

*On the ground: Reimagining community protection of the ecosphere in the
Northern Rivers*

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Abstract: It would appear that the effects of sustained overuse of the planet's resources is straining the natural world to its limits. The consequences of staying on this path may be catastrophic for both planet and humankind. At this time, when the ecosphere which sustains us all is so fragile, it seems imperative that we address the nature of the fundamental relationship between humans and their environment. Hence, we should perhaps undertake to reimagine our relationship with nature, with place and with each other if we are to counteract such malign influences. This paper will argue that localised, direct democratic action offers us one way in which we may begin to redeem these relationships by providing an account of the way in which an assortment of subcultures in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales united to successfully oppose mining for coal seam gas. The Northern Rivers is renowned for its natural endowments and a community which boasts great diversity. A variety of motivations led to an array of groups exerting their collective power and unity at grassroots level to defeat the attempt to introduce unconventional methods of gas extraction. In this process, a sense of place emerged as an important factor for many of those resisting the mining. The movement as it unfolded 'on the ground' proposes an alternative way of being and belonging, developed through a different relationship to place, community and the ecosphere.

Keywords: sense of place; democracy; coal seam gas.

Introduction

Some days before an estimated 800 police were reputed to arrive to break the Bentley Blockade, the place was a hive of activity: groups of protestors were practising their methods of peaceful resistance and refining their contingency plans. Newcomers were streaming into the area and logistical preparations were proceeding. It was feared that police intervention would be brutal and swift, and there was speculation on the direction of their approach throughout the site. However, later that day, it was announced that the New South Wales State Government had revoked Metgasco's mining licence, referred the company to the Independent Commission against Corruption and called off the police action (Nicholls 2014). Jubilation and rejoicing ensued, though this was not a definitive end to the threat.

The action at Bentley came about as a response to impending unconventional gas mining in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, a region that is renowned for its natural beauty and diverse community. Its inhabitants were provoked to mobilise to protect the land, water and air on which they depend, working together at the local level, that is, 'on the ground.' This paper explores two related themes: how relationship with place and nature informed the on-the-ground collective resistance to the threat of invasive gas mining; and the inclusion of direct/participatory democratic principles in the array of methods used to achieve ends in a non-violent manner. These themes demonstrate one way of positively reimagining our relationships with others and with the Earth, providing an example of what is possible.

Told from the perspective of the authors, both of whom engaged in sustained participation in the movement over a period of years, this paper firstly provides some context for this case study after which we outline a personal account of our experiences during the Bentley blockade from an emic perspective. As such, we are part of the culture that developed and are able to provide a standpoint 'from the inside.' As Olive (2014) notes, "it is impossible to truly comprehend and appreciate the nuances of a particular culture unless one resides within that culture." After critically reflecting upon our lived experiences, we extend our analysis to a broader context. We suggest that the two themes identified above—sense of place and a combination of direct and participatory democracy—initiated at the local level, are important factors that may help to influence and inform responses to environmental problems on a national or international scale.

Indeed, one of the most fundamental facts of our existence is our reliance on the ecosphere for survival.¹ At a time when the ecosphere is so fragile, it is imperative that we address the nature of the relationships between humans and their environment, and between ourselves. We will argue that there is increasing urgency to address looming ecological problems such as climate change and pollution at the planetary level. Yet, achieving consensus is proving to be elusive in an atmosphere of escalating mutual distrust within and between nations, even in those with long traditions of liberal democracy, as President Trump's isolationism and rejection of the Paris Climate Accord demonstrates. The consequences of ignoring ecological problems may be catastrophic for both planet and humankind (Ripple et al. 2017).

We contend that in the first instance it is at the local level that the threats identified above must be responded to, that is, 'on the ground.' This is because as embodied beings we are attached to the earth in particular places. Our knowing and our being are informed by our physical location in fundamental ways—ways that permeate our whole physicality, not just our minds, and out of that is often born a deep affection for and connection to place (Larsen & Johnson 2012). Many people are conscious of their affection for and attachment to their locale and when it is under threat, this can be a catalyst for provoking social action. Thus, we argue that the beginning of any project to regenerate our relations with each other and with the ecosphere should incorporate a form of direct and participatory democracy practised in situ as exemplified by the anti-coal seam gas (CSG) movement in the Northern Rivers, as described below.

