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Perspectives in People-Oriented Conservation

by Sally Jeanrenaud

Suad Newby

Forest-user group in Ijim, Cameroon. Community forestry legislation in Cameroon promotes local participation in the management of protected forests, with potential benefits for local people and biodiversity.

The question 'what is people-oriented conservation' presupposes the questions 'who is defining it and why?'. Different actors have different perspectives, motives and interests and construct its meaning in various ways. Arguments for people-oriented conservation are drawn from several disciplines and regional experiences, and engage a wide variety of organisations. Some views are derived from biologists and conservationists, some from anthropologists and ethnobotanists, while others are drawn from the indigenous peoples' and human rights' movements. The debate is dynamic, and actors tend to be eclectic in their rationale, weaving various arguments together in sometimes ambiguous and problematic ways. In this arborvitæ discussion paper *Sally Jeanrenaud* reviews the arguments and reveals a 'repertoire' of meanings in people-oriented conservation.

The next issue of the newsletter will be produced in April 1997. If you have any material to send or comments please contact either: Nelda Geninazzi at WWF International, Avenue du Mont-Blanc, 1196 Gland, Switzerland. Tel: +41-22-364-9524, Fax: +41-22-364-8219, or Ursula Senn at IUCN, 28 rue de Mauverney, 1196 Gland, Switzerland. Tel: +41-22-999-0263, Fax: +41-22-000-0025, e-mail: ujs@hq.iucn.ch

Ethical

Many arguments for people-oriented conservation focus on the injustices of a protected area system which displaces local people from land they have traditionally occupied and depend on for livelihoods (1). This point is put forward by a wide range of natural and social scientists, indigenous peoples and human rights activists. An unexpected feature is that such views were cogently expressed within mainstream conservation organisations over twenty years ago. For example, Raymond Dasmann the senior IUCN ecologist in the 1970s, wrote extensively on the injustices of the application of the protected area idea on local people (2). He argued:

"For countries that have not yet gone too far along the European-American path, the opportunity is available to follow a different [conservation path]. They can start with locally-based, decentralised, people-oriented, ecologically sustainable development, which can enrich life for all and lead to a new dynamic balance between humanity and the natural world" (1977:18).

Dasmann developed a set of principles which he considered mandatory for agencies responsible for creating new national parks which anticipated many of the developments in the 1990s (1976:166-167; 1984:670-671). These included: rights of ownership, tenure and resource use; use of local knowledge; local involvement in planning; local involvement with management; protection of native cultures; sharing economic benefits with locals; recognition of different local 'stakeholders'; development of surrounding areas. These principles have much in common with Pimbert's and Pretty's "operational components of an alternative conservation practice" (1995:33), written almost twenty years later.

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Ethical arguments continue to be expressed in the 1990s by mainstream organisations. For example, in a paper based on the seminal World Bank review of "People and Parks", Brandon and Wells (1992) state:

"Excluding people who live adjacent to protected areas from the use of resources, without providing them with alternatives, is increasingly viewed as politically infeasible and ethically unjustifiable" (ibid:557).

The economic inequalities in the distribution of costs and benefits of biodiversity conservation, are often used to support this ethic (FAO 1985, Wells 1992). For example, the World Banks "People and Parks" review argues that:

"...communities occupying lands adjacent to protected area boundaries frequently bear substantial costs – as a result of lost access – while receiving few benefits in return. People in these communities tend to be poor, they lack political influence, and they receive few government services. A large part of the costs of conserving biological diversity are therefore being borne by those least able to pay, even though the benefits are increasingly recognised as global" (Wells, Brandon and Hannah 1992).

