

Addressing the Social Impacts of Conservation: Lessons from Experience and Future Directions

Jenny Springer

World Wildlife Fund, 1250 Twenty-Fourth Street, N.W., P.O. Box 97180, Washington, DC 20090-7180, USA

E-mail: jenny.springer@wwfus.org

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As a social process involving decisions about access, use, and sustainability of the Earth's natural systems, conservation inevitably entails both social benefits and social costs. Benefits include clean air and water, the survival and growth of nature-based economies and ways of life, and the cultural and esthetic values of wildlife. Costs include limitations on resource use for economic purposes as well as social changes associated with changing patterns of resource use.

Distribution of the costs and benefits of conservation varies widely across conservation strategies. In the case of protected areas, there is increasing recognition that 'many costs of protected areas are borne locally—particularly by poor communities—while benefits accrue globally...' (IUCN 2005). Local costs, particularly associated with stricter forms of protected areas, can include physical displacement, restrictions on use of natural resources, restrictions on access for religious and cultural purposes, conflicts arising from enforcement activities and human-wildlife conflicts.

Concern with the social impacts of conservation—both positive ("benefits") and negative ("costs")—is not new. It has developed as part of broader concerns about social justice in conservation policy since the 1970s, and in practice since the 1980s through approaches such as integrated conservation and development and community-based natural resource management (Fortwangler 2003; Adams & Hutton 2007). At the same time, concerns about the social impacts of conservation have not yet been resolved, and in some respects are increasing. While public protected areas have been a main focus of debate about social impacts, the issue is also relevant across a wide range of conservation strategies.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review some aspects of past experiences from the perspective of how they have sought to address social impacts, in order to identify limitations and lessons that can inform future practice. The paper concludes with recommendations on how conservation organizations can contribute to ensuring that social impacts are more equitably and effectively addressed, including through more

in-depth social analysis, organizational policies, increased support for community-based approaches and policy-oriented partnerships.

WHY A CONCERN WITH SOCIAL IMPACTS?

Concern for social impacts in conservation has both ethical and practical foundations (Wilshusen *et al.* 2003; McShane 2003). Ethical foundations stem from recognition of the rights of local people to their resources and means of subsistence and to compensation for losses. These ethical dimensions rest on social justice values and legal human rights frameworks, and are not necessarily linked to conservation outcomes.

Practical foundations stem from the linkages between social and conservation outcomes. These linkages operate in a number of ways. For example, a flow of positive benefits to local people from natural resources can enable and provide incentives for sustainable management over the long term. Conversely, negative social impacts can erode local support as well as global constituencies for conservation, making conservation more difficult and less sustainable. Often, conservation and social impacts also are linked by the broader forces that threaten both biodiversity and the well-being of local people, such as commercial over-extraction of natural resources. Attention to these linked social impacts as part of conservation initiatives provides a foundation for alliances with social groups to address common concerns.

EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS

As noted above, efforts to address the social impacts of conservation have spanned a range of approaches, including integrated conservation and development, community conservation, and targeted compensation.

One prominent approach has been to link management of state protected areas with local community development activities. This approach is especially associated with integrated

conservation and development projects—implemented in the 1980s and 1990s as a central strategy for conservation—though remains broadly relevant. These development activities have taken a range of forms, especially economic alternatives to use of resources in protected areas, though also social services (such as health and education). In some cases, revenue sharing from park fees and other sources has provided additional resources to support community services or establishment of alternative income-generating activities. Key aims of these community development activities have been to reduce human pressures on biodiversity and to generate local benefits—including as a form of compensation for restrictions on resource access established through the protected areas (Larson *et al.* 1998; Brown & Wyckoff-Baird 1992).

