced in their letters. Additionally, other letters noted an already overextended infrastructure (Butterfield; Powell) including the country's "already strained healthcare system" (M. Smith "Even More") as sufficient reasons for questioning the SDO. Still others objected on the grounds of fairness: everyday residents have to abide by the National Trust's environmental guidelines in order to build a garage or simple room addition. Why should something with as big of an impact on the island as a luxury hotel not also subscribe to the same review process? (Powell). And numerous letters objected to the SDO on the grounds of risk: there is no guarantee that the hotel will be a success—as several empty hotels on the island attest by "lay[ing] derelict for years and becom[ing] useless eyesores" (K. Smith). A. M. Ware went so far as to assert that Bermuda's "only capital" is its environment. No matter how fancy the hotel, tourists are not likely to make Bermuda their travel destination once the island's remaining open spaces are destroyed.

Qualifying Claims

Of the forty-nine letters, ten circulated qualified statements (often several in a single letter) that formulated and reformulated versions of the exigency at hand. K. Smith wrote: "I, like most Bermudians, welcome the positive news regarding tourism and agree we need to make improvements to the product if the success is going to continue. [...] I also understand the need for owners of the Southlands property to make a profit; after all we are a highly capitalistic country." Another letter pointed out: "What most people don't seem to be aware of is that Southlands is privately owned—it was purchased for millions of dollars. Unlike the Government-owned Club Med and Morgan's Point properties, the Southlands developers are looking for the maximum return, of course" (Responsible). These statements moved discussion beyond a pro-con exchange regarding the SDO to more fine-grained appraisals that attempted to balance competing

and pressing environmental concerns and economic interests. Even as they attempted this balance, however, most letters also maintained that a keen reading of the situation would not justify the SDO out of hand, as the government had maintained. This move is particularly significant given the television program entitled *Balancing Conservation with Development* that the government produced and aired in late July of 2007. The program appeared to many viewers as an attempt to close down the very prospect of public deliberation—as evidenced in the Minister of Environment’s commendation of the program: “It is important for everyone in Bermuda to watch this show so that they may gain a better understanding of the balance between conservation and development” (“No SDO”). Embedded within longer letters, qualified statements such as those quoted above refuse to let the government be the only one naming the terms of debate or formulating responses to it.

Calling for More Information

Letters also frequently called for more information to inform better judgments. This was a primary purpose of six of the forty-nine letters and most notable in a letter from M. Smith posing seven pressing questions, answers to which an environmental impact study (circumvented by the SDO) would have supplied, for example, the impact of the hotel on the “ecology of the shore [...] and beach” (“Foreign-looking Project”). By calling for the Minister of the Environment and members of the Cabinet to consider more information before allowing the SDO to stand, such letters evoke an alternative image of deliberation to the one in play where agreement is reached among interested parties behind closed doors to benefit big business.

In “Toward a Civic Rhetoric for Technologically and Scientifically Complex Places: Invention, Performance, and Participation” Michele Simmons and Jeffery Grabill maintain that one way everyday people participate in environmental discussion is by “doing their own science” (427). Within scientific activity, they include the art of posing “the right questions” (433). Surely, within the letters analyzed here, many questions were rhetorical, implying for emotional affect answers that sympathetic readers would readily supply. Additionally, writers often cast themselves as experts in their own right, for example, by appealing to “those accustomed to even the basic principles of business and accounting and economics” (Butterfield), by asserting, “I’ve recently been doing a little research” (Faiella) or by circulating information of their own: “The National Geographic recently published a rather comprehensive study on the very destructive effects that this same Jumeirah group have created in their own country, why encourage them to come here” (Outerbridge). These moves—posing open questions, circulating expertise, and calling for additional information when expertise comes up short—called for public discourse to engage in inquiry as well advocacy of established positions.

Critiquing Existing Public Discourse

Letters also critiqued the existing public discourse. A most colorful example critiqued the government's use of statistics in a recent report to justify the SDO: "Statistics, like reason, panders the will, as Shakespeare said (my grandmother used the somewhat more graphic expression: 'Reason is a whore'" (Wary). The letter not only scrutinized statistics but also offered a lesson in critical reading:

If developers and environmentalists can use the same statistics and the same reasons for their respective arguments (developing green space vs. not developing it —is essential for tourism (and therefore of national importance) how can we separate the speaker of truth from the speaker of damn lies? The secret is to look not at the arguments but at the people putting them forward. Ask yourself one major question: what does this person have to gain? If the answer is: "Huge financial benefits as well as special privileges from the government including exemptions from the law," then turn your back. If the answer is, "Nothing but the sacrifice of time, money and hard work, the goal being to benefit on every level all citizens for all time," then you would be wise to listen. (Wary)

