



INTERVIEW

The Value of Patience and Pragmatism

Victoria J. Tschinkel is senior consultant at Landers and Parsons, P.A., in Tallahassee, FL. She has worked on environmental and resource management issues for several decades in both the public sector and private industry. Elected to the RFF Board in 1993, she recently spoke with Jonathan J. Halperin, RFF's director of communications planning and strategy.

RFF: Tell me what about the RFF research process makes it a model, from your perspective.

Tschinkel: RFF researchers do not try to second-guess a lot of scientific and biological and physical issues. They find and understand the range of opinions on an issue. Then, given that information, they ask what is the best way to go about solving this problem? They don't take one-sided positions, castigating all industry as bad or all environmentalists as misguided. The RFF approach is to say okay, we have a real problem. What's a sensible way that's going to produce the best results?

RFF: Let me ask you to look into your crystal ball regarding the kinds of environmental problems where that model would be well applied. Let's look out 20 years. What do you think the environmental and natural resource problems will be? How should we begin to think about them now?

Tschinkel: In the old days, we talked about water pollution and air pollution as distinct problems that represented trade-offs to some degree. Looking ahead, the interdependence of economics, energy, and environment—the truly complex multiple-equation issues—are going to be the principal characteristics of the problems that we share. Therefore, the research and modeling efforts that need to be done

should focus on how we maximize the beneficial aspects of energy, the environment, economic development, and land use.

RFF: Our perspective on the relationship between regulated industry, government agencies, and public stakeholders has evolved a great deal in recent years. So have



our policy tools. How do you think these shifts will influence how we solve environmental problems 20 years from now?

Tschinkel: The solutions will have to be even more complicated than the science, by definition. Two issues particularly stand out in my opinion. The first one is land use and

our view as Americans of having infinite land resources. From a sociological standpoint, that's already been challenged and it's beginning to be challenged in the resource area. More and more people see biodiversity as a global issue. Land use and the understanding of how we reinvent respect for land and see it as a limited resource shared by all of us will be the next big breakthrough.

The second big challenge will be in the area of energy. Clearly, understanding the balance between extraction, conservation, and next-generation technologies is something that every American is going to need to grasp. We all like turning on one switch and getting everything right away, but from here on out, we're going to have to make much more complex choices. The difficulties in California offer a window of opportunity for the entire country to look around and see how we're headed, which is very single-mindedly, in my view.

RFF: As the former secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation, you were actively involved in policy issues surrounding the Everglades. Can you talk about the lessons to be learned from the decades-long process of protecting this important natural resource?

Tschinkel: The first lesson we learned is to try not to make irreversible decisions about natural resources. Wherever possible, it is important to try to understand all the dif-



ferent features of a given natural resource as well as all the different groups seeking to gain what they perceive as ownership over the natural resource. Maintaining a balance so that the ecological integrity of the resource is sustained, the public has access, and agriculture can continue can be an enormous challenge. Unfortunately, we're facing many circumstances where we don't know what impacts those decisions are going to have—this is why I feel very strongly that the less we do to natural systems the better off we are.

The second lesson is to try to learn to live with nature rather than pretending that we can alter it to our benefit. That doesn't mean that we can't continually harvest certain resources where appropriate. The third lesson I've learned is that without proper science as a backbone, the decisionmaking process will be in chaos. We had virtually no hard science on the damage to the Everglades that we could rely on for the restoration project when we first started out, which made it extremely difficult to get started. In Florida, which has always been a wet/dry cycle state, having one year's worth of data or even 10 years' worth of data is completely meaningless.

RFF: Look back at the multitude of projects that you've been involved with and reflect on the permitting process. In general, are there ways to improve the permitting process so that it advances the public agenda and enables businesses to effectively compete?

Tschinkel: It would be desirable for agencies to set limits and goals, but keep an open mind on technology and the means of accomplishing those goals. The degree to which we can allow industry to reach for new technologies and quickly implement

them is going to allow better things to be done faster. I think a lot of agencies pay lip service to that, but they get uncomfortable sticking their necks out for anything new. Another way to expedite the permitting process is for regulated industry to reach out to its neighbors early in the project planning process. People need to meet and start talking about large projects before plans are finalized and the neighborhood has decided that it hates the idea. Most companies that I consult with try to do this. It's hard for some companies to understand that even if they do reach out, there are always going to be outliers in the neighborhood who are not happy with them. But that's to be expected. I think that many friends can be gained and many good ideas can be incorporated if a company is open to establishing a dialogue.

RFF: You've seen the first few months of the new Bush administration. If you were asked for advice, would you offer any and what would you say?

Tschinkel: The first thing I would say is that it is important to listen to people. Because people have not been supporters of yours or perhaps don't share your political views doesn't mean that they don't have good ideas. In fact, I think most Americans share a fairly fervent and practical approach toward environmental issues.

Early decisions almost always turn out to be a mistake, in my opinion. Decisions should be made carefully and slowly and new people should always feel their way. I think whether ideas come from industry or the environmental groups, they should always be taken from the highest common denominator.

To some degree, the new administration has decided what it thinks the energy industry wants or needs and it has put those

positions in play without consulting with industry leaders about what they think would make the system work better.

RFF: With this being half prediction and half advice, what would you like to see RFF, which is now approaching its 50th anniversary, doing in the next 50 years?

Tschinkel: RFF should continue to be the source for unbiased new ideas on looking at the economic ramifications of environmental issues. However, I think RFF needs to play a much stronger role in helping the public to understand the issues and the choices. The organization also needs to play a more important role helping the states, where a lot of these decisions are now being made, to develop exciting new programs for managing their land and other natural resources. In addition, as I said before, we're going to need some new and rather complicated analytic tools for these multivariate problems. There are some great opportunities for young researchers to get involved with making better decisions in such a complex technical environment.

Attention! Former RFF Board & Staff Members, Visiting Fellows, Dissertation and Fellowship Award Winners, and University Fellows

MARK YOUR CALENDARS for
April 18–19, 2002

*An RFF Reunion
In conjunction with
RFF's 50th Anniversary Year*

Stay tuned for more details on
the intellectual and entertaining
activities we have in store!