

# 14 PROTECTED AREAS AND PEOPLE: PARTICIPATORY CONSERVATION

**Ashish Kothari**

*Kalpavriksh, Pune, India, and*

*IUCN Theme on Indigenous and Local Communities, Equity, and Protected Areas (TILCEPA)*

*E-mail: [ashishkothari@vsnl.com](mailto:ashishkothari@vsnl.com)*

---

## 1. Introduction

Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are considering, at the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP) in Kuala Lumpur, a Programme of Work on protected areas. One key element of this is on Governance, Participation, Equity, and Benefit-sharing. This element contains a number of specific recommendations for action, and it is important for parties to have adequate guidance on how they can move forward to implement these.

It is also important to place the COP discussions on this Programme of Work in the context of the recently held World Parks Congress (September 2003). Here, about 4000 delegates issued a declaration that squarely put indigenous peoples and local communities at the centre of conservation planning. They also strongly emphasised the need to put protected areas (PAs) in the context of the larger landscape, addressing issues of poverty and development, governance and empowerment, benefit- and cost-sharing all of this in order to achieve more effective protection for threatened ecosystems and species.

## 2. Why participatory conservation?

Participatory conservation has become an imperative for the following reasons:

- Local people have had long-standing traditions of conservation and restrained resource use, which the conventional model of PAs tends to ignore. The opportunity of utilising such traditions and knowledge is being lost, as is the

chance of actually making conservation a mass movement.

- In most situations, communities have customary and traditional rights to land and resources, and the denial of such rights is unjust and violative of basic human rights.
- The negative consequences of PAs on local people (physical displacement, denial of access to resources that have been traditionally used, alienation from sites of cultural value, and human rights violations), have generated considerable hostility and decreasing public support for PAs. Unless it can be shown that PAs have benefits for people, or are in some way linked to their lives, this decline could continue to the detriment of the PAs themselves.
- The focus on PAs as islands of conservation, with increasingly destructive land use around them, is becoming self-defeatist. Classic examples include wetlands that are protected, only to have their biodiversity being destroyed by pesticide and fertiliser run-offs from their agricultural surrounds. Involving people in surrounding areas, in land/water uses that are compatible, therefore becomes a necessity.

Evidence from a range of situations around the world (see box below) suggests that these issues can be effectively tackled by involving indigenous peoples and local communities in the conceptualisation and management of PAs, and recognising their own diverse initiatives towards conservation.

### 3. Towards participatory conservation: collaborative management and community conserved areas

There are two broad trends in participatory conservation (as illustrated in the box below):

- (i). The increasing role of indigenous peoples and local communities in the management of government-managed PAs, with sharing of decision-making power (*Collaborative Management of Protected Areas*);
- (ii). The recognition of the biodiversity significance of territories managed by such peoples and communities largely on their own (*Community Conserved Areas*).

Of these, the concept of “community conserved areas” (CCAs) is relatively new. These are sites of biodiversity significance that are effectively conserved by indigenous peoples or local communities (many of them pre-dating modern PAs by several millennia!). There are probably thousands of such CCAs around the world, with significant coverage of natural ecosystems and wildlife populations. Yet they have remained largely neglected by governments and international conservation NGOs. Box 1 contains some examples of case studies on collaborative protected area management (CMPA) and community conserved areas (CCAs)<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a compilation of several more such cases, please see *Policy Matters* (Journal of the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy), No. 12, 2003 (available at <http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Publications/Publications.htm>). For a synthesis report of regional reviews, see “[Community conserved areas \(CCAs\) and co-managed protected areas \(CMPAs\)-towards equitable and effective conservation in the context of global change](#)”, Report of TILCEPA for the Ecosystem, Protected Areas and People (EPP) project (April 2003 draft), by Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend ([http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Wkg\\_grp/TILCEPA/community.htm#epp](http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Wkg_grp/TILCEPA/community.htm#epp)). The cases in this box draw on documents written by Marco Bassi, Gonzalo Oviedo, J.P. Gladu, Vivienne Solis and colleagues, J. Nelson, N. Gami, Dermot Smyth, M. Merlo and

### 4. Tips for successful participatory conservation

The above and other examples have yielded valuable lessons on what to do, and what to avoid, while moving towards participatory conservation. Some key lessons that would be relevant for national protected area agencies:

***Learn from history:*** In particular, PA managers can learn from the successes and failures of the past, especially of the wise traditional use of resources by many communities, of the record of centralised state control that often alienated such communities from their resources, and of the changes taking place in land/water use and people-nature relations over centuries.

***Provide secure tenure to survival and livelihood resources:*** In many countries, communities have been dispossessed of their lands or resources, leading to breakdown of conservation and sustainability traditions and institutions. Reviving or providing security of access to lands and resources, is therefore an essential (though not necessarily sufficient) step in creating long-term stake in conservation.

***Clarify roles of all partners:*** All partners to a participatory conservation arrangement, and in particular the local communities and the official agencies, need to be clear about their respective roles. This would need to include the customary/traditional rights of local communities to land/resources and concomitantly, their responsibility for conservation.