In their letters, residents also critiqued double standards among themselves. For instance, a resident called the leader of the Bermuda Environmental and Sustainability Taskforce (BEST), Stuart Hayward, to agree to the terms of engagement: "Stuart Hayward and his group have played a major role in encouraging Government to consider additional objections to the Southlands project. However, the question is, if Government goes through the entire process suggested by Mr. Hayward's group, and the Southlands developers are still awarded a SDO, will Mr. Hayward at least publicly admit that the process was fair?" (Responsible). But without question, most frequently letters critiqued the process by which the government arrived at its decision to grant the SDO.¹⁶ Typically the letters did so by overtly demanding a greater degree of transparency from the government than previously practiced, but letters also employed indirect moves, such as the use of shame: "Well, I for one am frankly thankful to the Government of Bermuda for disabusing us of our silly notion that the democratic process is governance by mandate of The People.[...] I would like to propose the discovery of a new species of democracy indigenous to Bermuda: [...] klepto-democracy, in other words, stealing rule from the people" (Faiella). By critiquing the existing public discourse, letters to the editor worked in the way that Fraser commends: by holding strong publics—those with institutional decision-making power—accountable to less organized "weak" public (136).

Imagining Alternatives

Letters also imagined alternative sites for the proposed hotel, as well as alternative values to the profit motives that justified the SDO. As Flower writes in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, the discourse of critique is good for exposing hypocrisies and other inconsistencies and limits within the dominant discourse, but it is rhetorically more demanding for members of a local public to learn “to speak with Others for Something” (79). Residents circulated in their letters a commitment to open space on the island of Bermuda: as a place to spend time with family, regardless of one’s socioeconomic standing; as a unique habitat for the longtail¹⁷ and other creatures that nest along the island’s cliffs and other unique habitats; and as a site for environmental education.

Letters also spoke for reclaiming brownfield sites, rather than covering the last of the island’s remaining limestone cliffs in concrete.

It would be an overstatement to credit the above letters to the editor from *The Royal Gazette* with instigating the government’s decisions to suspend the SDO for the hotel on Southlands and to facilitate the land-swap at Morgan’s Point.

Rather remarkably, just five days after the sale of Southlands was first announced, letters were already circulating the suggestion that the Jumeirah Group build—if it must—not on Southlands but an existing brownfield (Starling), an alternative that the Government would itself propose when—on October 8, 2007—the Minister of

the Environment announced that the Jumeirah Group would, after all, not be building on Southlands but rather on a neglected brownfield, Morgan’s Point, an abandoned U.S. air force site (“Breaking News”).¹⁸

For all their accomplishments, these letters may still fall short of readers’ expectations. Most notably, readers may maintain that high quality public deliberation is not only focused and sustained but also expects and allows participants to speak back to specific arguments and to evaluate the evidence and interests behind one another’s claims, as well as their own. That is, readers may uphold a definition of deliberation that fosters the strong rival-hypothesis stance (Flower, Long and Higgins). Indeed, this notion of deliberation is central to the rhetorical model of community literacy described above.

On the one hand, we concede that, as rare as they are, other models of public discourse may more effectively foster such exchanges. On the other hand, we would suggest that letters to the editor are not only printed in *The Royal Gazette*. They also circulate. As Peter has observed, in Bermuda, these letters live. At the pub, down at the dock, over the grocery counter,

residents regularly enlist one another in discussions of recent letters—whereby moving this alternative public discourse about the environment from the pages of the newspaper to other discursive domains. Here, in such exchanges, these additional argumentative moves very likely take place.

Not only is this Peter’s observation, *The Royal Gazette* makes it as well in an article that juxtaposed public sentiment concerning the Government’s doublespeak regarding Southlands with the public’s public engagement on environmental issues. Reflecting on the past year, the article states: “Lack of transparency, ‘arrogance’ and ‘doublespeak’ are just some of the accusations leveled at Government following a spate of Special Development Orders and controversial planning decisions of a cliff side resort at Southlands. [Meanwhile...] green issues became a burning issue in cafes, homes, schools and workplaces across the Island” (“PLP”).

This observation contrasts the public’s eagerness to deliberate over Bermuda’s environment—as represented, in part, by letters to the editor written for this purpose—with the Government’s interest in closing down this problem space and simultaneously covering in concrete one of the last open spaces in Bermuda.