As a means to address social costs, development activities linked to state protected area management have several limitations. One is that, in their association with protected area exclusions, alternative livelihoods and related social activities have tended to take compensation of social costs—rather than prevention—as the starting point. At the same time, a growing body of research has questioned the rationale, even in ecological terms, for exclusionary approaches to protected area management. Analyses of conservation discourse trace persistent images of ‘wilderness’ through the history of conservation, and argue that associated assumptions of a fundamental incompatibility of people and wildlife have driven actions to separate people from nature in particular places (Colchester 2004; Adams & Hutton 2007). Other critiques, deriving from practice, have highlighted problems of flawed or insufficient social analysis in project design (GEF 2006; Seymour 2008), especially analysis of the actual degree of conflict between conservation objectives and patterns of local resource use, or the appropriateness and viability of alternatives. One aspect of flawed social analysis has been the tendency to focus on local problems and solutions (Larson *et al.* 1998), as this risks exaggerating the impacts of local use on biodiversity, and obscuring broader drivers and external factors. An overall implication of these critiques is that, even where the intention of alternative livelihoods and other development activities has been to generate benefits for local communities, the approach does not necessarily challenge assumptions about the incompatibility of people and nature that give rise to protected area exclusions and their associated social costs.

Analysis of alternative livelihoods activities as a form of compensation reveals an additional set of limitations. One is that the link between benefits and costs has generally been vague; without concrete assessments of the nature and distribution of impacts of protected areas, compensation for them is less likely to be appropriate or directed to the most affected people. The sequencing of protection and development activities has also tended to be de-linked. Because increased restrictions on access and use of natural resources can be put in place much more quickly than benefits, especially from enterprise-based development activities, benefits often have not started to flow until long after costs have been incurred.

Of course, where flows of benefits have been limited or not realized, the compensation aim has also not been achieved. Alternative livelihood and development activities also tend to focus on economic costs, with less attention to maintaining community cultural ties, governance systems, knowledge, and other critical social values linked to lands and resources. Finally, while the intention of alternative income-generating activities or social services is to generate social benefits, accountability to communities for these benefits—linked to defined and articulated costs—has tended to be limited.

Forming a contrast to this experience is a range of community or ‘place-based’ approaches (Bray this volume) such as indigenous territorial management, community forestry and fisheries, and community-based wildlife management. These approaches have generally taken as a starting point the connectedness of people with their lands and resources and recognition of human use as a part of ecologies and landscapes. Viewed in relation to social impacts, community-based conservation and natural resource management (CBNRM) have generally sought to avoid or prevent social costs, especially from outside restrictions on access and use of natural resources, and to generate benefits from community management. While these initiatives have most often been focused outside of protected areas, ‘community conserved areas’ are now also increasingly recognized as a governance type, along with state and private management, for protected areas (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2004).

Community-based initiatives have demonstrated some significant successes in generating positive social and conservation outcomes, including across large scales. Examples include Namibia’s National CBNRM program, community forestry in Mexico, and locally managed marine areas in the Pacific. However, considerable gaps remain between the aims of community conservation and CBNRM and their implementation in practice. Critiques from social perspectives point to the still-too-limited extent to which real power and authority have been relinquished by governments to indigenous and local communities, for example through recognition of rights to lands and resources, vesting of authority in customary governance institutions, and equitable distribution of revenues and other benefits generated from natural resources (COICA 2004; Jones 2004). In these contexts, social costs may be incurred as a result of people investing in management activities that are not sufficiently compensated due to the limited benefits generated or distributed to communities.

A third approach consists of ‘targeted compensation’ efforts that seek to address conflicts between specific conservation objectives and particular aspects of human use. Examples include direct compensation to forgo specific types of hunting, harvesting, or cultivation activities (such as grazing or underplanting in forests) that affect biodiversity or payments for attacks on livestock by predator species of high conservation value. For example, in Namibia, the government provides compensation to community conservancy members for predations on livestock by wildlife (WWF 2008b). Key elements of promising efforts to establish these kinds of

targeted compensation are that both the specific conservation objective and the social impact are clearly defined, the form and extent of compensation is negotiated and agreed, and accountability for compensation is clear.

LOOKING AHEAD

This brief overview of experience in addressing social impacts points to several key directions of change—many of which are underway but need more concerted effort. While relevant for all actors involved in conservation work, the following points particularly highlight the contributions that conservation organizations can make to promote more effective approaches.