Background

In 1999, a small petroleum exploration and production company called Metgasco formed to extract gas from the Northern Rivers (Deem 2016) and initially received favourable attention from the local media on the basis that it would supply the area with cheap natural gas, as well as providing much-needed employment. It was not until around 2010-2011 that public concern began to be expressed about the method of gas extraction. It emerged that Metgasco intended to use highly contentious extractive techniques: unconventional gas mining, which included fracking. This technique involves injecting water, sand and a range of highly toxic chemicals at high pressure to release gas, resulting in the production of huge amounts of salt water that may contain residues such as heavy metals and radioactive material. This water must then be either stored or treated due to its toxicity. Further, there were concerns about the escape of emissions of methane and other gases into both the groundwater and the atmosphere (Hartman & Darab 2014). Unconventional gas mining also carries the possibility of catastrophic pressure loss resulting from excessive drawdown of the ancient groundwater stored in the Great Artesian Basin (Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development 2014, p. 116). In an already dry continent subject to frequent droughts that affect food production, any loss of groundwater is of great concern (Eamus et al. 2015).

In response to the emergence of these concerns, community landowners affected by the proposed mining began a resistance that initially took the form of an information campaign via the local press and community meetings. This quickly developed into a mobilisation drive involving countless workshops and the forming of a plethora of individual action groups in both town and country areas. Rural residents were encouraged to survey their neighbours and declare their roads 'gasfield free' on the basis of the survey results, which invariably demonstrated overwhelming opposition to Metgasco's plans. The guiding principle adopted by the resistance was encapsulated by the slogan "non-violent and non-negotiable" borrowed from earlier social movements. Alongside the community actions, the Lismore City Council election, which was held in September 2012, included a referendum-style poll that was implemented by the Electoral Commission of New South Wales. Voters were asked whether or not they supported coal seam gas exploration and production in the Lismore City Council area. The response was

an overwhelming 87% opposition to this activity (Luke et al. 2014). Other local councils in the region were more circumspect, but were persistently lobbied in numerous ways by anti-CSG groups and individuals. Meanwhile, the State Member failed to adequately represent these constituents' concerns in the NSW Parliament.

The ongoing resistance continued from 2012 until Metgasco's acceptance of the NSW government's buyback offer of its mining license in December 2015. During that time, the opposition in the Northern Rivers saw numerous meetings, rallies and a great variety of non-violent actions, including most notably three blockades; one in Glenugie in late 2012/early 2013, one in Doubtful Creek in early 2013 and finally at Bentley in the first part of 2014 (Deem 2016) as outlined below.

The drill rig in Glenugie was considerably delayed in gaining access to the site selected for drilling owing to a string of events such as cars with flat tyres and other impediments blocking the road. Many of the protestors were locals and were zealous in their continued efforts to hamper the drilling. The blockade itself endured over the Christmas period, with protestors using their ingenuity to decorate the site and celebrate the festive season. Eventually the police from the Police Rescue Squad and the Tactical Response Group were called in to break the blockade, using force to remove the protectors (Feain 2013; Northern Star 2013). The blockade lasted 76 days (Deem 2016), ending when the drill rig pulled out to move operations to Doubtful Creek.

The rig arrived at Doubtful Creek in early February 2013 where protestors had been massing. The police contingent emerged out of the forest to be met by a determined but peaceful crowd of protestors singing and blocking the gate through which the rig needed to pass. Over the course of this blockade, a number of arrests were made beginning with those who had attached themselves to various structures or were blocking access by other means (Deem 2016). Again, the rig established a drilling site, but abandoned it in March, subsequently announcing their decision to suspend all CSG drilling in the Northern Rivers. However, in late October, Metgasco stated at its annual general meeting a new intention to drill at Bentley, approximately 10 kilometres from Lismore, which has a population of around 44,000 (Deem 2016; Lismore City Council 2016). In late December 2013, preparations began to oppose drilling at Bentley and in late January a 24-hour vigil was established at the site. Protestors now became protectors (Deem 2016).

