



Tackling a Wicked Problem: Water Issues!

How the Delta Dialogues Project Is Using Dialogue Mapping to Build Shared Understanding

By Patricia B. Seybold, CEO & Sr. Consultant, Patricia Seybold Group

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NETTING IT OUT

This is the story about how Dialogue Mapping™ has been used to support a six-month process among litigious stakeholders embroiled in a “Wicked Problem:” What to do to protect the largest source of fresh water in California? This “case study in progress” turns out to be Part 1 of an ongoing effort. We plan to bring you Part 2 in due course. The six-month pilot was successful in building a shared understanding and forging ties among a group of unlikely collaborators (people who had been at each others’ throats for decades). Now that group is continuing into Phase 2: to attempt to develop solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Here’s a brief [video clip](#) in which some of the participants in the Delta Dialogues describe what the process to-date has meant for them.

In this case study, we focus on how Dialogue Mapping played a role in helping participants engage in civil discourse and begin to capture and objectify both the complexity of the wicked problem they are immersed in and the pros and cons of possible actions and policies.

Delta Dialogues



THE WICKED PROBLEM: WATER ISSUES

Fresh water is biggest battleground of all. It’s the scarcest resource that humans need for survival. No wonder that setting policy and coming up with solutions surrounding water is a topic that has been fraught with controversy as long as humans (and other animals) have been on this planet. There’s a famous saying, “whiskey is for drinkin’ and water is for fightin’.” Dealing with water issues is often a “wicked problem”¹—one that involves many stakeholders and for which there is no “right solution.”

¹ See [How to Address “Wicked Problems: Use Dialogue Mapping to Build a Shared Understanding and Evolve a Group’s Thinking](#), by Patricia B. Seybold, May 23, 2013.

Cosumnes Preserve



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Why Is the Sacramento/San Joquin River Delta So Vital to California's Future?

The river delta and estuary formed by the Sacramento River and the San Joquin River carry water from the California's snowy Sierra Mountains to the San Francisco Bay. The Sacramento/San Joquin Delta provides fresh water via federal, state, and local water systems to 25 million Californians. There are 500,000 people who live in the delta area. It includes 500,000 acres of fertile agricultural land and attracts 12 million visitors per year for recreation. The income from all this activity is estimated at \$35 billion per year. The delta and the estuary are also home to 55 species of fish (including the Chinook salmon which travel through the delta to their spawning ground) and to over 750 species of birds, other wildlife, and plants. Daniel Weintraub explains the source of the controversies that have swirled around the delta for decades:

"But man long ago perverted nature's intent, and the Delta now also serves as a massive pumping station for water flowing to Central Valley farms, the Bay Area and Southern California, which gets much of its drinking water from the north. More than 1,000 miles of levees have rechanneled the Delta's waterways, creating artificial islands with rich soil that is ideal for farming.

Now, in a twist, man's restructuring of the Delta is itself threatened, by man and nature.

The courts and government regulators have slowed the flow of water out of the Delta to protect endangered species and the habitat on which they depend. Water users from north and south fume at this intervention. But it is nothing compared to what might

happen some day, what many experts say will happen one day. The next big flood or earthquake could damage those aging levees, and if the levees go, the freshwater now traveling south and west would be contaminated by saltwater, rendering it useless for drinking or irrigation. The Delta islands and their farms would be inundated, perhaps never to return.”

~ Daniel Weintraub, [A New Conversation about Water](#), HealthyCal.org

McCormack Williamson Tract



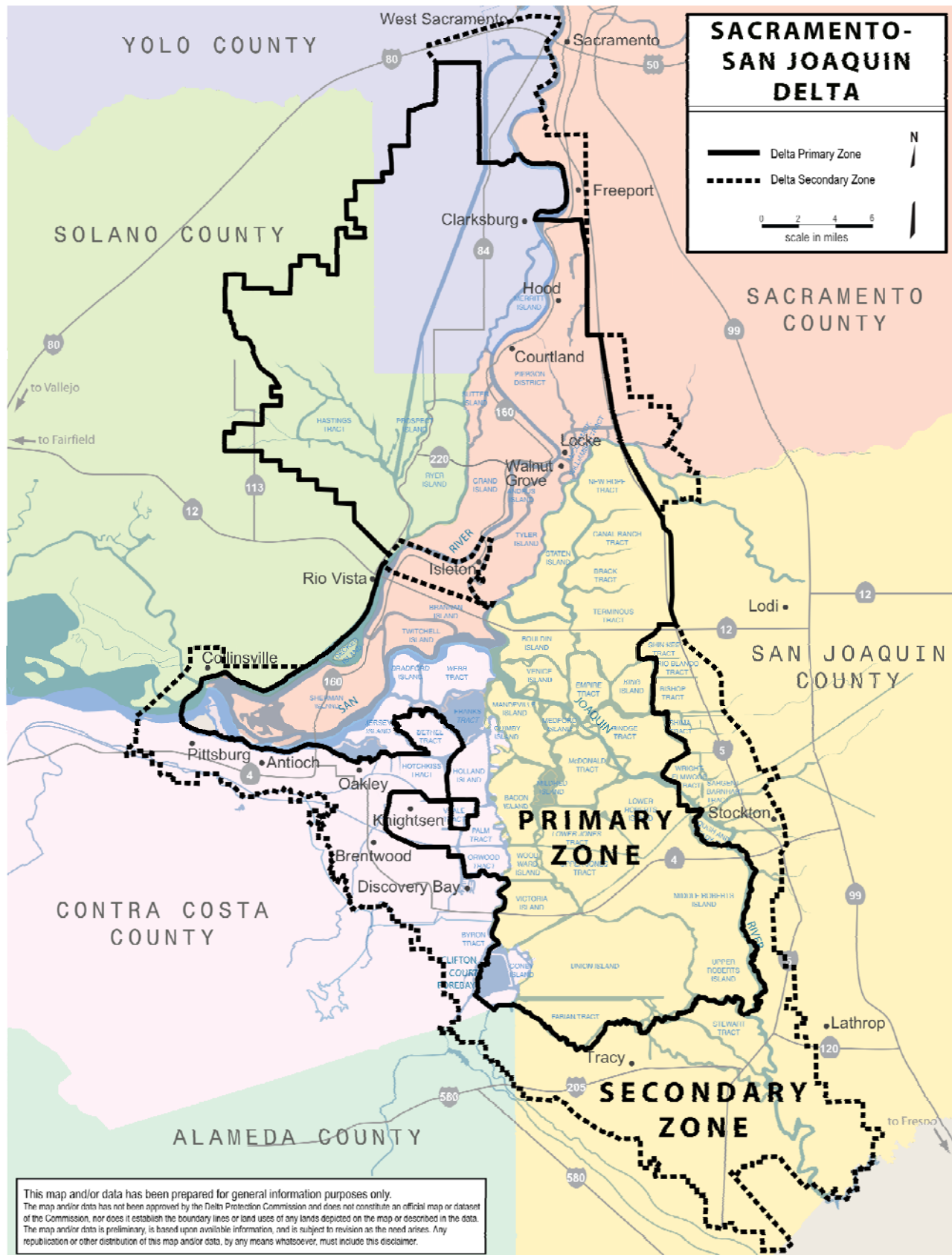
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It’s no wonder, then, that this area has been a political, economic, and environmental hot potato for decades. Environmentalists are at odds with commercial and municipal water companies and with farmers. Farmers and local residents are at war with state regulatory agencies.

“The Delta’s importance was the source of its difficulties. So many people depended upon it that it was badly stressed. And because so many interests—environmentalists, conservationists, fishermen, residents, farmers, recreation and tourism businesses, visitors, federal officials, state officials, local officials, water users, water agencies—were involved, dealing with those stresses became nearly impossible.

Each interest described the Delta’s problems in different ways. You could mention any one of the stressors on the Delta—the loss of most of the tidal wetlands, the subsidence of Delta islands that had left many farms below sea level, the disrepair of some older levees and the vulnerability of those levees and the Delta to earthquakes, the decline of species and fish because of salinity and water pumps, the water demands of Central valley farmers and California’s coastal cities—and get an entirely different explanation of the problem—and story of blame—depending on which Delta interest you asked.”

~ Joe Mathews, [The Delta Dialogues](#)



INNOVATIVE APPROACH: THE DELTA DIALOGUES PROJECT

The Role of the Delta Conservancy

In February 2010, the California legislature created the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta Conservancy (<http://www.deltaconservancy.ca.gov/>). Its mission is, “Working collaboratively and in coordination with local communities, the Conservancy will lead efforts to protect, enhance, and restore the Delta’s economy, agriculture and working landscapes, and environment, for the benefit of the Delta region, its local communities, and the citizens of California.” The Conservancy’s governing board has 23 members, including representatives of the five counties that border the Delta.

How Did the Delta Dialogues Begin?