---

colleagues, S. Jeanrenaud, Neema Pathak, and Ashish Kothari.

**Box 1: Collaborative Protected Area Management and Community Conserved Areas: Case Studies from Six Continents**

**Gurig National Park (Australia)**

In 1981, the establishment of Gurig National Park was agreed to by the Northern Territory Government and the Aboriginal traditional owners, to resolve a pending land claim under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. The traditional owners consented to the establishment of the National Park in return to regaining title and the right to use and occupy it. A Board of Management comprising traditional land owners and Northern Territory Government representatives, prepares the management plan, enforces the rights of local owners, determines rights of access to others, and ensures protection of sites important for the aboriginal population. Australian law also recognises several Indigenous Protected Areas, controlled by aboriginal peoples.

**Alto Fragua-Indiwasi (Colombia)**

The Alto Fragua-Indiwasi National Park was created in February 2002, after negotiations amongst the Colombian government, the Association of Indigenous Ingano Councils and the Amazon Conservation Team, an environmental NGO. The Park protects endangered humid sub-Andean forests, endemic species such as the spectacled bear (*Tremarctos ornatus*), and sacred sites of unique cultural value. The Ingano are principal actors in the design and management of the park, the first such instance in the country.

**Tayna Gorilla Reserve (Democratic Republic of Congo)**

The Tayna Gorilla Reserve of 800 sq km was created in 1999 through a formal agreement between the customary landholders, government and NGOs. Communities have been directly involved in the development of the Reserve's management plan, which emphasises conservation with rural development. Key challenges are the prevention of unauthorized resource uses by outsiders during periods of political instability, and the engagement of the local Pygmy population, so far been neglected in the co-management process.

**Forole (Kenya-Ethiopia)**

Forole is a sacred mountain between Kenya and Ethiopia, whose trees are totally protected by the Gabbra people. The lower part of the mountain provides permanent water and it is used as reserve grazing area by Gabbra and Borana pastoralists. Although there is sometimes tension over pastoral resources, the Borana fully respect the sacredness of Forole mountain and the inherent restrictions. This is an example of a community conserved area not univocally associated to a single ethnic group, and engaging local actors in complex economic and symbolic relationships.

**Gwaii Haanas (Canada)**

The Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, located in Queen Charlotte Islands, was established in 1986 under an agreement between Parks Canada and the Council of the Haida Nation. The Haida initiated the process, after their land and culture started to disappear due to heavy logging. Gwaii Haanas is now governed by a joint Management Board, and its establishment park has promoted a shift in the local economy from logging to tourism. Employment opportunities have also been created by the Park, with over 50% of staff being Haida people.

**Mendha-Lekha and Jardhargaon (India)**

Mendha-Lekha village in central India protects nearly 2000 hectares of forest containing threatened wildlife species. The forest belongs to the state, but it is the village that has staved off threats including timber logging and submergence by a dam. Mendha-Lekha's inhabitants have also declared "tribal self-rule", and practice a strong form of consensus democracy involving all adult members. Jardhargaon village in the Himalayan foothills of northern India, has over the last two decades protected 600 hectares of broad-leaved forest through a self-initiated Forest Protection Committee. Several dozen villages in other parts of the Himalaya conserve hundreds of square km of forest, under traditional arrangements of their own or

recognised by the state. These examples represent thousands of community conserved areas across South Asia, mostly not part of the government PA system.

**Val di Fiemme (Italy)**

Long-established traditions of community forestry in the North of Italy date from the Middle Ages, and in some places such as the Val di Fiemme (Magnifica Comunità di Cadore), were maintained thanks to the struggles of local residents against the state that wished to incorporate all forests into the national *demanio*. The forest-managing institutions are still strong and characterised by a spirit of mutual assistance and solidarity. Legally, the forest is owned by all people of the Vald di Fiemme. Community forests are inalienable, indivisible and collectively owned and managed, and the result is a continuing high quality of the ecosystems, with significant biodiversity values.

**Initiate a process of dialogue:** Oft-times, genuine and open dialogue amongst various ‘rightholders’ and stakeholders is missing, leading to misunderstandings and lost opportunities to bring their respective strengths together. Such regular dialogue at local, regional, and national levels is needed to reduce stereotypes, increase understanding, and arrive at mutually acceptable ways forward.

**Encourage ecologically sensitive livelihoods:** Clearly some traditional livelihoods are compatible with conservation objectives, while others may be detrimental. The former need encouragement and support, the latter need alternative approaches. In all cases, the search for secure livelihoods is important to tackle real poverty, and to link people’s lives with conservation.

**Distribute costs and benefits more equitably:** Given that most costs of conservation are borne by local people and most benefits go to ‘outsiders’, a more equitable sharing of costs and benefits is urgently needed. This should include tackling human-wildlife conflicts, channelling conservation benefits to local people, and other such steps.