One need is for more in-depth analysis, in conservation planning and monitoring, of how human activities affect specific aspects of biodiversity (positively and negatively) and how specific proposed conservation interventions are likely to affect local people (positively and negatively). To date, social research in the context of conservation planning has focused overwhelmingly on analyzing human impacts on biodiversity, especially those seen as posing ‘threats’. More work is needed to ensure that strategies are grounded in concrete understandings of how human activities relate to specific conservation objectives (Agrawal & Redford 2006; Brockington *et al.* 2006), including with greater attention to the influence of broader policy, market, and institutional factors (Reed 2006).

A related gap is consistent integration of analysis to understand how conservation interventions may impact local people, comparable to social impact assessment in the context of development interventions (Geisler 2003; GEF 2006). Social impact analysis provides a basis for conservationists and potentially affected people to define and develop appropriate responses—such as alternative strategies or compensation measures—to ensure against negative impacts or promote positive ones (Some frameworks for social impact assessment relevant to conservation include the Akwe Kon guidelines (CBD Secretariat 2004), the World Bank’s Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction model (Cernea 1997), and Sustainable Livelihoods Analysis (DFID 2001; Igoe 2006)). Impact analysis should be part of and, in turn, can strengthen and inform collaborative planning and decision-making processes with indigenous peoples and local communities.

Monitoring of social impacts also needs to be integrated into emerging systems for more rigorous measurement of conservation outcomes. At the site level, monitoring of social impacts provides a basis for changing course, where problems arise, as well as for demonstrating—through better documentation of positive outcomes—the relevance of conservation to the social agendas of broader constituencies. In the aggregate, documented experience can usefully inform broader policy debates over the social impacts of protected areas and other conservation strategies, where data is currently limited (Agrawal & Redford this volume; Brockington & Igoe 2006).

A second way conservation organizations can contribute is through clear policies and positions regarding the social impacts of conservation. Institutional policies reflect recognition that conservation organizations share responsibilities with governments and others for ensuring that social costs and benefits are equitably addressed in the activities they support. Relevant standards have been developed through a growing set of international instruments and in operational guidelines of development agencies (Siegele *et al.* forthcoming; Krueger this volume). Principles and standards related to indigenous peoples have been a focus of attention in conservation policy—for example, the WWF Statement of Principles on Indigenous Peoples and Conservation, first developed in 1996 and updated in 2008 (WWF 2008a)—reflecting international legal frameworks specific to the rights of indigenous peoples. In addition, relevant policy and guidance is needed to address social impact issues as they relate to nonindigenous communities. There is also a need to periodically evaluate policy implementation and ensure that principles are effectively integrated in practice (Springer & Alcorn 2007).

Institutional social policies establish standards and provide guidance to managers in implementing social safeguards and promoting positive social benefits from conservation. In addition, policy communicates institutional values and commitments to others. Thus, policy supports clear statements to potential partners regarding the terms on which the organization can engage in a partnership or activity, and the kinds of activities it cannot support. It also establishes a basis for collaboration with others who share concerns for socially equitable approaches to conservation and development.

A third critical future direction for conservation organizations is to continue building upon and expanding collaborative approaches with indigenous peoples and local communities. This direction is supported and necessitated by the growing recognition of indigenous and local communities as rights holders in many remaining areas of high biodiversity, shifts in conservation thinking and practice to broader landscape scales, and lessons learned regarding the need for local constituencies for conservation.

Collaborative approaches are especially important because conservation activities can often take place in contexts where basic social protections—such as protection of human and civil rights, channels to participate meaningfully in decision making, and rights to land and resources—are not secured. In these contexts, special efforts are needed to engage with indigenous and local communities and their organizations, in order to identify common interests, resolve conflicts or concerns, and establish agreements for collaborative work. At the same time, it is much more difficult to undertake socially sound conservation in the context of constraining policy and institutions. Expanded alliances with peoples’ organizations at higher levels, along with engagement with governments, offer important opportunities to address broader governance issues that affect both biodiversity and social well-being, and the possibilities for linking them in practice.

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