The new Executive Director of the Delta Conservancy, Campbell Ingram, and his colleague Nancy Ullrey had decided they wanted to host an event to kick off a collaborative approach to problem-solving. Nancy had been following Jeff Conklin’s work on building shared understanding of wicked problems, so she invited him to be one of the main speakers at their kick off event in Sacramento on October 18, 2011, a forum entitled: “*Changing Our Perspective: New Ways of Thinking about the Delta.*” The Forum was attended by about 150 people. Jeff Conklin didn’t pull any punches. In his [presentation](#), he told them that it’s unethical to try to treat a wicked problem as if it’s a tame problem, that you can’t hire experts to tell you how to solve this problem because it has never been done before, that you actually have no idea how to solve it, that they were all failing, that they were running out of time, and that nothing they were doing was going to help them address the wicked problem of the Delta. He talked to them about what he saw as the only way forward: bring together all the warring parties and build a shared understanding of the problem, and start learning from creating and debating solutions in order to make design trade-offs that would be the least harmful to the most people, habitat, and businesses.

Jeff Conklin’s Presentation in Sacramento

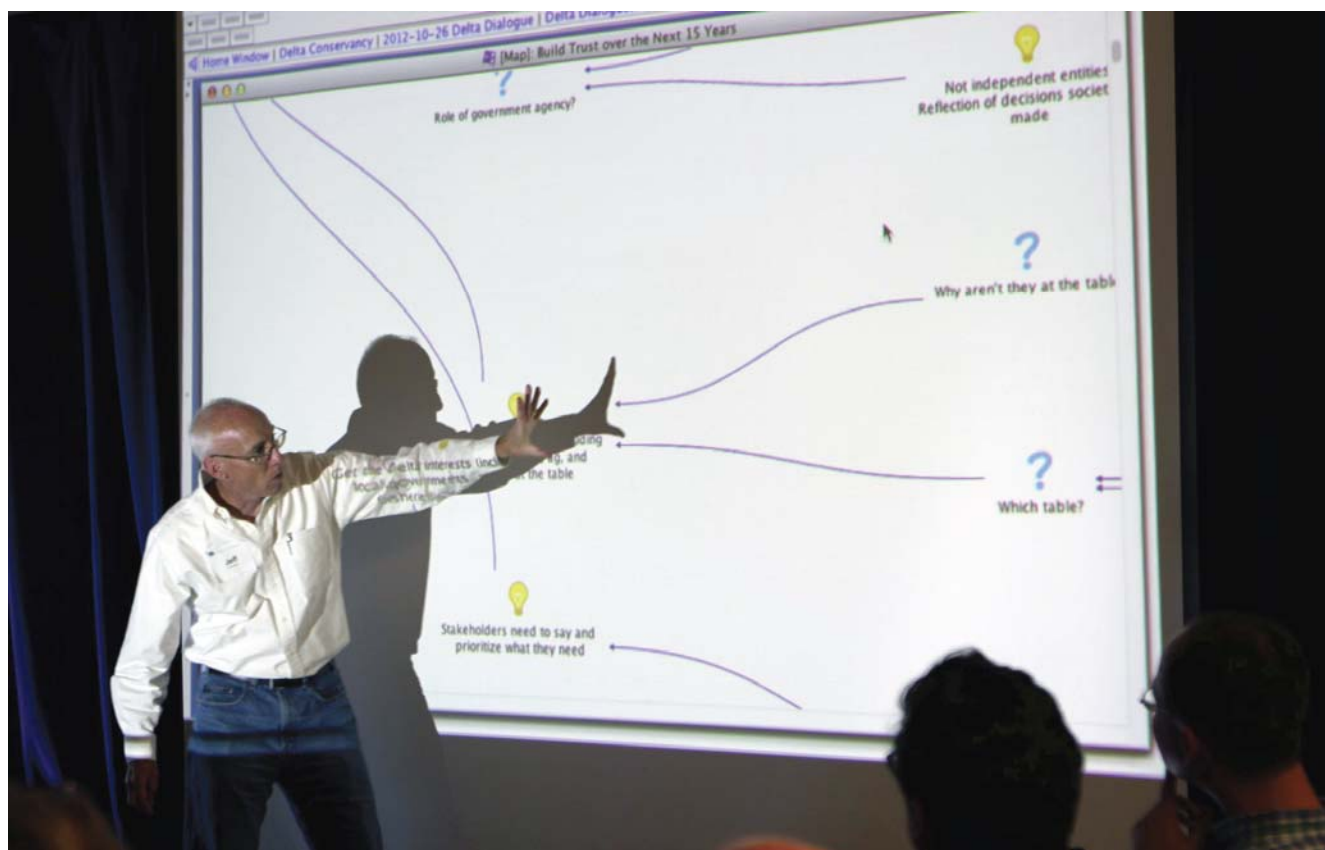


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Proposal: Use Dialogue Mapping to Create Shared Understanding. Jeff Conklin's presentation intrigued many of the stakeholders enough that they asked him to come and present again to a smaller group of key people at the Conservancy offices. Out of that planning meeting, the Conservancy decided to take a risk on hiring Jeff Conklin, and a consulting team he recruited, to lead a six-month effort they dubbed "The Delta Dialogues." The pilot project was largely funded by Bechtel.

The Consulting Team. When the Delta Conservancy suggested that Conklin put together a proposal, he realized that he needed reinforcements to carry out this important project. He turned to a consultant with whom he had worked in the past, Eugene Eric Kim. Kim and his partner Kristin Cobble ran a local consultancy, Groupaya. So the consulting team consisted of Dr. Jeff Conklin, Co gNexus Group, and Kristin Cobble and Eugene Eric Kim from Groupaya, along with an able support team, Rebecca Petzel and Natalie DeJarlais, and, for documentation, Amy Wu, Dana Reynolds, Matt Sengbush (videographer), and Joe Mathews (storyteller, author). When you read Joe Mathews' account of the project, you'll see that he does a good job of covering the ups and downs of the facilitators' efforts to coordinate and to integrate their respective facilitation styles.

Jeff Conklin Pointing out Key Questions on a Dialogue Map



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Jeff leads the Delta Dialogues discussion about Governance—Who should be at the table? And which table is the one we want to be at?

The Structure of the Delta Dialogues Project

The six-month pilot project consisted of recruiting a small group of key stakeholders who would represent the different voices who needed to be involved in the dialogue, holding six face-to-face meetings, in which the conversations would be facilitated and mapped using Conklin's Dialogue Mapping™ techniques. These meetings would be punctuated by site visits to different areas in the Delta region. There would also be five group phone calls in between the face-to-face visits and meetings.

Timeline of the Project



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Note that the project kicked off in April. Four of the ensuing six meetings included site visits. These really enriched the group's learning and their dialogue.

Transparent, Well-Documented Process. Partly because the Delta Conservancy is a government organization, and also because its leaders believe strongly in transparency, they decided to document the work they were doing publicly so that other interested parties could follow along. They hired Joe Mathews, a local journalist with a lot of experience in environmental issues to document the group's process, and they also captured video documentation. (The basis for my case study is largely Joe Mathew's excellent case study, [Delta Dialogues](#), which was published in February 2013, as well as the blogs posted on the website created for this project: <http://delta.groupaya.net/>.)

Participants



Brett Baker
Fish biologist,
farmer, and in-Delta
representative



Bruce Blodgett
San Joaquin Farm
Bureau Federation



John Cain
American Rivers



Gilbert Cosio
MBK Engineering



Jim Fiedler
Santa Clara Water
District



Sue Fry
U.S. Department of
the Interior, Bureau of
Reclamation



**Dale Hoffman-
Floerke**
California Department
of Water Resources



Campbell Ingram
Delta Conservancy



Randall Neudeck
Metropolitan Water
District



Don Nottoli
Sacramento County
Supervisor



Jason Peltier
Westlands Water
District



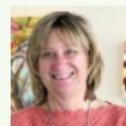
Mary Nejedly Piepho
Contra Costa County
Supervisor, District III



Dick Pool
Commercial Salmon
Fishing



Maria Rea
NOAA Fisheries



Nancy Ullrey
Delta Conservancy



**Russell van Loben
Sels**
Sacramento County
Farm Bureau



Ken Vogel
Farmer, San Joaquin
County Supervisor,
District 4



Carl Wilcox
California Department
of Fish and Game



Leo Winternitz
The Nature
Conservancy

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The Delta Dialogues Participants for Phase 1 included fewer farmers, fishermen, and residents—so called “In Delta” participants—than it did water purveyors. But those who did participate were quite outspoken and valued.

Whose Voices Were Missing in the Past? People Who Live and Work in the Region

There were 19 people who participated in the Delta Dialogues throughout the six-month pilot. Two were the Delta Conservancy leaders—Campbell Ingram and Nancy Ullrey, who were the sponsors of the initiative. The rest were a mix of “in-delta” participants—people who earned their living from the delta (fishing, farming); those who represent them (e.g., farm bureaus and county organizations); water districts and purveyors; State and Federal agencies; and environmental and recreational non-government organizations.