Collective power, ingenuity and cooperation

As the movement evolved, a series of groups became key resources for organising the resistance. This included the nationwide group Lock the Gate formed by Drew Hutton, and at the local level, groups such as Northern Rivers Gasfield Free were influential. Indigenous people, in particular the Githabul people, played a significant role in expressing their opposition to what they saw as the violation of their land. A major contribution to the blockades was the smoking ceremonies Indigenous people would conduct for those protestors who were willing to chain themselves to devices or otherwise resist attempts to remove them. The experience of participating in a smoking ceremony is one of deep connection to both the place that is being protected as well as the other

protectors. It is our understanding that these are considered to be sacred events and we felt privileged to be participants. Elders also regularly gave impassioned addresses to the massed gatherings and lay down on the road with other protectors in attempts to halt the advance of drilling vehicles. Such experiences brought disparate groups of people together in action, giving them a commonality and indeed a bond they might never have otherwise had, as discussed below.

Farmers contributed by providing land for protestors to camp on and they became a fundamental part of the campaign by giving addresses at rallies and meetings—in particular, the early morning meetings at Bentley—as well as travelling to Sydney to attempt to influence parliamentarians and other decision makers. They were particularly persuasive because their direct livelihoods were at stake. When they talked, they elicited emotional responses from the crowds, speaking passionately about their love for the land.

Thousands of local people from Lismore and other towns in the region also became heavily involved and—for the first time in some cases—they rubbed shoulders with many people committed to alternative lifestyles and environmental causes—meetings that would normally be outside their daily experience, as reported to the authors. The social markers such as class, gender, place of residence and occupation that had previously separated and distinguished inhabitants from each other fell away in the unity of action, with many participants publicly expressing at the regular gatherings their emotional attachment to a place that had become imbued with special meaning for them.

Key actors also came from a range of disparate fields. Their expertise encompassed the fields of psychology, chemical toxicology, local government, health promotion, community development, law, academia and politics. Veterans of the previous environmental protest in the region in the late 1970s to save the rainforest in Terania Creek also made important contributions. These actors were not leaders in the sense of taking command; rather, they played an educative role and advocated a model of distributed leadership that saw many small groups forming to mount their own activities depending upon their areas of interest. With such a variety of groups and individuals participating, obviously there was bound to be disagreement at times. Disputes were handled by holding regular meetings in which deliberative and consensus-style democratic approaches were employed, so that as many decisions as possible were taken at the grassroots level. Inclusiveness, respect for differences of opinion and the general agreement about the broader objective of defeating the introduction of gas mining seemed to act as a sort of glue to bind the vast majority of protectors together, avoiding major conflict.

One group that achieved some notoriety was the Knitting Nannas, who adopted as their slogan “saving the land for the kiddies” and sought through the use of humour and non-threatening activity (i.e. knitting) to subvert the stereotypical image of so-called hippie protestors. For instance, they would sit outside the office of the local National state Member of Parliament (mentioned previously) every Thursday lunchtime to knit, and the intention was to do so until the Northern Rivers was gasfield free. In this way, the group interacted with the wider community and garnered huge public support. Cars would drive by, with drivers waving and tooting their horns, or the car occupants would yell, “Go the Nannas.” People in the street would stop and chat or buy a Ban CSG badge. Sometimes

the Nannas would attempt to see the member, but most of the time he was away—not on the ground at all.

The ingenuity, imagination and co-operation that these small groups exercised drew in people who, as noted above, would not ordinarily have taken part in such a movement. They performed an educative role as well, which was very often persuasive. Some participants, for example, organised viewings of films about unconventional gas mining for the general public. Others used their premises, both commercial and residential, as a means to promote the movement. Funds were raised in many ways, for example via the sale of merchandise but also more imaginative methods were employed, such as the staging of a locally written and produced play in pantomime style called *Coal Seam Gas: The Musical*, which used local talent and humour to convey a message of non-violent opposition. Once again, the production brought a diverse range of community members together in a common cause.