Conclusion

It would be an overstatement to credit the above letters to the editor from *The Royal Gazette* with instigating the government’s decisions to suspend the SDO for the hotel on Southlands and to facilitate the land-swap at Morgan’s Point. The public rallies, the petitions containing more than 5000 signatures, the political efforts of groups like BEST and Greenrock to galvanize public protest as political opposition in the 2007 election—all of those measures arguably had a more direct effect. Furthermore, it is premature to conclude that Southlands is not out of the bureaucratic woods.¹⁹ On November 3, 2008, an article in *The Royal Gazette* reported that part of Southlands’ property has been rezoned for much needed but still controversial residential housing (T. Smith). Instead, our analysis suggests that only in relation to people’s commitment to publicly accessible open space—activated not only in the rhetorical appeals of these letters but also in the actions of groups like Greenrock and BEST—that efforts to preserve Southlands stand a chance.

Most clearly, the letters can be credited with creating, in collaboration with Editor Zuill, the space for people to reason together about a shared concern—the environment—in that mix of motives, values, emotions, and reasoning that, as Gerard Hauser observes, comprise the “untidy communicative practices” of day-to-day democracy (275). Operating within a larger activity system that grants far more privilege to the discourses of big business and government, the letters indicate that opportunities to speak for and to co-construct such a discourse about the environment is as compromised and as vulnerable—as worthy of protection—as the 37 acres of Southlands property. Like Southlands, this discursive space is not to be taken for granted. During the Southlands hotel development controversy,

public deliberation came under assault, for instance, not only when the government authorized the SDO without public input—a process the Minister of the Environment would later revise (“Southlands Objectors”), but also when members of the Southlands Ltd. hurled insults (including “stupid bitch” and “you’re like a bunch of beggars”) at residents assembled to protest the SDO and when an owner revved his motorcycle engine to drown out speeches made at another rally (“You’re Like”). In sum, letters responding to the Southlands hotel development controversy constitute a public called into being not only to protect one of a country’s last open spaces but also to advocate for the public’s access to and ability to create discursive space itself that can speak for and protect open space. This, we would argue, is the letters’ most distinctive achievement.

Postscript

At the time of writing, a new controversy on environmental sustainability was in full swing over plans for a proposed bar and cantina on Warwick Long Bay, Bermuda’s only major public beach that has not yet been subject to commercial development (see endnote 19 for more details). Once again, BEST, in collaboration with Greenrock and The Bermuda National Trust, has generated public discussion and protest over the proposed development facilitated by local newspapers, and particularly *The Royal Gazette*. The public has been urged to write letters to the editor, and major news stories on the matter have appeared in both print and online versions of the paper. In an editorial column, while taking a critical stance on the controversy, the paper sided with the protesters in response to the questionable processes on the planning decision by the government. The editorial concludes: “Just because one Ministry supports something means that the Environment Ministry should back it too is not just nonsense; it makes the Minister and the Ministry nothing more than pawns for others’ ambitions. Bermuda’s environment does not need a pawn right now; it needs a champion” (“Beach Bar”). Further, *The Royal Gazette* provided a link in its reports to an online petition by BEST soliciting signatures from the public to a letter to the Premier, Dr. Ewart Brown, opposing the beach cantina approval. While the outcome is not certain at the time of writing, it is clear that environmental interest groups value the press for its sponsorship of community activism on environmental sustainability and that the Southlands success was not a “one-off” case. As Bill Zuill himself observes, the newspaper serves as a “watchdog” for the community and when it comes to the future of the world’s environment and sustainable development Bermuda is the “canary in the coalmine” and that officials everywhere should pay attention.

Authors’ Note:

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Notes

1. Habermas maintains that the discourses of business, government and industry support institutional rather than communicative rationality—a concept that Killingsworth and Palmer develop in relation to environmentalism in *Ecospeak*, 163-65, as well.

2. Below are the features that Killingsworth and Palmer identify:

- Democratic, foregoing an elitist retreat from the general public and recognizing the need of all levels of people to have access to reliable information designed to be useful for their particular social goals;
- Open to contributions from diverse sources, creating new possibilities for hegemonic links, but resisting control by any single perspective or discourse community;
- Action-oriented, encouraging informed action both by making forth-right recommendations and by presenting information in a form reflective of an action context;
- Continuous, not ceasing to cover important topics, even after the attention of traditional mass media lags;
- Value-centered, making no attempt to attain an elusive (or illusive) "objectivity" or neutrality, but nevertheless maintaining a commitment to worthy proofs and following the rules of good evidence.
- Technically competent, both in style and in content, drawing on the best scientific information as it evolves toward factuality, and in the manner of the scientific research paradigm, keeping open to the possibility of changes and shifts in the structure of information. (265).