One reason we wanted to call your attention to this “case study in progress” is that it’s not *just* a good example of how to work on a wicked problem with a group of passionate stakeholders. What’s more important to us is that this was the first time that the “customers,” the residents, farmers, and fishermen in the affected region, had been included in the design discussions. In the past, many open community meetings had been held to solicit “public comment.” And many farmers, residents, and local businesspeople attended and spoke passionately. But they were never given a proverbial seat at the table in the *formulation* of solutions. It was up to their elected representatives to advocate for their interests.

The First Planning Meeting of Delta Dialogues



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Note how uncomfortable the participants seem to be at the first planning meeting in April, 2012.

The Next to the Last Meeting of Delta Dialogues—Phase 1

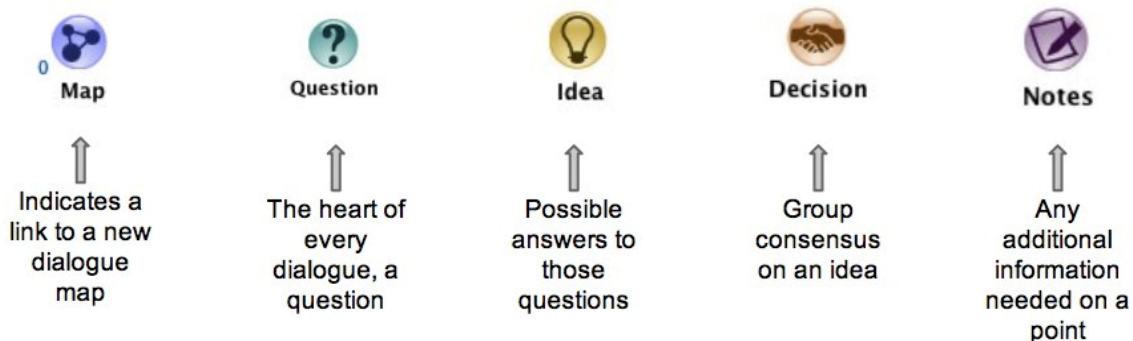


© 2013 Delta Dialogues

Now look how comfortable everyone is hanging out together and sharing a laugh the following September.

How to Read Dialogue Maps

The Delta Dialogues use a technique called Dialogue Mapping to both facilitate and record the conversations. One Delta Dialogue meeting is captured in many maps, each mapping a different exploratory question. The best way to read the maps is from left to right, from top to bottom. We use the following icons:



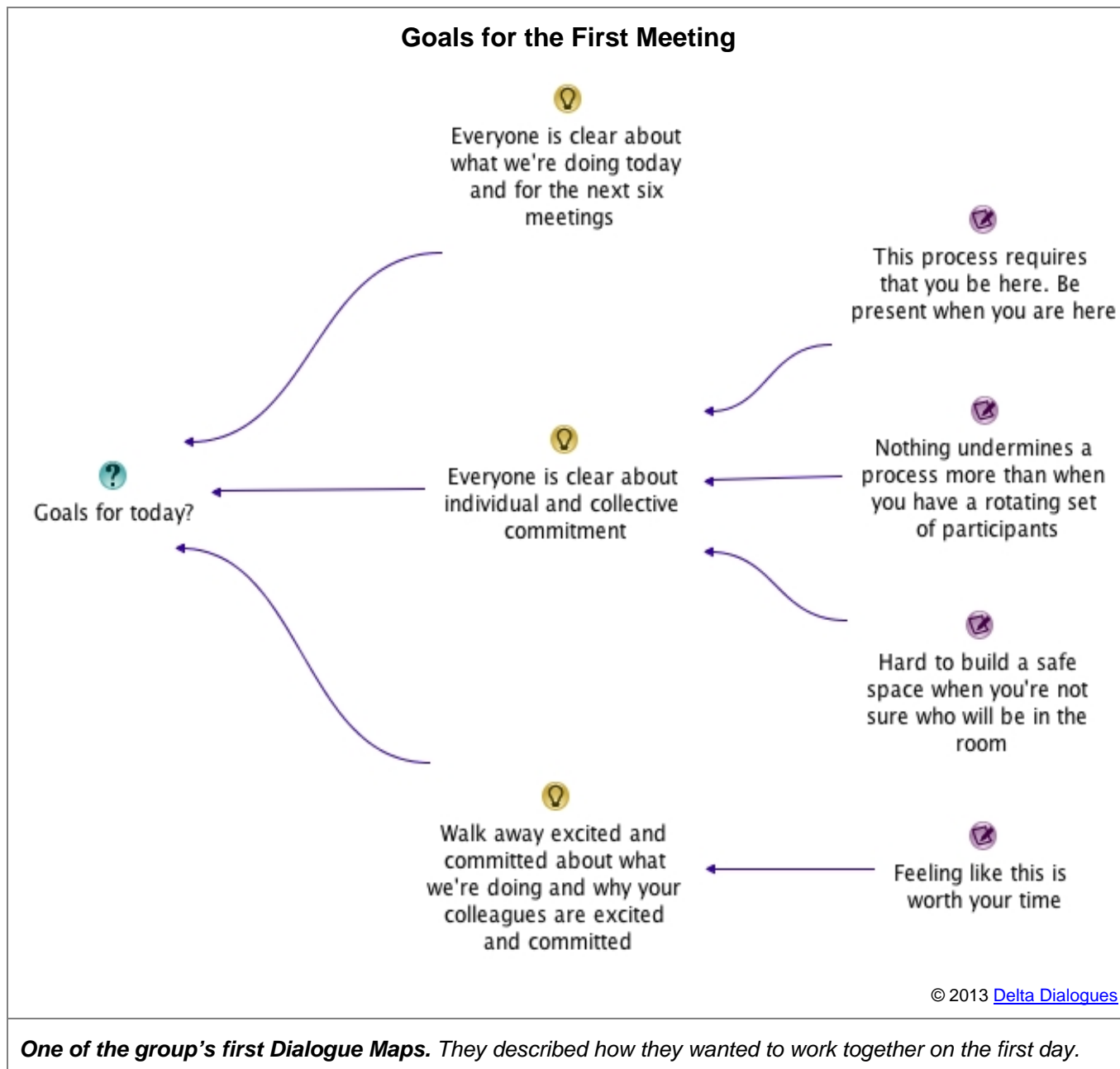
The numbers on the bottom left of the map icon represents the number of items inside that map. The numbers on the bottom right indicate how often that item appears in different maps.

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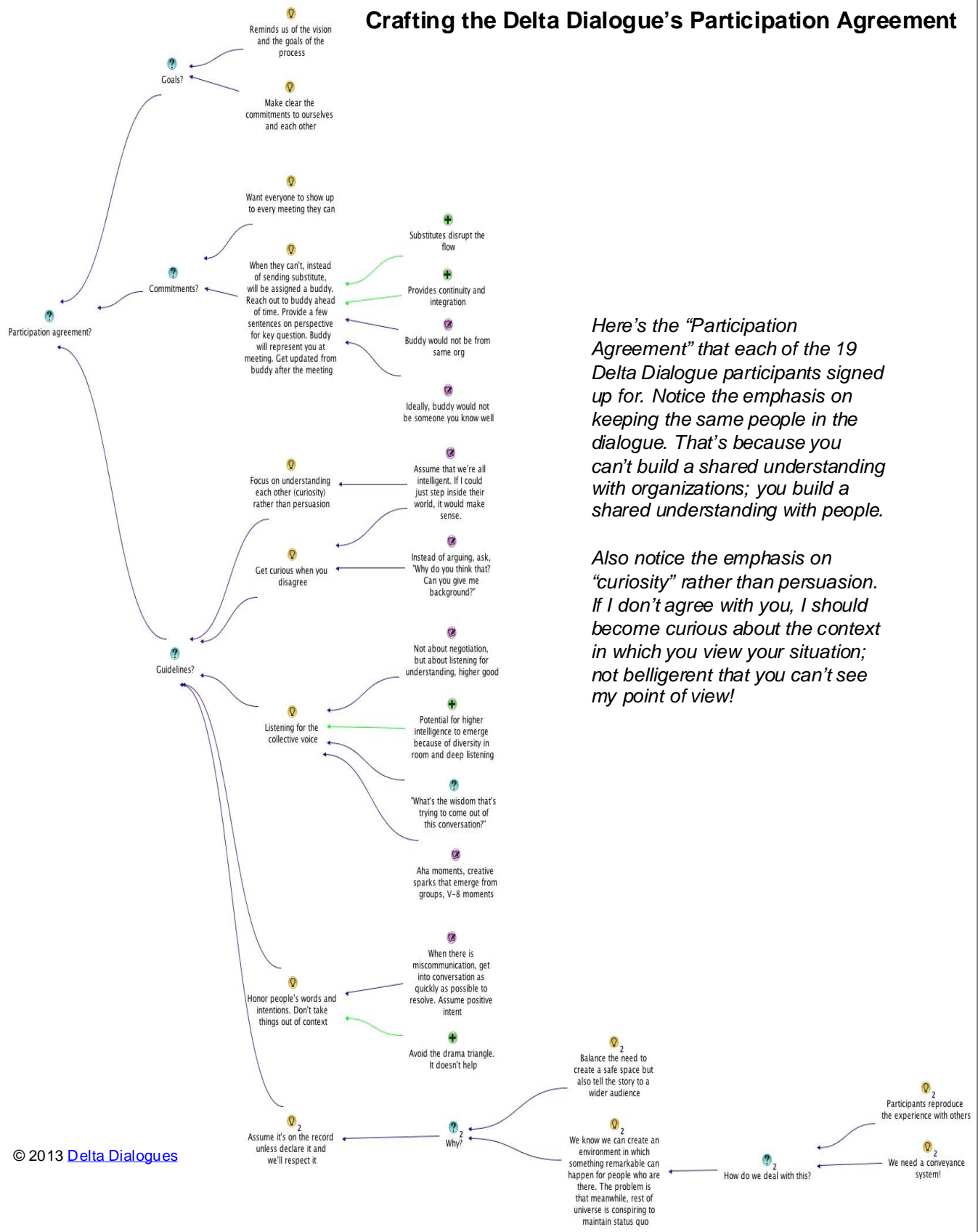
HOW WAS DIALOGUE MAPPING USED DURING THE DELTA DIALOGUES PILOT?