Efficiency

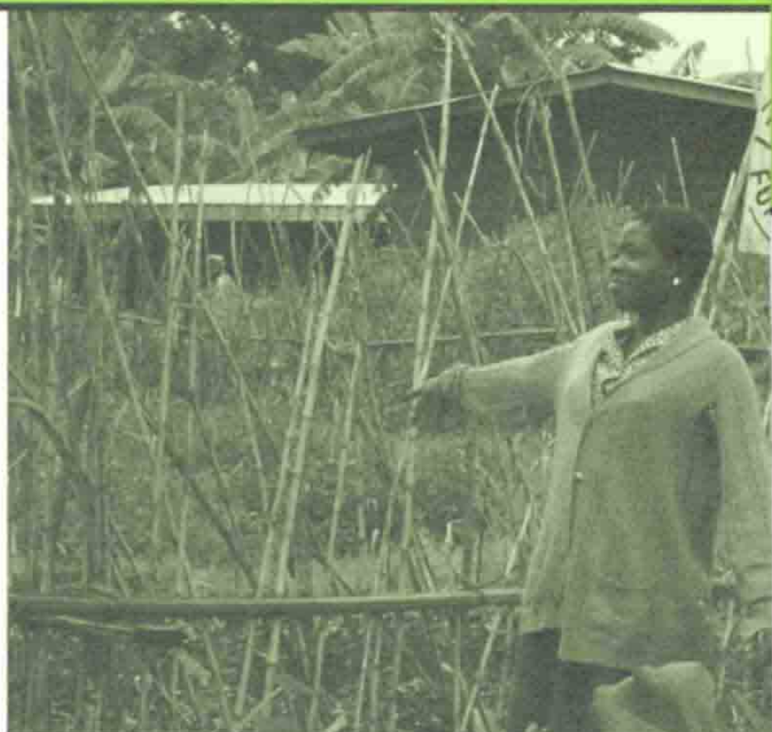
Many of those advocating people-oriented conservation do so on 'efficiency' grounds. These arguments do not necessarily question the legitimacy of conservation areas per se, or endeavour to find alternative models, but rather seek to make protected areas more effective. The social and economic effects of protected areas on local peoples are now widely acknowledged, and attempts are made to mitigate them, but usually for the purpose of better conserving nature. For example, it is common for conservation projects to emphasise the need for securing alternative sources of fuelwood, protein, land, income etc; and stabilising land use in buffer zones. Where there are no alternatives, it is feared that local communities will continue to exploit protected areas. Local people thus tend to be viewed as a 'resource' for achieving pre-defined objectives.

Much of mainstream conservation literature tends to emphasise such arguments. For example, MacKinnon *et al* (1986) address the importance of deriving sustainable benefits for rural populations around and within protected areas:

"The success of [protected area] management depends very much on the degree of support and respect awarded to the protected area by neighbouring communities. Where protected areas are seen as a burden, local people can make protection impossible. When the protected area is seen as a positive benefit, the local people will themselves become allied with the manager in protecting the area from threatening developments"

Woodcarver, Ijim Mountain Forest Project, Cameroon. Forests provide a wide range of products crucial to sustaining local livelihoods.

Tree Nursery, Ijim Mountain Forest Project. Forest user groups in Ijim, Cameroon, help forest restoration through planting tree seedlings raised in their own nursery.



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"There are many ways in which local people can benefit from protected areas, including utilisation of some resources from certain protected areas and buffer zones, the preservation of traditional rights and cultural practices, and special preference for local residents in employment or social services. Nevertheless, there are limits that must be placed on exploitative uses if reserve areas are to fulfil their primary protective functions. Managers must know where to draw the line" (ibid:99)

'Efficiency' arguments are usually the principal rationale for the establishment of Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs). While these promote the coupling of conservation and rural development, it is argued that ICDPs are conceptually derived from conservationists and environmentalists (Stocking and Perkin 1992), and are proving difficult to implement (Brandon and Wells 1992, Buschbacher 1994). A similar efficiency argument is put forward to support some 'participatory' approaches to forest conservation. Without 'participation', some conservationists fear that local communities will subvert conservation projects (see Pimbert's and Pretty's (1995:25-27) analysis of participation in conservation).