With regards to the construction of an alternative environmental discourse, Killingsworth and Palmer observe: "Such a discourse will not replace [...] political and normative rhetoric [...]; indeed it [...] will influence their sense of purpose and their understanding of their relationships to other discourses. The continuous narrative of an environmentalist culture will, above all, be the medium through which communicative action [as described by Habermas] is realized and perpetuated" (266).

3. Compare, for example, Higgins, Long and Flower 29-31 with Killingsworth and Palmer 265-266.

4. For example, in *Ecospeak*, Killingsworth and Palmer draw on Habermas's notion of lifeworlds and communicative rationality to call for an alternative "public discourse that meets the public's demand for [environmental] change" (168). This alternative public environmental discourse would encourage citizens' active participation and would work hard to arrive at, not force, consensus among competing perspectives. Motivating the call was the untapped potential of everyday people's attitudes and insights that could put and keep environmental concerns on the national agenda. According to Killingsworth and Palmer, this alternative discourse would operate in distinct contrast to the instrumental rationality that has long governed mainstream environmental discourse. Instrumental rationality assumes "that people are confused about their own real needs,

that impulses and emotions override rationality in public debate, and that good action depends upon expert guidance” (167). Furthermore, “the aim of instrumental documents is never to treat deviant discourses with respect but always merely to take note of them, to record them, and ultimately to treat them as ‘noise’ in the system, which needs to be ignored or expunged” (166).

Writing a decade later, in *Natural Discourse* Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser refine Killingsworth and Palmer’s call for an alternative public discourse to address environmental concerns. Drawing on Nancy Fraser’s critique of Habermas’s critical-rational deliberation, Dobrin and Weisser push against the concept of a singular public sphere where people deliberate over the common good. They note that this model discriminates against people unaccustomed to using the specialized codes and conventions that secure a certain class and gender (namely, propertied men) their places at the table. Habermas’s concept of “the public sphere” also assumes that economic, cultural, and other differences are obstacles to be overcome rather than resources to inform understanding and to build new knowledge on issues of shared concern.

5. Problem-solving strategies—or *technai*—are the hallmark of the rhetorical model of community literacy that Higgins, Long and Flower describe in “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry”; the form and function of these *technai* are discussed at length on pages 19-27. See also Peck, Flower and Higgins’s “Community Literacy” 211-15; Flower’s “Intercultural Knowledge Building” 243-245; and Long’s *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics* 120-24. Yet regardless of *techné*’s prominence in ancient rhetoric and rekindled interest in invention within some academic circles (Atwill; Atwill and Lauer), *techné*’s place in contemporary local public life is hotly contested. For a discussion of this debate, see Long’s “Rhetorical *Techne*, Local Knowledge, and Challenges in Contemporary Activism.”

6. Our reasons for choosing this particular print media venue are multiple, and many of these are explained below, but for the sake of clarity of purpose we must point out that the collaboration on this essay reflects continuing scholarship in sustainability and community literacy by both of the authors respectively. Peter, as a Bermudian, born and raised, has intimate knowledge, access, and insider experience of Bermuda as an island native. He has also researched and published on environmental remediation over the U.S./Bermuda military base closure and cleanup, and is currently researching rhetorical constructions of sustainability and environmental stewardship in small island communities, a project that prominently features Bermuda as one of the studied locales. Elenore has worked in the area of community literacy for many years, first by joining Linda Flower, Wayne Peck, Joyce Baskins, and Lorraine Higgins at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh and later by approaching questions of community literacy from various angles in- and outside the classroom.

7. The Jumeirah Hotel Group is an international super-luxury hotel chain based in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The company is known

most popularly for its iconic dhow sail-shaped Burj Al Arab hotel.

8. While there are a few very short tunnels for some of Bermuda's smaller roads and lanes (mostly along a route originally built for a short-lived narrow gauge railway in the early twentieth century), there are no tunnels along any of Bermuda's three main roads that run the length of the island chain. Residents raised concerns of viability, esthetics, and practicality about the proposed Southlands "land bridge" across the South Shore Road, including questions of structural integrity along a cliff face, obstruction of ocean views, environmental damage, potential flooding from tropic storm, traffic congestion, pedestrian and cycle rider safety, among others. But, in Peter's perspective as a Bermudian, what seemed most galling about the proposed "land bridge" was the decision to tear up a stretch of one of Bermuda's most picturesque shoreline drives and build a mainland-style highway underpass for the benefit of a luxury hotel for the wealthy, and that would avoid environmental and planning oversight via a proposed Special Development Order. Hundreds of residents signed letters of protest against the proposed tunnel development, and a vigil was held by BEST protesters who lined along the stretch of road that would be rerouted to form the underpass to alert commuters to its impact. In a *YouTube* production, one protester states: "This is our country. We should have a say in this. This shouldn't be something they classify as a done deal—which is wrong—which is improper to the people" ("Southlands").