Used Dialogue Maps to Set the Stage, Gain Agreement, and Share with Others

Dialogue maps provide a good “container” for capturing agreement and understanding among participants. Here are a couple of maps that show the ways in which Dialogue Maps were used to gain commitment for the process.



Crafting the Delta Dialogue's Participation Agreement



Here's the "Participation Agreement" that each of the 19 Delta Dialogue participants signed up for. Notice the emphasis on keeping the same people in the dialogue. That's because you can't build a shared understanding with organizations; you build a shared understanding with people.

Also notice the emphasis on "curiosity" rather than persuasion. If I don't agree with you, I should become curious about the context in which you view your situation; not belligerent that you can't see my point of view!

Used Dialogue Maps to Debrief After Each Site Visit

During the six-month project, some of the highlights of the process were the “Learning Journeys”—site visits to different parts of the delta to see different aspects.

Nature Conservancy’s Restoration of an Island. The first site visit took place in May 2012. The group toured an island that is being “restored” and is now owned by the Nature Conservancy. Here’s some of Joe Mathews’ commentary:

“Most of the participants in the May session came early to tour the McCormack-Williamson tract in two big white vans. Winternitz of the Nature Conservancy, which owns the island, explained the group’s plans to restore the original marshland.

Bruce Blodgett, executive director of the [San Joaquin County Farm Bureau](#), pressed Winternitz repeatedly on whether the Nature Conservancy had considered the full economic impact that restoration—by taking productive farmland out of service—would have on people who work the fields, service the farms, sell insurance to farms, and depend on county tax revenues, which would be impacted by the change. The friendly, spirited exchange between the two men continued throughout the tour, and seemed to shape the broad conversation in the formal session.”

~ Joe Mathews, [The Delta Dialogues](#)

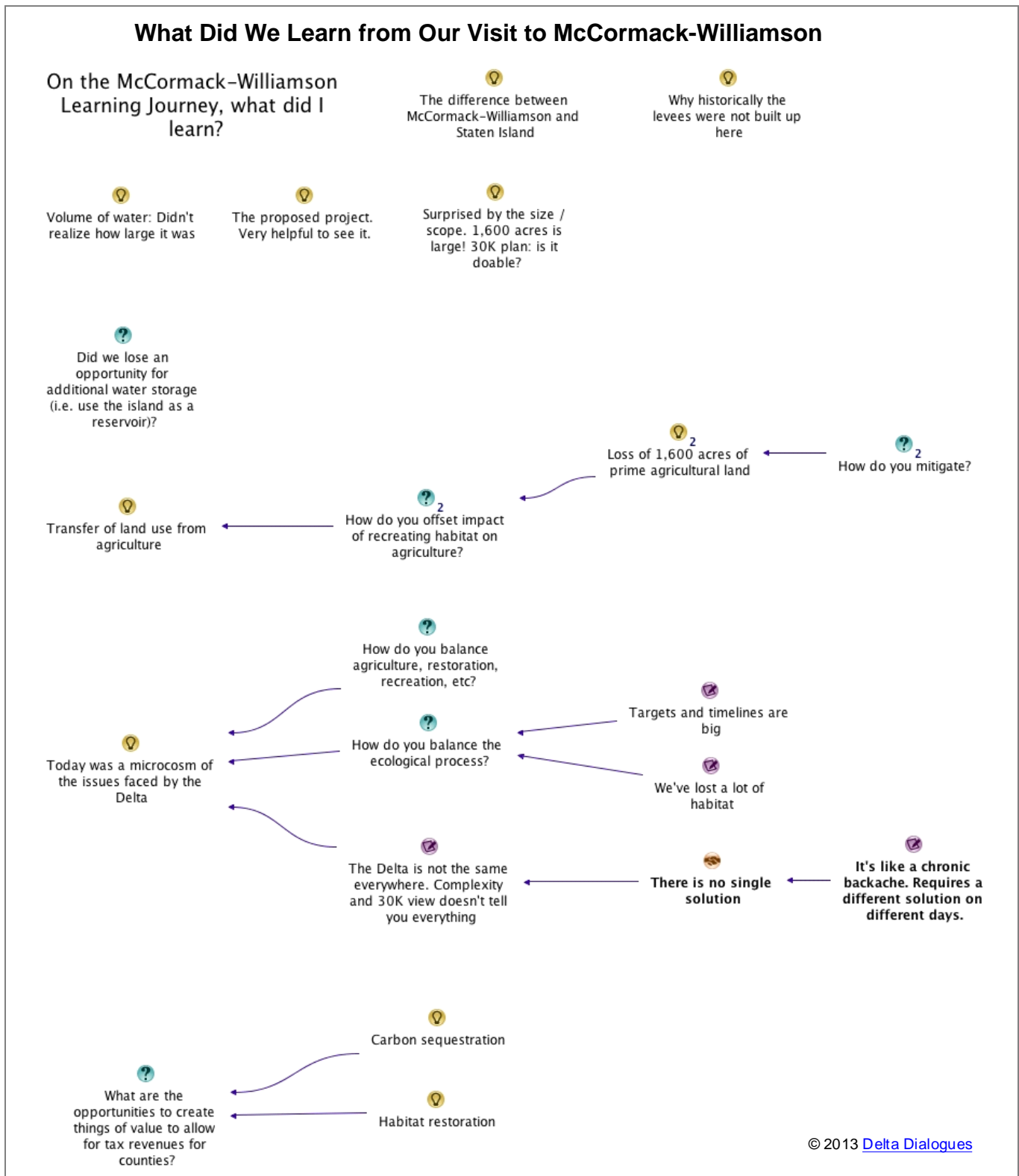
McCormack Williamson Tour



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The first site visit was to the McCormack Williamson Tract—an area the Nature Conservancy is planning to return to wetlands. The farmers questioned why this land couldn’t be used for agriculture.

After the Tour, the Delta Dialogues continued, as the members of the group debriefed on what they had learned:



Bouldin Island Levees



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Gilbert Cosio (in the red shirt) explains the four different ways that the Bouldin Levees are being strengthened.

Inspecting the Bouldin Island Levees. One of the most controversial aspects of man-made intrusion into the delta is the levees which have been built and maintained for years in the delta. Gilbert Cosio is a Delta Dialogues participant who lives and works in the delta and who designs and maintains these levees for a living for [MBK Engineers](#). He gave a two-hour tour of the levees on Bouldin Island and showed the group a levee that was being strengthened. Here is Joe Mathews' description:

"The tour, on a windy day, illustrated the complicated nature of levee design, the variety of conditions of the levees, and the delicacy of levee repair. Cosio made two points that seemed to resonate with those on the tour and that were referred to several times during the subsequent afternoon meeting.

First, he noted how slow, careful, and deliberate one must be in rebuilding a levee. Levees move (in one Stockton project, the peat in a levee moved three feet overnight and 13 feet in the course of the project, he said), and changes in levees, even improvements, can be dangerous in the short-term to the levee. In the Delta, everything has ripple effects.

Second, he recounted the history of levees and, in particular, promises that were made 50 years ago that the [State Water Project](#) would include the rebuilding of the Delta's levees. It didn't happen.

"The way the Delta people see it, they never got what they were promised," said Cosio.