Anthropological/Ethnobotanical

Since the mid eighties a growing body of evidence has emerged, mainly from anthropologists and ethno botanists working in the tropics, revealing that rural communities have extensive knowledge of and use a wide range of wood and non-wood products supplied by forests, representing considerable biodiversity values. There is evidence that communities have actually enhanced and promoted biodiversity in many forest regions (Posey 1985; Rabinovich-Vin 1991, Haverkort and Miller 1994), even in remote areas, thus challenging the 'wilderness' myth of 'pristine' forests (Gomez-Pompa and Kaus 1992). Communities' knowledge of species and products is considered an important resource in itself, and there are persuasive arguments to conserve neglected traditional knowledge, both for its cultural and environmental significance (McNeely and Pitt 1985; Kiss 1990; Dubois 1996). Traditional management systems and other common property regimes are emphasised as effective institutions for sustainable resource use (Ostrom 1990; Mckean and Ostrom 1995). Many conservationists argue to support, build on and replicate these institutions for conservation purposes (Kemf 1993; Pye-Smith and Borrini-Feyerabend 1994; Pimbert and Pretty 1995). However, many of these arguments are widely critiqued. Several anthropologists challenge the romantic 'green image' given to indigenous people, and traditional management institutions (Ellen 1986, 1993) revealing discrepancies between the international image of local communities, and what they actually do, or want (Colchester 1992, 1994; Conklin and Graham 1995). Others point out that community-management systems are frequently underpinned by mechanisms of social control which reinforce social inequalities (Thomas-Slayter 1992, Jackson 1993). For example, Jackson (ibid:651) argues that "environmental conservation is frequently predicated upon social inequality". Such arguments warn against building new community conservation institutions on traditional authority structures, which may entrench existing inequalities between class or gender-based social groups. Traditional institutions are also losing their viability in face of pressures from both within and outside their own society, and some question whether traditional institutions can prevail in contemporary contexts (Brown and Wycoff-Baird 1991; Brandon and Wells 1992). Some political studies suggest that 'grassroots' conservation programmes may be a vehicle for the extension of central state control in remote areas (Peluso 1993, Fox 1993, Hill 1996).

Human Rights

Another set of arguments supporting people-oriented conservation is derived from indigenous peoples and the human rights movement. These put human rights and justice rather than 'nature' at the top of agendas (Lohman 1991; Colchester 1992, 1994; IWIGIA 1996). The key principle at stake here is 'self determination'. Many of these arguments are rooted in histories of popular resistance to government agency appropriation of land. Motivations for community forest conservation usually stem from alarm at the devastating effects of environmental degradation, and capitalist expansion on the lives of poor and politically marginalised rural communities. For example, Lohman (ibid:11-12) argues:

"Experience suggests....that it is rural village groups and movements opposed to the schemes of governments, corporations and international agencies who are generally the most powerful and committed defenders of biological diversity...[but] the notion that the political leadership provided by grassroots groups...might be central to conservation movements is ...treated as if it were too exotic even to mention".

It is widely argued that supporting local peoples rights, such as security of tenure, is the only way to ensure effective conservation (Lynch and Alcorn 1994). This is a similar argument to that which emphasises local participatory planning, management and evaluation in conservation as a community 'right' (Pimbert and Pretty 1995). These arguments are also widely debated. For example, many point out that indigenous peoples do not regard themselves primarily as 'conservationists', and that their agendas may be in conflict with conservation groups (Redford and Stearman 1993). Others suggest that by aligning themselves with the international conservation movement, indigenous peoples may be substituting one form of political dependency for another (Conklin and Graham 1995).

Pragmatic

Since the late eighties it has become apparent that most protected areas are actually inhabited anyway, leading some conservationists to argue for an "integration of local inhabitants into the park concept" (Amend and Amend 1995). Many recognise that most biodiversity resides outside protected areas under the control of rural communities (Halladay and Gilmour 1995). Moreover, a rapidly growing body of evidence has emerged suggesting that local communities are independently protecting their resources (Ghai and Vivian 1992; Pye-Smith and Borrini-Fayerabend 1994) and creating their own 'protected' areas (Apffel Marglin and Mishra 1993; Sochaczewski 1996) irrespective of national or international conservation and development programmes, and sometimes in spite of them (Fairhead and Leach 1995). There is some evidence to suggest a global transition to community involvement in forest management (Poffenberger 1996). It many cases it is apparent that government conservation agencies lack the resources (or will) to maintain designated protected areas, thus challenging the "myth of the noble state" (Alcorn 1994), and are obliged to promote community-based management for practical reasons (Poff 1996). Recent arguments suggest that compliance to international regimes for biodiversity conservation will necessarily depend on community conservation programmes (Maggio 1996).