The movement also attracted others to the region to contribute. Mostly they articulated a strong commitment to environmental protection as their main motivation for becoming involved. Yvonne spent months participating in a roadside vigil at Bentley with many people, some of whom were from other parts of the country. As these months elapsed, these contributors became woven into the fabric of the ongoing and growing non-violent resistance so that a little part of them, too, belonged in this place. At Gate C, where Yvonne began acting in a police liaison role on her pre-dawn shifts in the latter part of the blockade, an assortment of locals and non-locals was protecting a junction from whence the police might arrive. The usual tripod, signs and other installations began to sprout, and a fireplace was built, with a fire kept burning or smouldering at all times. Even in the soaking rain of blackest night, the fire was burning. For those of us on the ground at those times, it was a symbol of that most elemental force that draws us together: the fire in the hearth.

Over time, more and more so-called 'ordinary' people were turning into eco-warriors. When the first mass call-out to block an estimated 200-strong police contingent occurred, a long line of car headlights was visible as far as where the road wound out of sight between the hills, as people arrived in the dark of the early hours to stand against the police. Making one's way up to the main gate, from the main camp (called Liberty), hundreds of little points of light from torches bounced up and down in what seemed a never-ending stream as the protectors walked to the gate. Such experiences were both exhilarating and deeply moving all at once. The police failed to materialise that morning, but their aborted exercise only added to the numbers of people joining us on the ground at Bentley. As the anticipated final showdown at Bentley neared with the predicted arrival of 800 police, Sandy was joining very large groups of people who were gathering to train in methods of non-violent resistance in preparation for the onslaught. Once again this activity fostered a sense of camaraderie. Further, many expressed a love of place to the point of willingness to physically endanger themselves for the cause.

Our experience was that these kinds of activities drew locals and non-locals together for a common purpose that erased the distinction between locals and outsiders. The participants often articulated a sense of unity that arose from their desire to protect the land, which had achieved monumental significance for them. As the final confrontation loomed, regular morning rituals with singing and the Bentley Angel ascending the tripod

began to occur, taking on a sacred character for many. This significance was fuelled by the popular perception that the Bentley site was pivotal in arresting the advance of gas mining in the Northern Rivers.



The fire in the hearth: Bentley 2014. © Yvonne Hartman.

Motivations

A variety of motivations becomes apparent in the foregoing narrative. Three in particular stand out. In the first instance we have seen that not only a sense of place, but a love of place was a potent impulse that provoked action on the ground. This was bound up to some degree with a sense of a distinctive regional identity that was expressed by speakers such as Indigenous leaders and farmers. There is some support for this in the literature: Usher (2013), writing about a mobilisation against a coal mine in Britain, finds that local identity and place are inextricably intertwined, becoming cemented over time. Chapin and Knapp (2015) have proposed that a sense of place, often understood as a subjective interpretation of a space bound up with personal meaning and experience, acts as a

motivator for stewardship on a local scale, whilst Kudryavtsev, Stedman and Krasny (2012, p. 229) relatedly suggest that sense of place can foster “pro-environmental behaviour.” However, Larsen and Johnson go furthest by developing what we mean by ‘sense of place’ using a phenomenological approach. They suggest that although we may see the natural and social worlds *as distinct phenomena*, the reality of our embodied experience depends first and foremost upon place, such that “place does more than bridge; it grounds” (2012, p. 641).

A slightly broader motivation was community cohesion. The Mayor of Lismore City Council often expressed her opposition to the mining in terms of the hole that would be torn in the fabric of the community. She outlined the divisions that would open up, for example, between farmers who allowed gas mining on their land and neighbours who did not; between the gas workers, who would not be living in the general community, and townspeople; and the effects on the regional economy that would see a devaluing of some resources and an overvaluing of others.

Finally, the broadest of all motivations and one that would seem to have been shared by all protectors was that of making a contribution to saving the Earth in some small way. This was the most common motivation expressed by non-locals who arrived to take part in the resistance. And those locals who were newcomers to environmental activism often expressed a new awareness of the environmental dangers the planet is facing. Their participation thus had an educative effect that may well be lasting. In the final analysis, not only was the movement successful in arresting the introduction of an extractive industry that promised great environmental harm to the Northern Rivers, it also produced intangible benefits such as: new skills learned, particularly in collective action and decision-making; stronger ties with neighbours and community members who would not normally be thrown together, or as Larsen and Johnson express it, “unexpected coalitions and partnerships” (2012, p. 633); and for many, a deep and abiding sense of place that demands ongoing praxis.