Russell van Loben Sels, a Dialogues participant and North Delta Farmer who was on the tour, nodded and added: “There are a lot of things in the Delta that have not happened the way they were supposed to.”

Those two, related ideas—that the Delta is more complicated and interrelated than generally thought, and that today’s Delta efforts are undermined by the broken promises of the past—served to propel the Dialogue discussion that afternoon.

That session started with follow-up discussion about the tour and levee issues. Cosio said that many recent reports on levee failure were based on old knowledge and failed to account for hundreds of millions of dollars of levee work since 2005. The conversation soon pivoted from levees to habitat restoration, as participants noted that, as in levees, habitat restoration must be done with the recognition that a small change in one part of the Delta can affect people elsewhere. This part of the conversation brought the sharpest exchange of the dialogues so far—between Brett Baker, a fish biologist and farmer whose family has lived in the Delta for six generations, and Carl Wilcox of the [California Department of Fish and Game](#).

Wilcox made the point that levees are crucial for protecting habitat, as well as agriculture. He mentioned the habitat restoration at [Liberty Island](#) as a potential model for how to do this in the Delta.

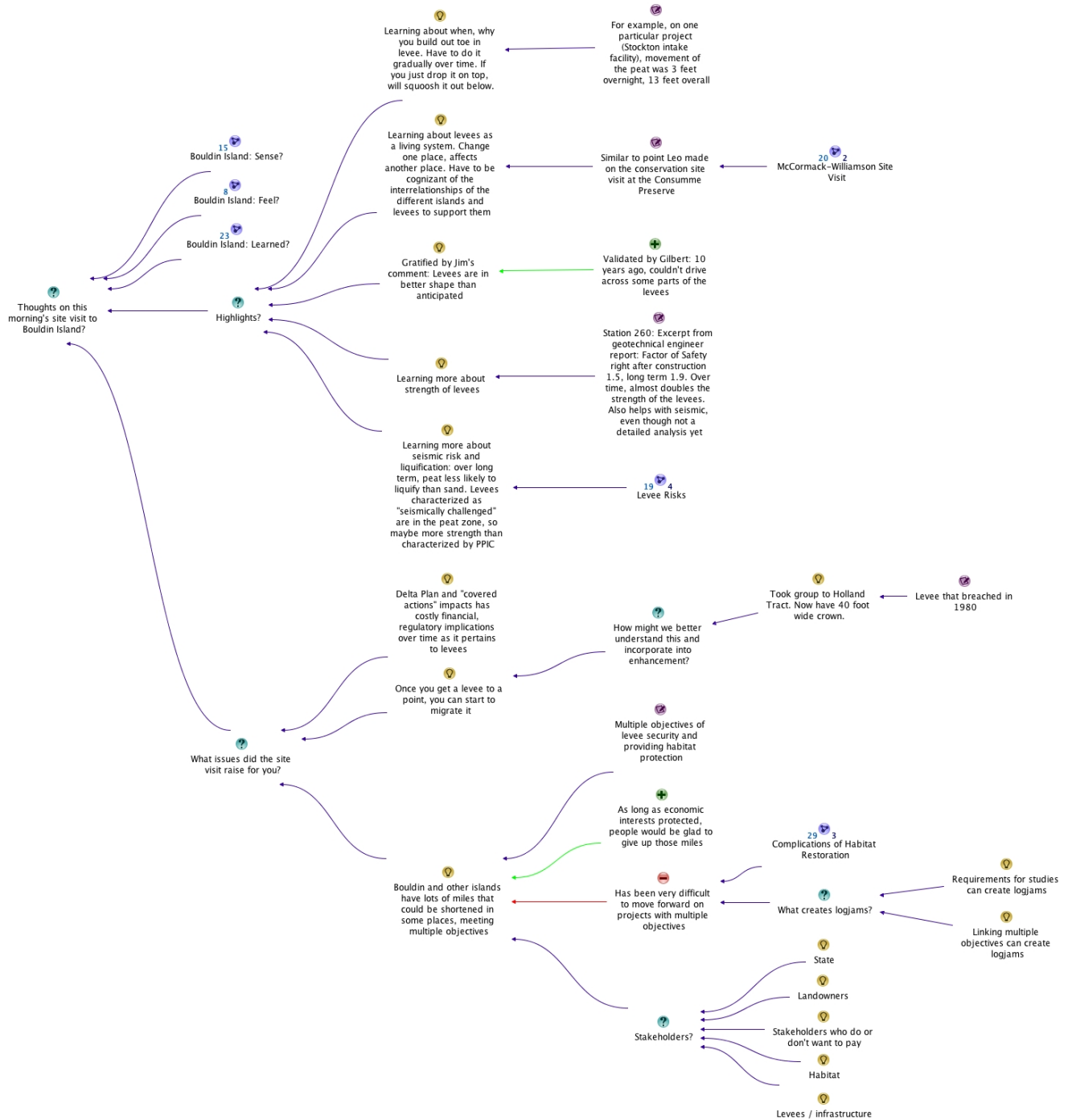
Baker objected, arguing that the example of one island shouldn’t be extrapolated to the rest of the system. After some back and forth, Leo Winternitz of [The Nature Conservancy](#) broke in to say there was common ground between them: that the habitat questions were complex, that there’s been very little habitat restoration, and that there needed to be more dialogue before any progress could be made on the issue. Van Loben Sels then made a similar point. The exchange served to propel the conversation forward, as participants talked about specific areas and questions that were misunderstood and needed more dialogue.”

~ Joe Mathews, [The Delta Dialogues](#)

Debriefing from the Site Visit

When the group gathered in the meeting room again, they quickly captured their learnings from that site visit and the essence of that spirited dialogue. They then went on to explore a discussion of the risks to Levees. This was a huge breakthrough! Up until that point, many of the environmental and in-Delta participants thought of levees as man-made interventions that screwed things up. Now they were viewing levees differently. They understood the role of levees better.

What Did We Learn about Levees?

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First Debrief after Levee Tour. The group was able to document a slew of issues surrounding levees. This is just one of five juicy Dialogue Maps they created to document what they had learned about Levees and about the controversies surrounding them.

WHAT WORKED IN THE FIRST PHASE OF THE DELTA DIALOGUES?

Creating a Safe Space and Building Trust

The combination of the intentions of the participants, the quality of the facilitation, the use of Dialogue Mapping to capture peoples' issues and points of view, and the shared experiences of doing the site visits built up a lot of trust among the Delta Dialogues' participants. Many of them pointed out that, in the past, they wouldn't have been able to listen to several of the players without their blood boiling. Now, they have developed the capacity to listen, to hear, to understand the other party's point of view, and to understand the context. The people who participate in this kind of serious, committed design conversation tend to become a member of a group that builds a shared context and forges new bonds. By seeing each others' points of view, they get to the point where they can actually anticipate each other's reactions to things.

Focusing on the Shared Dialogue



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At the June meeting, participants created Dialogue Maps depicting what they had learned and observed about the Levees they had just visited.

Having the “Right” Stakeholders at the Table

One of the things we’ve noticed about these kinds of initiatives is that you always manage to have the “right” people participate. Whoever actually participates in this kind of serious, committed design conversation tends to become a member of a group that builds a shared context and forges new bonds. I like to say “there are no accidents.” The people who decided to participate in this first Pilot Phase were the “right” people to do so. The proof is that they all stuck through the arduous process from beginning to end, and they all wound up as a committed team.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the goals of this project was to get as many of the different types of stakeholders as possible to the table. Several of the Delta Dialogue members lamented the small number of “in-delta” participants, e.g., farmers, fisherman, and other people who make their living from the Delta. Yet those in-Delta participants who were engaged felt good about the seat they had at the table.

Having a Way to Capture the Issues without Amplified Acrimony

All of the participants in the Delta Dialogues have been attending meetings and visioning sessions on delta-related issues most of their adult lives. This is the first time they have felt really heard. I believe that is due to the Dialogue Mapping process. Everyone’s issues are not only heard and recorded, but they are placed into context and given equal weight with everyone else’s issues. The ability to capture both the concerns and the ramifications (positives and minuses) of any action or idea quickly makes it easy for people to feel validated and then to let go and move onto the next topic.

Shared Experiences: Group Visits Followed by Dialogue Mapping

As we’ve seen by sharing a bit about just two of the site visits and the dialogue that ensued, these “learning journeys” were a highlight of the Delta Dialogues’ process. There is nothing as powerful as the rich context you gain from being physically in an environment you are trying to understand. Doing these as group visits heightens the experience. As an individual, you are satisfying your own curiosity and learning things; as a group member, you’re learning more about your colleagues’ interests and knowledge and perspectives based on the questions they ask.

Capturing the learnings and the issues raised and debates spawned immediately after each field trip (the same day) is a tremendously valuable way to use Dialogue Mapping. You capture everything everyone learned and thought very quickly, and the group can contemplate the picture of their shared understanding and come to some “meta” observations, conclusions, or new questions to pursue.