Many such considerations have inspired the conceptualisation of joint or collaborative forest management or protected area programmes linking state and NGO conservation agencies with local communities (Fisher 1995; Borrini-Feyerabend 1996). However, some political and social analyses challenge assumptions about formalised collaboration, suggesting that joint-management can become a means whereby the already powerful concentrate their power still further, and may undermine some of the community controls that previously served to protect the environment (Kothari, Suri and Singh 1995:11; Fox 1993).

Holistic

Some arguments for people-oriented conservation explicitly attempt to transcend the dualism of supporting either 'people' or 'nature' arguments, inherent in the conservation movement, believing that traditional conceptualisations are too reductionist, contradictory and limiting (Alcorn 1993, Williams 1996, Jeanrenaud and Jeanrenaud 1997). For example, Williams (ibid:393) argues that 'good forestry' depends on:

"overcoming this dualism and its associated inconsistencies ...if civilisation is to resist a gradual drift towards increasing conceptual fragmentation and ecological disaster".

Alcorn (ibid) argues:
"in the real world, conservation of forests and justice for biodiversity cannot be achieved until conservationists incorporate other peoples into their own moral universe and share indigenous peoples' goals of justice and recognition of human rights".

Jeanrenaud and Jeanrenaud (ibid:36) Believe that this depends on recognising common ground and strategically cultivating political alliances for mutual benefit.

Several groups explicitly link concerns for environmental protection, democracy and social justice, such as the contemporary 'environmental justice movement' in the United States which is attempting to provide a basis for a new 'people's forestry' (Salazar 1996).

Conclusion: Understanding Policy and Practice

It will be evident from this review that there are many actors with different motives as well as many principles at stake in the arguments for people-oriented conservation. Some of these principles may be mutually inconsistent. These different constructions of 'people-oriented conservation' cause much of the confusion surrounding the term. The inconsistencies and problems highlight a number of key issues.

Firstly, the arguments reflect contrasting ecocentric and anthropocentric world views. While the former values nature for its perceived intrinsic worth, the latter values nature for its contribution to humanity (the concept of value itself is seen as a human creation). John Muir and Gifford Pinchot respectively, are often seen as representatives of these ideas within the modern conservation movement. However, as Pepper (1984, 1996) argues these are perpetual philosophical themes with their roots in the classical period. Ecocentrics start from concern about non-human nature and the whole ecosystem, rather than from humanist concerns, whereas the anthropocentric view does not recognise value in nature outside human perception or human need. Taken to extremes, the former can eclipse concern for humans and lead to charges of 'biological determinism', while the latter can lead to over-socialised views of nature, and may justify an arrogant pursuit of human interests at the expense of other life forms.

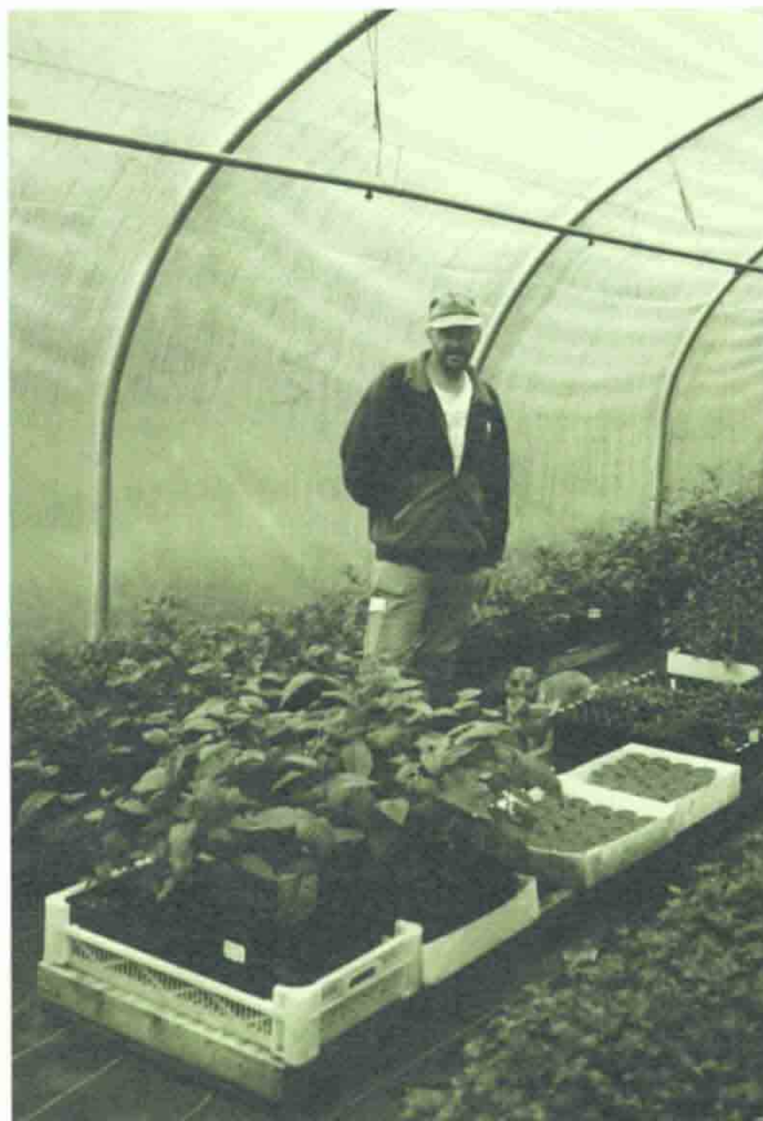
While philosophy and ethics may not be the pressing every-day concerns of conservationists, the divergent world views are embedded within conservation ideologies and are reflected in debates on people-oriented conservation. While some conservationists work with local people for the sake of nature, others view community conservation as part of a wider social agenda, related to issues of social justice, self determination, and democratisation. These contradictions are unlikely to be resolved while our concepts and values remain fragmented. Their reconciliation will demand an integral world view, which unites environmental and humanistic concerns.

