Narrator: We each have our own perspectives and our own mental models. We just don’t see or perceive things the same way as each other – even though we’re mostly unaware of that fact! This idea is well explained in the old tale from India of the Blind Men and the Elephant. Here is a version of it by John Godfrey Saxe, who lived from 1816 until 1887.

Text: The Blind Men and the Elephant

Narrator: It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a WALL!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, "Ho, what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a SPEAR!"

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a SNAKE!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee
"What most this precious beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he:
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a TREE!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a FAN!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant is very like a ROPE!"

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

Or, as the authors of your textbook put it,

“No one person can see the whole of a social-ecological system. The development of an adequate understanding of the behaviour of such systems requires the collaborative meshing of many perspectives.”

And, when we try to communicate with others, since we have differing perceptions of reality, differing concepts, and differing ways of labeling those concepts with written and oral language and symbols, meaningful communication is actually quite difficult.

Text: The Basic Communication Loop

**Narrator:** When you are trying to communicate thoughts and ideas with a friend, there are many, many opportunities for miscommunication. You have a particular set of concepts in your mind, and your friend also has a particular and potentially different set of concepts in her mind. There may or may not be an overlap in your conceptual repertoires!

The names or labels that you attach to your concepts may or may not be the same as the names or labels that your friend attaches to the same concepts – or, you may even use the same names or labels for different concepts!

The signals, written or oral language, or even mathematical symbols that you use to convey your concepts to your friend may or may not be received and interpreted in the same way as you intended, and vice-versa. Communication is a difficult task among friends, let alone between stakeholders representing vastly differing interests and world views, and who may be trying to exchange ideas and understand complex human-ecological concepts.

Think about some neutral, objective techniques you have learned thus far for describing and communicating complex human-ecological relationships: systems dynamics models.

Text: References


End of presentation.