Structured Process that Includes Visioning and Storytelling

Dialogue Mapping wasn’t the only facilitation technique used during the Delta Dialogues. There were many other ways in which the participants shared their personal stories and articulated their visions.

What’s Your Favorite Place in the Delta? For example, at the kickoff of the project, Kristin Cobble asked each participant to describe his or her favorite special place on the Delta.

Nancy Ullrey talked about her Chinese American friend’s home that her grandfather built despite the fact that he was not allowed to own property. The family repurchased the property later and now live in the house their grandfather built.

Storytelling about Our Favorite Place on the Delta



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What's Your Favorite Place on the Delta? In the first group meeting in May, one of the bonding exercises led by facilitator Kristin Cobble was to ask each participant to describe their favorite place on the Delta. Jeff Conklin is holding the map.

Russell van Loben Sels pointed to the levee that his great-grandfather built in 1876 and finished in 1910. Russell grew up there, learned how to hunt and fish.

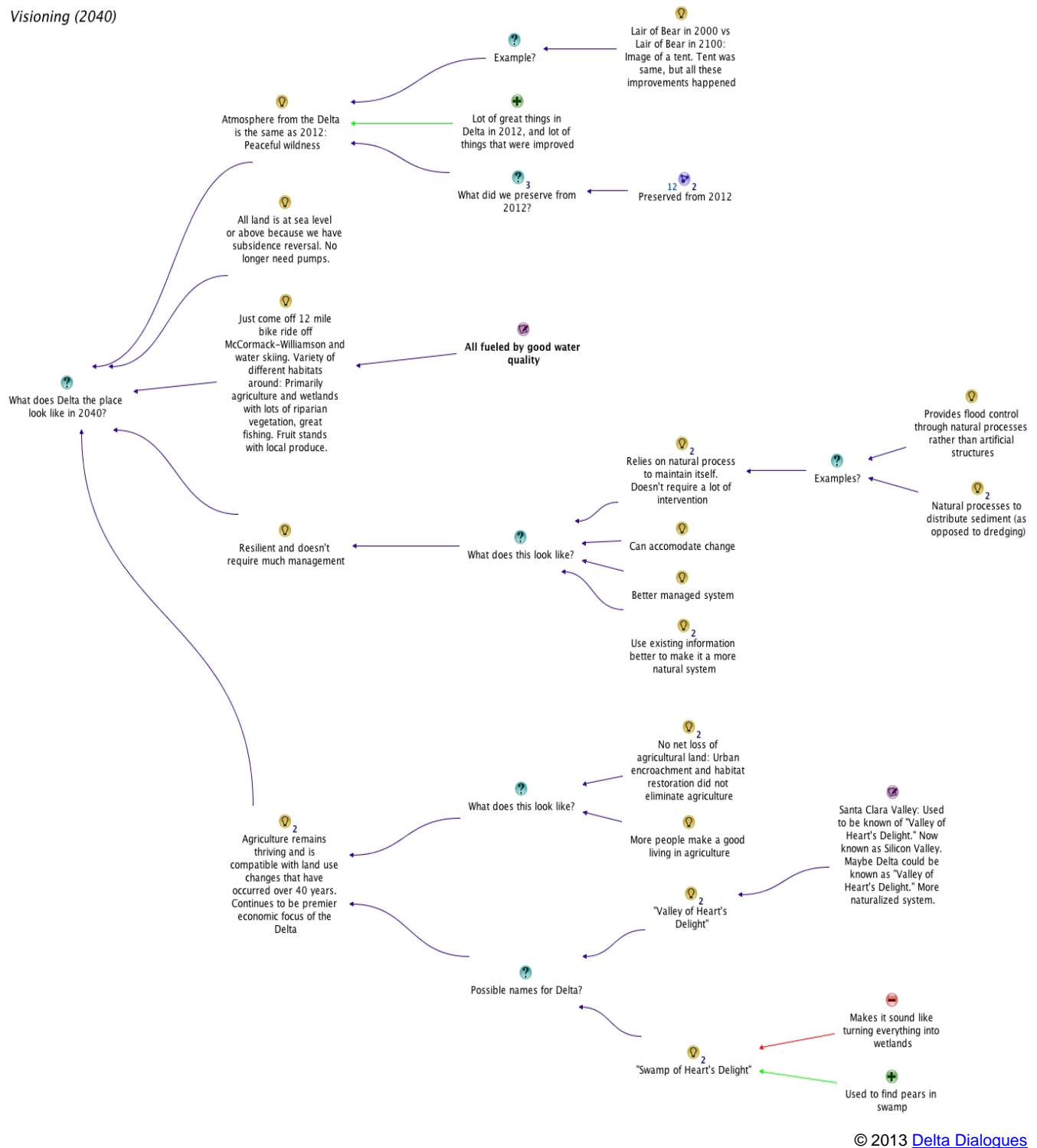
Randall Neudeck's favorite place is a wide channel. As you cut into the slough, it narrows into a place overgrown with trees with lots of cranes. It's what the Delta used to look like.

These stories were collected, and the locations and stories placed on the Delta map. It was a great bonding and trust-building exercise.

Creating a Shared Vision. During the first session, the members of the group also began to flesh out their vision for the Delta in 2040. This was done as individual visions and as a collective vision. In their June meeting, the group revisited the Vision 2040 maps and modified them slightly to reflect their shared vision.

Delta Dialogue Participants' Vision 2040

Visioning (2040)



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Vision 2040. One of several vision maps the group created for the Delta. How does this place look in 2040?

Here's Joe Mathew's recap of the visioning process:

"The biggest common thread in these visions of the future was a Delta of great variety. Leo Winternitz of [The Nature Conservancy](#) imagined having just finished a 12-mile bike ride, after some time water skiing, in a Delta with agriculture, wetlands, native vegetation, fruit stands with local produce, and great fishing.

Participants also offered similar visions around improved water quality, the strong presence of agriculture, and smarter Delta governance that would be at once more coherent and centralized (everything from state management to United Nations management was suggested) and also more fluid and adaptable to changing conditions.

The visions also shared a strong sentiment that science, technology, and data would drive decisions and allow stakeholders in the Delta to be smarter and more efficient in fulfilling needs.

There were more specific differences over issues such as dredging (some participants thought it would be a thing of the past by 2040, while others saw it as part of the future) and on questions of diverting water. Late in the session, facilitators asked participants to imagine what actions taken between the years 2012 and 2017 would lead to their 2040 visions. The conversation didn't get very far before time ran out. Facilitators closed the meeting by asking participants to keep pondering these questions and to write in their journals—provided as part of the Dialogues—as thoughts occur."

Commenting on Each Others' Visions



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Participants revisited the group's original visions for 2040 a month later and placed green dots next to the statements they agreed with and red dots next to the ones that troubled them.

Informal Networking & Problem-Solving

Once the group had begun to build trust through the combination of shared dialogue in a safe space, telling personal stories, and sharing visions, they began to reach out to one another in between meetings. This is probably how the biggest pay off from the Delta Dialogues will occur. Here's an example: one small subgroup even did their own "site visit." Carl Wilcox from the California Department of Fish and Game took the initiative and launched additional discussion with some Delta Dialogues' participants.

Campbell Ingram described this activity in the Delta Dialogues' [blog](#). Here is an excerpt:

"Carl's idea was to take some people out in the field and think about what the opportunities are in the Delta on the habitat issue. So last Wednesday, July 13, Carl met with Brett Baker, Russell van Loben Sels, Leo Winternitz, Mike Tucker of NOAA Fisheries, and myself at the head of Steamboat Slough.

We spread maps across the top of a pick-up truck and stood there for 45-50 minutes talking about habitat opportunities and constraints in the north Delta.

There were three main issues we discussed. I wouldn't go so far as to say that we achieved consensus, but here are the three big things we hashed out.

1. Setback levees. In the past, there has been discussion of doing setback levees—pulling back the levees from the waterway and providing more flood plain habitat on the water side for fish.

What we realized ...was that if you look at any one of those islands, the levee ring about the island is the high ground. And it is precisely on this high ground that you see a ring of high-value agriculture with permanent crops as well as the homes, the barns, and the supporting businesses of the farms. The lower, sometimes wetter land – with lower-value row crops – is in the center of the islands.

Given this geography, the six of us recognized the concept of setback levees might not be viable in this area, because it would affect the most valuable agriculture and infrastructure near the levees.

2. Eminent domain. We talked about the expectation that the [Bay Delta Conservation Plan](#), in order to do habitat restoration on a large scale, might use eminent domain to achieve their habitat goals.

A point that came out in our discussion at Steamboat is that if the BDCP would back away and come out with a definitive statement that it would not use eminent domain, farmers might be willing to have more of a dialogue about habitat restoration opportunities in the Delta. Right now, farmers feel threatened by the possibility of eminent domain, so dialogue is not possible.

