

COMMONS FORUM *Commentary*

Conservation Policy and the Commons

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In May of 2005, a workshop on Social Controversies and Cultural Contestations regarding national parks and reserves in the Malay Archipelago” was held in Singapore stating the question: Conservation for/by whom? We have become used to think that conservation is a good thing for the public good and that governments are responsible for it. We take for granted the existence of protected areas, national parks and reserves managed by small and large government and or nongovernmental organizations. Protected areas have become national or even global commons. Highlighted in the workshop, however, was the other side of the coin, i.e., the conflict between conservation policies set by the state and the rights of local or indigenous people. Conservation is supposed to be about safeguarding global public goods in the interest of all. In practice conservation for the benefit of the global communities is too often carried out at the expense of local people. Is the theme therefore: ‘For the global people by the local people? Conservation is beneficial for the world, for the people of the world. Is it therefore also good for local people?

Despite evidence to the contrary the protected area approach is still the dominant model for conservation and local communities are perceived as being the main threat to conservation. Indeed when an area becomes a protected area, the ways local people have perceived the changing status of the land have resulted in environmental degradation. When common property of a community was made into a protected area, in effect it became open access. The community had no legal rights while the state was not present to protect the area against ‘illegal’ acts.

This realization supported the theory that given secure rights over the area, indigenous communities will manage the resources in a traditional sustainable manner. People living in and around forest area, however, are often amongst the poorest in the country where conservation becomes a luxury they might not be able to afford. As well increasing heterogeneity of rural people and the strong linkages to global economic process has led to the deterioration of traditional management systems. The issue of poverty and claims of indigenous and local people, however, have resulted in some rethinking and increasingly we have become aware that conservation is far more a social challenge than a biological one.

Assuming that poverty drives communities to encroach on national park land, rural development projects were commenced targeting poor communities in and around nature reserves. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank funded large conservation projects known as Integrated Conservation and Development Projects. The role of NGOs to initiate and run ‘participatory’ natural resource management schemes became generally accepted. Today, almost all national parks have some aspect of management done participatorily. NGOs working with local communities to strengthen local capacity, improve strategies for action and facilitate communications had already adopted participatory approaches such as PRA, PAR and participatory mapping. In forestry various types of participatory schemes emerged, from social forestry programs as part of logging concessions to development of traditional systems of natural resource management.

Participatory approaches to management and conservation of natural resources became part of the solution to situations in the field. However, the question is whether local communities are able and willing to participate in managing a national park for abstract and long term purposes? As well,

implementing participation is no easy task. After all, in most cases the people who are now asked to participate have first been de-responsible and dispossessed. Now these same people are asked to participate and become responsible again. As well the state and international agencies, which has become accustomed to a simple top-down approach has had to learn the actual meaning of participation. And the burden for conservation is still put on the local population.

Generally attempts to manage parks for uses by local communities are more likely to succeed if the users support the management plans. Users are much more likely to support management plans if the plans take account of their economic needs. And this is much more likely when users have had a significant role in the development of management plans. However, while most participatory approaches are based on the notion of resources being essentially state property, it is essential that some rights of communities are recognized. After all, being rational human beings community members are unlikely to invest labor and resources in sustainable management without some guarantee that they or their descendants will receive its benefits.

ICDP and collaborative management approaches are focused on a particular protected area and its surrounding communities. However, as also suggested in a recent IUCN publication on poverty and conservation that one should look beyond the site level and address problems at the appropriate levels both geographically and institutionally. We need to accept the fact that conservation is a multilevel problem and therefore requires multilevel solutions This means that conservation need to be viewed from the level of local households, urban populations, and the international community, but also at the level of the protected area and the larger landscape. Conservation, whether conventional or through community participation, has so far shown a remarkable lack of success. The government is not able to guard the large areas it assigned for conservation. Local government and local communities are seemingly not interested.

So, whose task should conservation be?

Should local communities be in charge? Many NGOs promote the myth of indigenous or traditional communities living in harmony with nature and applying traditional systems of natural resource management. The state system of parks and conservation areas is to be seen as a crime against humanity whereby land is alienated and people are prevented from fulfilling their needs. Parks will therefore be much better managed when traditional communities are in charge.

John MacKinnon, Director, ASEAN Regional Center for Biodiversity Conservation, on the other hand says of participatory management that it might be necessary to reach some compromise but 'it is certainly not the best way to achieve conservation'. Apart from probably having a more economical way of using the area, local communities might not have the interest. He further criticizes the common belief that if we can raise the standard of living, local communities no longer need to exploit natural resources and the area can be protected more effectively. However, the more 'developed' people are the higher their needs. The conditions under which people are seen as ecologically friendly (low population, low resource use, subsistence production) are conditions under which we would not expect conservation to develop. On the other hand when people might feel the need for conservation due to a 'developed' lifestyle with market oriented production, they are perceived as obstacles to conservation.

Although the way natural resources are controlled by the state is much criticized, ultimately the government must be responsible for conservation. After all, isn't the state created in order to protect the common good? However, the government is clearly not able to do this alone. Some sort of collaborative arrangement is needed. Collaboration and participation for conservation is not only an option, it is a necessity. The government might have formal power, but de facto, national parks are managed (or not-managed) by the people living in and around the park. Communities which have no legal rights, even if

willing, are not able to protect the park against encroachment by outsiders. Private companies might be willing to manage a park if profit is involved but even then have to cope with local communities.

For conservation purposes in particular, government is needed to set a general management policy setting guidelines for permissible and non-permissible activities and ensuring that society as whole abide by these rules. However setting policy by the state is not enough. The 'reality gap' between policy makers and the reality in the field needs to be closed. And for this we first need to realize the different realities of policy makers, those implementing the policies and those affected by these policies. Too often policies and regulations are made to guarantee the sustainability of the state rather than of the environment.

For Further Reading:

Fisher et al, 2005. Poverty and Conservation. Landscapes, people and Power. Landscapes and Livelihoods Series No 2. IUCN Forest Conservation Programme

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