Discussion

We suggest these motivations encapsulate the two themes referred to in the introduction. Sense of place is specifically named as a motivation, whilst the practices of community cohesion and ecological activism are enacted via direct and participatory democracy. The question is whether they can be applied at a broader level, given that there is an urgent need for international cooperation and concerted effort to avert ecological collapse on a global scale (Ripple et al. 2017). In order to interrogate the potential of these themes, it is necessary to provide some context in terms of the global environmental situation as well as economic and political arrangements that have contributed to current conditions.

It would appear that the effects of sustained overuse of the planet’s resources through ever expanding industrialisation is straining the ecosphere to its limits. The price that China pays for its breakneck industrialisation is a range of environmental harms, of which life-threatening air pollution is but one example. However, the ore that China depends upon is mined elsewhere, causing environmental damage such as excessive water and

energy consumption, and an increase in greenhouse gases in source countries such as Australia (Mudd & Yellishetty 2011). This is not an isolated instance, but aptly illustrates some of the dimensions of the problem. We are now seeing ominous signals (such as climate change and its effects) that we are approaching a “tipping point” (Scheffers et al. 2016). Some are suspicious that we might have already passed it (Arctic Council 2016, p. xii; Ripple et al. 2017). Arguably, this state of affairs is attributable to the historical conditions of industrial society and more recently the economic and political circumstances of the twentieth century.

The post-World War II consensus in Western nations was directed towards the prevention of extremism and authoritarian dictatorships like the fascism that had so recently resulted in armed occupations, genocide and war on a global scale. The war was partly attributable to the severe economic depression that had preceded it and so the post-war effort included not only liberal democratic principles such as individual liberty, the extension of citizens' rights, periodic election of representative governments and the separation of powers, but also economic stabilisation and the development of a welfare state that provided for its less fortunate citizens, which Esping-Andersen (1996) has argued assisted social integration. This economic approach could be called managed capitalism, following Keynesian principles (Keynes 1997). However, as prosperity declined in the 1970s, neoclassical economics began once again to gain ascendancy, with the result that over the next decades the welfare state was subject to incremental retrenchment. At the same time, economic globalisation increasingly led to more tightly integrated markets characterised by trade deals that have led to extreme imbalances in wealth in both the developed and less developed world (Galbraith 2008; Pogge 2008).

This constellation of economic and political arrangements has had benefits for some social groups, but also malign consequences such as economic inequality and environmental degradation on a global level. Previously—in liberal democratic states at least—some measure of stability and respect for human rights has existed alongside industrial capitalism. However, this situation seems to be eroding as we see populism, racism and xenophobia increasingly valorised in public. This is evidenced by such events as a presidential candidate (now President) in the United States of America calling for Muslim immigrants to be placed in internment camps, despite the U.S.A. having apologised for doing that very thing to Japanese residents during WWII (Bronwich 2016). Populism is also evident in the successful campaign for Britain to leave the European Union. We are also seeing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers portrayed as responsible for a range of ills that can arguably be attributed to the combination of war, environmental catastrophe and the economic inequality already referred to (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

Media commentators argue that the new surge towards populism and intolerance is characterised by the erosion of trust in democratic institutions, as well as suspicion of and even outright hostility to minorities (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Australia is not immune in this regard. The current surge in popularity of minor parties and independents campaigning on ‘anti-political,’ anti-immigrant platforms such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party testifies to this trend. Cameron and McAllister (2016, pp. 74-79) find that trust in democracy and politicians is at its lowest level since the Australian Election Survey began. This loss of trust in traditional political arrangements is unlikely to further efforts to halt environmental harm.

In light of these developments, we suggest there is a need to reimagine our relations with each other and the ecosphere if we are to arrest the current, possibly irreparable, trajectory toward social and environmental damage. In such an atmosphere, we suggest that the anti-gasfield movement in the Northern Rivers can be an example of how protecting the ecosphere can be enacted, and a large measure of its success can be attributed to a different way of relating and doing that is literally grounded in our physical environment, namely, via sense of place and participatory democratic methods.