3. A new approach to restoration that protects high-value land. Regarding those islands in the North Delta that have that characteristic high land around the levee and deeper land in the center, we discussed the idea that good design might provide opportunity for compromise.

Specifically: If you could—through good design—create connectivity between the river and tidal wetlands located on the lower-value agricultural land in the center of some delta islands—thereby preserving the higher value agriculture and infrastructure on the higher elevation rings of the island—there might be more opportunity for partnership around restoration.

This would be a slightly different concept than we've seen before. Right now, habitat restoration is built around the strategy of buying big chunks of these islands—and buying out landowners over time. That requires dealing with lots of landowners, and it means

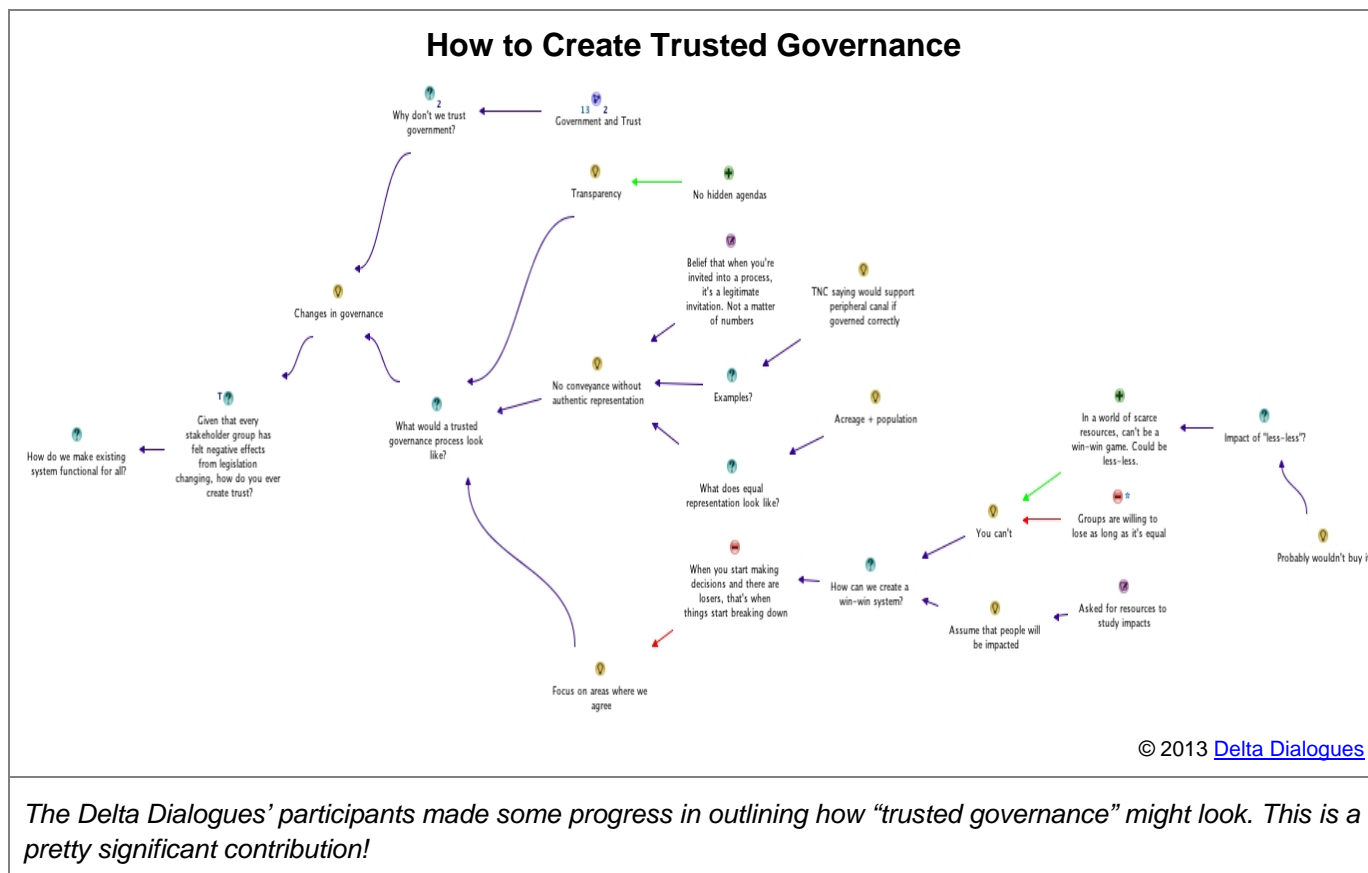
you wait a long time. Valuable agricultural land and infrastructure can be degraded in the process. With this different concept, you could compensate farmers for the loss of their lower value agriculture, protect high-value agriculture, and do habitat restoration in a faster, and possibly less costly, fashion.”

This is clearly breakthrough thinking! It’s likely that it would never have surfaced without the shared trust and open dialogues and the site visits.

Using the Dialogue Maps to Re-Cap the Work of the Group

One of the most powerful meetings for the group was the last one, which took place at Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco. The last meeting began with a fascinating site visit going out on boats with local salmon fishermen to pick their brains about the impact of changes in the delta on the salmon fishery.

In their ensuing work session, the group reviewed highlights of the maps from the previous discussions and realized how much ground they had covered. What they all realized was both how much they had learned, what new ideas they now had about governance issues, gaining participation of in-delta farmers and residents, and potential solutions (such as combining farming and habitat preservation on islands).



WHAT DIDN'T WORK?

Stepping Back from Controversy Prematurely

The planners of the Delta Dialogues were well aware that a bomb was about to drop. The long anticipated, and feared, high profile [Bay Delta Conservation Plan](#) was about to be released just prior to the July meeting of the Delta Dialogues' group. The plan is to create a water conveyance tunnel through the delta. This is a controversial proposal, but it's one that the governor has championed.

BDCP Map of Bay Delta Conservation Plan



The Bay Delta Conservation Plan, announced in July, was not unexpected. But it has major consequences for many stakeholders, including the farmers in the delta.

The Dialogue Map captured this commentary:

"All impacts associated with BDCP or related activities take place in the Delta at the expense of Delta residents, while the Delta residents don't get any benefits."

Much of the July meeting was devoted to gathering participants' responses to the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. Although the conversation was being mapped in real time, the participants weren't paying attention to the Dialogue Map. At one point, Jeff Conklin felt that the group was going down a rat hole—spending too much time on the specific issues surrounding the BDCP, and losing sight of the big picture. So he jumped in and tried to focus the group back on the Dialogue Map and to pop the discussion up a layer to all the other larger issues that loomed in this Wicked Problem space. His co-facilitator, Kristin Conklin, disagreed. She felt that it was important for the group to air their concerns. Joe Mathews reported:

“Cobble believed that stopping a difficult, if civil conversation about a source of conflict could be a setback for the Dialogues. ‘I remember feeling like his approach was not helpful to building the container,’ she would say. ‘If conflict is handled productively, it helps make the container strong. ... If conflict is deferred, it makes the container weaker.’”

Jeff's attempt to broaden the conversation, focus on the Dialogue Maps, and move to a meta level failed. People weren't ready to leave the “heat” of the controversy yet.

Trying to Focus the Group on the Dialogue Maps

The way that Jeff Conklin prefers to work is to have the Dialogue Map be THE container for the conversations surrounding a Wicked Problem. According to Jeff, Dialogue Mapping is not just a note-taking artifact; it should be the focal point of the conversation. It should be used to focus people's attention on the issues at hand and to flesh out all the ideas and issues and pros and cons. But often the group prefers to just talk and debate, letting the mapping facilitator simply capture the dialogue, without paying much attention to the map that's being built. The problem with this approach, Jeff Conklin points out, is that it doesn't build ownership of the dialogue.

On the other hand, dragging people back to the maps when they'd rather just talk can be frustrating to the participants.

WHAT HAPPENED IN SPITE OF HICCUPS?