9. The Southlands hotel development controversy is just one of a number of high profile cases that have generated a great deal of opinion in the editorial pages of *The Royal Gazette*. Though these other areas of concern are no less important, this controversy proves particularly relevant to the study of sustainability and community literacy given the high-profile nature of the case in the public sphere, the impact of community activism on the courses of action that ensued, and *The Royal Gazette's* mediating role in affecting a reversal of the government's development decision, ongoing new developments over the case, and, the large overall percentage of letters written and published on the case.

10. Bermuda is sub-tropical, located in the North Atlantic ocean off the Eastern seaboard of the United States, about 650 miles east-southeast of Cape Hatteras. Uninhabited until 1609 when it was founded (by accidental shipwreck) as a British colony, the island is a territory of the United Kingdom and has a parliamentary system of local government. It has a population of about 65,000 living on roughly 20 square miles made up of a narrow string of islands linked together by bridges. More than half of the population is black and the rest white and mixed. Bermuda has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world with an economy based primarily on international business, banking, reinsurance and, to a lesser extent, luxury tourism. The island is very limited in local resources for food and goods, and depends almost exclusively on imports for just about everything.

11. See also Rebecca Weaver-Hightower's *Empire Islands: Castaways Cannibals, and Fantasies of Conquest*. Her "situated psychoanalysis" of island

castaway fiction, relates how infused the romantic othering of islands has come to justify colonialist ideology in the popular mindset.

12. The Bermudian sense of specialness is captured in its unofficial “national anthem,” entitled “Bermuda is Another World” by Hubert Smith & Coral Islanders.

13. Peter’s spouse, Maureen Daly Goggin, recalls an incident soon after she moved to Bermuda to reside and teach at the local college. On returning to their new apartment after a trip to the market to stock up on household necessities she noted, with a sense of dawning awareness of the realities of “life in paradise,” that she had never before considered Bermuda and a toilet brush in the same context.

14. Masters, Bob. “Gov’t Not Committed.” Letter. *The Royal Gazette*. 24. Jan. 2007. 11 Oct. 2008. <http://www.royalgazette.com/siftology.royalgazette/Article/article.jsp?sectionId=60&articleId=7d7a44630030001>.

15. Starling, Jonathan. Letter. *The Royal Gazette*. 5 Jan. 2007. 11 Oct. 2008. <http://www.royalgazette.com/siftology.royalgazette/Article/article.jsp?sectionId=60&articleId=7d7a44630030001>.

16. In an unprecedented move, in March of 2007, the Environment Minister made the Southlands SDO proposal draft public by publishing it—notably, not in *The Royal Gazette* but in the twice weekly *Bermuda Sun*. The files of materials leading up to the draft were also opened to the public for about three weeks. In making the draft and files public in this way, Minister Butterfield emphasized that this step was not meant to set a precedent for how applications for future special development orders will be dealt with. In following this course of action, she said, “my objective is to ensure that there has been adequate opportunity for public comment, and to consider all submissions that are made in respect to the published draft special development order before a final decision is made” (qtd. in “Southlands Objectors”). Many applauded Butterfield for recognizing and responding to the public’s demand to participate in the fate of the Southlands property and to interrogate the justification for the SDO.

However, the gesture was not free of contradiction. Stuart Hayward—a leader of the environmental group BEST—lodged a public critique of the rules structuring this period of public review. Hayward wrote that he “feared a lot of people who want to inspect the Southlands Planning file won’t be able to get their hands on it because the rules require that only one person inspect the file at a time while inside the Planning Office. Given its size and complexity, even the most experienced reviewers of such an application would require an hour or two to view and absorb the content of the application file” (“Southlands File”).

17. The longtail, as it is known locally, is an Atlantic seabird native to Bermuda and the tropics. Longtails return to Bermuda seasonally to nest in cliff faces. The species has mostly white feathers with distinct black markings on the eyes and wings. Adult birds have very long narrow central tail feathers, thus the name.

18. Morgan’s Point was the site of the U.S. Navy Annex from 1941 to