Secondly, the contrasting views create a series of challenges for policy development within conservation organisations. Whose arguments win? Conservation bureaucracies are not monolithic actors with single interests. They contain individuals with many different motives and positions, who collaborate and network with a diverse range of groups sometimes forming important alliances with grassroots organisations. Policy development can be a painstaking consensus building exercise between actors within the same organisation, and can take months, even years to develop. Often, different ideological positions may be obscured within organisations, and subsumed by more general goals. For example, as a fundraising organisation, WWF purposefully cultivates many perspectives and pursues many partnerships in conservation, resulting in a wide variety of views about people-oriented conservation.

Thirdly, the review above suggests some of the practical dilemmas related to the implementation of people-oriented approaches. Implementation implies another set of actors who 'filter' policies according to their own motives and needs, and are capable of supporting or subverting projects. Can social and environmental agendas both be served by devolving power to the local level? If both humanistic and environmental concerns are embraced, this question must be assessed from both social and environmental perspectives. This involves a clear focus on the links, compromises, and tradeoffs between principles in practice: between progressive social agendas on the one hand (equity, democratisation, self-determination, etc) and environmental quality on the other.

Understanding the meaning of 'people-oriented conservation' requires a knowledge of different actors, motivations, interests, power-resources, relations and alliances (Blaikie and Jeanrenaud 1996). The politics of policy and practice constitutes a 'struggle for meaning' as different actors seek to enrol others into their point of view. It is hoped that Arborvitæ will provide a forum for continued exploration of people-oriented conservation issues at both the conceptual and practical levels.

Nursery, Ecological restoration and Community forestry in Scotland.



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Footnotes:

(1) See for example:

Dasmann 1976; 1977; 1984; Anderson & Grove 1987; Hales 1989; Rao & Geisler, 1990; Ghimere 1991; West and Brechin 1991; Brandon & Wells 1992; Kemf 1993; Colchester 1994; Pimbert & Pretty 1995; Ghimere & Pimbert 1997.

(2) Dasmann argued that:

"....the modern conservation movement .... involves the setting aside of protected areas, the passage of laws to protect species, and the establishment of agencies, based usually in the capital. People who once did a reasonable job of protecting nature on their own are driven away from the areas that are set aside for nature protection, and naturally enough take to poaching on lands that they once considered their own. It is usually a fairly brutal, insensitive approach to conservation that takes little account of the needs or wishes of those people who ultimately will be responsible for deciding whether the system will continue" (Dasmann 1977:16)

"National parks must not serve as means for displacing the members of traditional societies who have always cared for the land and its biota. Nor can national parks survive as islands surrounded by hostile people who have lost the land that was once their home"(1976:166).