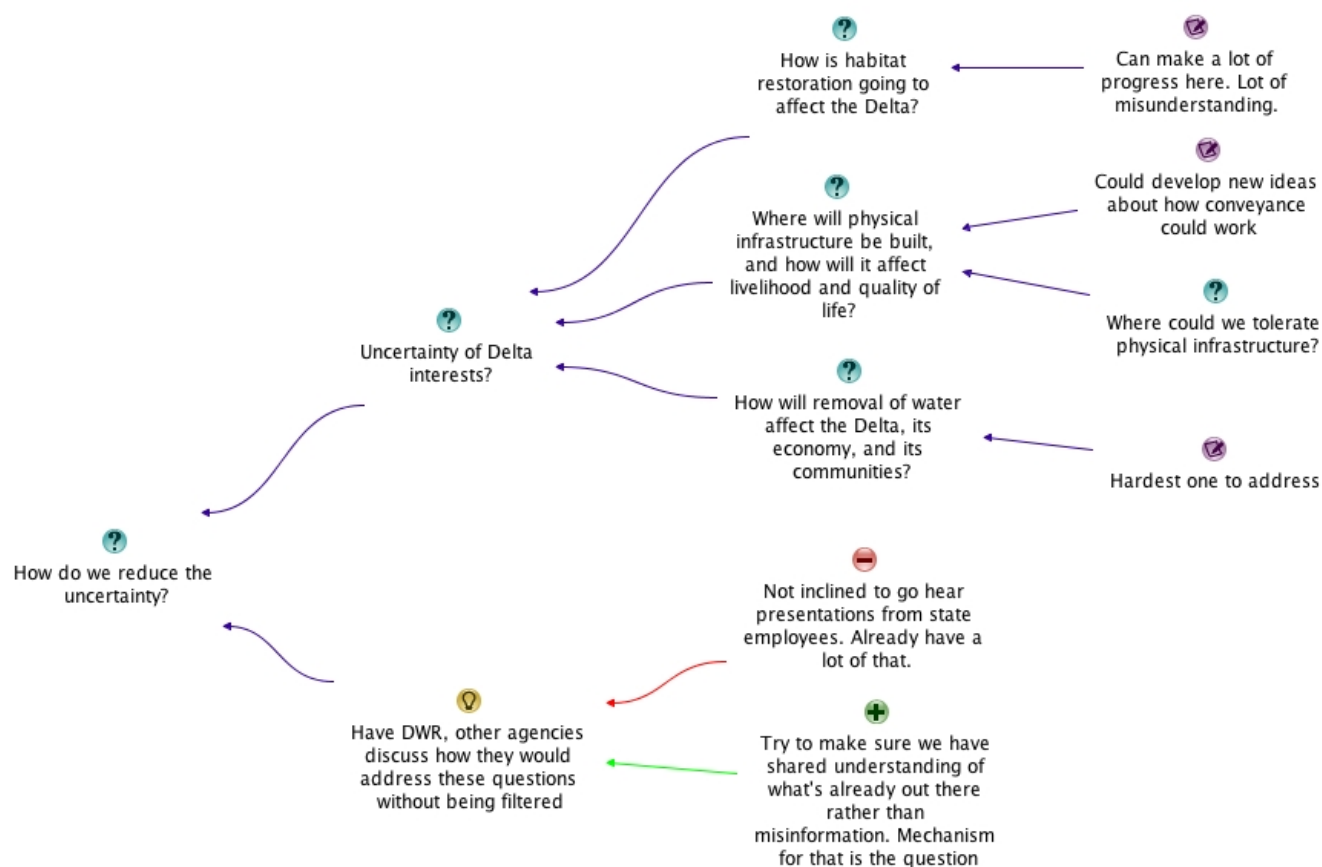
Dialogue Maps Capture the Truth and Illuminate the Pros and Cons of Solutions

Looking through the Dialogue Maps that were captured, especially at the two relatively rocky meetings (July and August) after the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) was unveiled, it's obvious that the group made significant headway in not only documenting their concerns and issues around the BDCP proposal, but also in coming up with antidotes and solutions.

In August, the Delta Dialogues' participants made a site visit to a large organic fruit farm, Greene and Hemly. One of the deep impressions that visit made was how difficult it is for farmers to make business and investment decisions in the light of all the uncertainty swirling around the BDCP.

One of the maps they created as they debriefed offered a number of suggestions for reducing that uncertainty for the farmers.

How Do We Reduce the Uncertainty Introduced by the Bay Delta Conservation Plan?



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Delta Dialogues' participants learned to cherish good questions, like "how do we reduce uncertainty?" And how to unpack those questions into ones that can be addressed, such as: "How is habitat restoration going to affect the Delta?" or "Where will the physical infrastructure be built and how will it affect livelihood and quality of life?" The latter question led to an opening: "Let's develop some new ideas about how this could work..."

WHAT'S NEXT? PHASE 2

Declare Victory; Document the Process and Present the Results

The Delta Dialogues team has done an amazing job of summarizing their results and making this process visible to all. Here are just some of the ways they have documented and distributed information to participants and anyone interested:

1. A beautiful designed and written report, [The Delta Dialogues Phase 1 Report](#), that is informative and captures the ups and downs of the entire process of Phase 1.
2. A [video](#) documentary.

3. A publicly accessible [website](#) with detailed documentation of the entire process.
4. [Blog posts](#) by many different participants that takes the place of a journal, describing different events and opinions during the entire process from planning the Delta Dialogues through the six-month and now into its aftermath.
5. The many Dialogue Maps from each meeting (you can find these by clicking on the [Meetings tab](#) on the website).

Final Panel Discussion



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Panelists were Jason Peltier, Dale Hoffman-Floerke, Russell van Loben Sels, and Gilbert Cosio. Joe Mathews was the moderator.

The official report was published in February and highlighted in a panel discussion in front of a large audience in Sacramento. Nancy Ullrey blogged:

“On February 6, 2013, the Delta Dialogues was featured in a panel discussion entitled “Is Peace Possible In the Delta Water Wars?” at the UC Center in Sacramento. Panelists were Jason Peltier, Dale Hoffman-Floerke, Russell van Loben Sels, and Gilbert Cosio. Joe Mathews, who usually writes on this blog, was the moderator.

About 150 people attended the hour long panel discussion. Daniel Weintraub, from HealthyCal.org, wrote a nice summary at their website, [here](#)."

Continue the Process

The good news is that there was so much good will and learning that came out of the Delta Dialogues' process, the group has decided to go into Phase 2. That will be kicking off this week! I imagine that we'll all be able to follow along on the Delta Dialogues [website](#).

Have the Group Create an Issue Map to Share with Other Stakeholders

Since the beginning of the Delta Dialogues, there has been a tension in the group between wanting to accomplish something tangible and the fear that, without sufficiently strong relationships, any serious attempt at substantive discussion would disintegrate into rancor, and the whole project could fall apart. Going into Phase 2, Jeff Conklin and his colleagues feel that the level of trust (of each other) and confidence (in the process) is strong enough to support a significant broadening of the scope of the Dialogues to include the creation of something, some kind of work product, that could have an impact on the broken situation in the Delta.

*This was the first time that the "customers,"
the residents, farmers, and fishermen in the affected region,
had been included in the design discussions.*

The challenge is that there are still many areas of intense feelings and strong disagreement among the stakeholders. Being cordial with your neighbor, for instance, doesn't mean you like their plan to destroy your view by building a second story on their home. Indeed, there are virtually no current and pressing Delta issues on which the Delta Dialogues stakeholders agree.

The plan for Phase 2 is to use Dialogue and Issue Mapping to help the stakeholders discuss these contentious issues in a way that:

1. Allows for a one-time rehash of the old, tiresome arguments, if necessary
2. Maps the details of the argument, capturing the key points, so that there's no sense in repeating them
3. Stimulates new thinking on the issue (new questions, new ideas, new arguments)

The idea is that the process continues to build trust and confidence, but also results in a work product, an issue map, that is both *comprehensive*—encapsulates all points of view—and *neutral*—presents the rationale for all positions with equal detail. (Think of the voter's guide you get in advance of a referendum in your state or county.)

After applying a bit of "map hygiene" to the issue maps from a session (i.e., spelling, grammar, etc.), Conklin's team will publish the maps on the project website and will explore ways to both drive traffic to the site and to allow the public to interact with the issue maps in the hopes that, just possibly, some of that trust and confidence created in the Dialogue's sessions begins to grow and spread within the various stakeholder communities. Conklin says, "The big question for this project is this. We know how to create shared understanding among the participants, but can the shared understandings among this relatively tiny group of representative stakeholders be somehow exported beyond the meeting room? Although it will be almost impossible to attribute any given breakthrough to the Delta Dialogues, such as avoiding a lawsuit, we hope to gradually and gently dismantle this unworkable condition of hyper-polarization that has become the norm in the Delta."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



With 30 years of experience consulting to customer-centric executives in technology-aggressive businesses across many industries, **PATRICIA B. SEYBOLD** is a visionary thought leader with the unique ability to spot the impact that technology enablement and customer behavior will have on business trends very early. She assesses and predicts how new and evolving technologies will impact customers. She forecasts the ways in which both business and consumer customers will make new demands on companies in many different industries.

Seybold provides customer-centric executives within Fortune 1000 companies with strategic insights, technology guidance, and best practices. Her hands-on experience, her discovery and chronicling of best practices, her deep understanding of information technology, her large, loyal client base, and her ongoing case study research enhances the thought leadership she provides.

Seybold uses a coaching, mentoring, and learn-by-doing consultative approach to help clients achieve their goals as they transform their corporate cultures to be more customer-centric. She helps her clients' teams redesign their businesses from the outside in by inviting their customers to invent new streamlined ways of accomplishing their desired outcomes, using their own real-world scenarios.



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