The case of the anti-gas mining resistance in the Northern Rivers illustrates this different way of operating. In particular, the deliberate adoption of non-violence rules out the kinds of outrages we see being committed against migrants and other minorities in both the U.K. since Brexit, and the U.S. since the American election campaign (ABC Television 2016; Corcoran & Smith 2016; Southern Policy Law Center 2016). A further crucial difference we have noted above is that the movement was generated by the people directly affected at the local level—on the ground—rather than by a national-level referendum or election. Castells (2004, pp. 334-335) argues that in response to the legitimization crises experienced in Western nations, nation-states resorted to the devolution of some of their powers to the regional or local level. However, because of the considerable attachment that people feel towards their spatial and cultural locales, “once decentralization occurs, local and regional governments may seize the initiative on behalf of their populations ... eventually coming in competition with their own parent states” (p. 335). We have seen an example of this phenomenon described above, when the local government in Lismore played an active part in the resistance towards CSG mining, using direct democratic methods to oppose the State Government. This included measures such as the poll discussed earlier, providing leadership by heading rallies, visiting the blockade, and media appearances advocating for an end to the CSG mining.

This kind of activity provides support for our argument that the most important factors in understanding the strength and resolve of the anti-CSG movement in the Northern Rivers were a sense of place and the use of direct/participatory democratic methods. Lake (1994, in Pratchett 2004, p. 366) argues that local autonomy from central governments is a “bottom-up phenomenon, in which localities reflect and develop a sense of place through political and social interaction.” Furthermore, Larsen and Johnson (2012) advance a notion of place as important in what they call “affinity politics,” which occurs when people disengage from the exigencies of states and markets, and instead adopt forms of direct action that address community needs, using fluid and decentralised forms of organisation, deliberation and engagement within the context of place, whereby unique meanings and bonds are created. As Razsa and Kurnik (2012, p. 250) state, in reflecting on the Occupy movement in Ljubljana, Slovenia, “direct democratic practice extends across the fabric of daily life and is inseparable from lived experience.” Our personal experience participating in the anti-CSG movement in the Northern Rivers for a number of years confirms that affinity politics grounded in place and a sense of place was in play.

Indeed, we would argue that what we have seen demonstrated by this movement is an alternative way of being and belonging that embodies at its core a respect for the ecosphere; not just the humans in it, but the totality of the Earth. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon; it has been expressed most potently by Indigenous peoples, but also by those who see themselves as stewards of something innately precious. As well, it has been expressed in other social movements attempting to save places under environmental

threat. However, it has not been the dominant mode of existence in modernity and post-modernity. What this way of being and belonging asks of us is that we pay attention to where we are, to the meaning imbued in physical location and to take action at that level, in a way that respects not just other humans but all that surrounds us. Literally and metaphorically, we need to be on the ground.

Conclusion

We have argued that liberal democracies are struggling to contain forces that are threatening the post-World War II consensus on a global scale. While offering a measure of peace and stability, this consensus has allowed a continuation of pernicious practices and modes of existence that have exacerbated social inequality and invited environmental catastrophe. Australia is bound up in this web of practices and relations but for many, there is a growing realisation that the dominant order must be resisted in situ.

We have described one such case of resistance that we experienced in person, on the ground in our own region. In this instance, it was successful. Factors that appear to have made major contributions to this outcome were a commitment to non-violence, a strong sense of place and the use of direct and participatory democratic methods to practise a form of affinity politics. We contend this constellation of factors offers a way of reimagining our relations with each other and with the environment that is more attuned to our real needs and place in the ecosphere.

However, this assertion is not a call to reject cosmopolitanism or dispense with liberal democracy and the nation state. We have acknowledged the benefits that both national and supranational co-operation can bring, and they are necessary and appropriate for peace building, mitigating inequalities and environmental protection. Nevertheless, action for all of these desirable goals may need in the first instance to originate from citizens on the ground rather than as prescriptions from a central government. The anti-CSG movement has spread to many other parts of Australia and has offered other communities under similar threat a model for action that offers meaningful connection to place and each other. At this point in the history of our civilisation, such a model is sorely needed. After all, as Ripple et al. (2017) so eloquently state, “we must recognize, in our day-to-day lives *and* [emphasis added] in our governing institutions, that Earth with all its life is our only home.”

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¹ We use the term ecosphere as expressed by the Oxford Dictionaries (2016), where it is differentiated from the term biosphere by its emphasis on the interaction between living and non-living components.