**Create empowered institutions:** A single bureaucratic or scientific agency managing PAs is often not sustainable. There is a need for much more participatory institutions, such as joint management boards, village

conservation committees, and so on. These should provide a clear say to local people in decision-making, and build on relevant traditional institutions.

**Provide firm legal backing to the initiative:** Informal participatory conservation initiatives can be powerful and successful, but don’t often last long. Legal backing, through statutory or customary law or both, can be one element in providing such long-term sustenance.

**Build on traditional knowledge, provide modern inputs sensitively:** There is much in traditional practices and knowledge from which modern conservation can learn, and much in modern conservation science that traditional communities can benefit from. A judicious mix of the two, with neither dominating, needs to be attempted.

**Set up accessible and transparent dispute resolution mechanisms:** Disputes amongst community members, or between communities and others including official agencies, are commonplace in participatory conservation initiatives. Transparent and accessible mechanisms to resolve such disputes, including through third party mediation, are a good investment.

**Ensure public right to information:** Secrecy about conservation and development programmes (including budgets) is one major reason for suspicion and misunderstanding. Citizens, in particular

local communities, must have full access to all aspects of the conservation initiative, and developmental inputs that have a bearing on it.

***Consider various forms of PA governance:***

One of the clear messages from the World Parks Congress was that PAs can be governed not only by the federal or central government of a country, but also by communities, NGOs, local governments, private entities, and combinations of these. A country's PA network should therefore be able to accommodate, as appropriate to the situation, collaboratively managed PAs, community conserved areas (CCAs), private reserves, etc. (see, for instance, note on how CCAs fit each of the IUCN PA categories, at [www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/wkg\\_grp/TILCEPA/WPC/TILCEPA%20CCA%20mandate%20and%20work06.03.03.doc](http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/wkg_grp/TILCEPA/WPC/TILCEPA%20CCA%20mandate%20and%20work06.03.03.doc))

***Adapt to site-specific situations:*** Given the enormous ecological, cultural, economic, and political diversity within which PAs are located, a uniform legal and programmatic approach for an entire country or region is counter-productive. PA policies and programmes need to be open and sensitive to such local conditions, perhaps by prescribing only a broad framework of values. This built-in flexibility should promote creativity, but also contain checks against misuse.

***Build capacity:*** Participatory conservation being a relatively new phenomenon in many countries, capacity of several kinds needs to be built, of officials to deal with community issues, of communities to deal with conservation responsibilities and new institutions, and so on.

***Be sensitive to cultural and spiritual values:***

While the scientific value of PAs is undoubtedly important, there are often also intangible cultural and spiritual values assigned by communities to landscapes/seascapes, ecosystems and

species. These need to be respected and promoted.

***Resist destructive 'development' and commercial pressures:***

Many participatory conservation initiatives have failed due to the larger pressures of 'development' or commerce that the site or participatory agencies have been subjected to. Such processes that impinge on the conservation values of protected areas, or undermine community abilities to conserve and manage, need to be strongly resisted. Given that in many cases some parts of the government itself are promoting such destructive processes, this can be quite tricky, but conservation agencies need to put their foot down on such matters!

***Treat conservation as a process, not a project:***

Short-term projects aimed at achieving participatory conservation are often unsuccessful because they try to force an artificial pace or achieve impractical targets. Experience from successful community-based initiatives strongly suggests that a long-term *process* is important, keeping in mind the varying pace of communities, the need to build sustainable institutional arrangements, and so on.

***Integrate steps to tackle inequities within and outside communities:***

Communities are not internally homogenous; many of them can contain severe inequities of gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age, and other factors. Conservation initiatives need to consciously understand and attempt reducing these inequities, such as for instance providing special decision-making status or benefits to the 'disprivileged' sections.

***Monitor the results of the initiative:***

From the first step itself, monitoring of the ecological, social, economic, and political impacts of the initiative needs to be initiated. This necessitates good baseline information, and continuous, participatory assessments of the changes in this baseline. It also means

the ability to change elements of the initiative should it be found that conservation and livelihood objectives are not being met.

***Be aware of pitfalls, challenges, and threats:*** Participatory conservation is not a panacea to fit all situations; it needs to be put into place and in a way that is appropriate to the local situation. And in particular, caution is warranted regarding vested interests that could undermine the initiative.

## **5. What next?**

Adoption of a forward-looking Programme of Work on PAs, by the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of Parties, will lead to a strong push for participatory conservation around the world. The following steps could be taken by national conservation agencies:

- Document and learn lessons from existing initiatives at participatory conservation, including from case study material already available;

- Exchange experience and information related to successful and failed attempts, with each other (perhaps through the clearing-house mechanism, and of course bilaterally);
- Invite indigenous peoples and local community organisations, NGOs, and individual experts to provide evidence and ideas that would help build strong national programmes;
- Adopt or strengthen policies, laws, and programmes of participatory conservation; in particular, move towards more equitable relationships with indigenous peoples and local communities, and the recognition of the importance of Community Conserved Areas.