

## Chapter 7:

# EMPATHY

The importance of empathy in community-based conservation cannot be overstated. Empathy enables the practitioner to assess the idea and the costs of conservation and conservation interventions from the perspective of the local people. It helps understand that while conservation might be the foremost pursuit of the practitioner, it can sometimes be but a minor concern for a community member who is dealing with economic hardship and other issues. Empathy allows the practitioner to be more accommodating towards local people and more appreciative of their conservation effort. When things go wrong, it helps focus on the root causes rather than on individuals or perpetrators. Empathy is a skill that can be enhanced with practice and through immersion in the community.

Empathy, which involves the perception and understanding of the ideas and emotional state of others, is rather important for effective community-based conservation, as it presumably is for any social work practice (Gerdes and Segal 2011).

Empathy enables sensitivity to other people and cultures, and a better ability to view the problems and the opportunities from their perspective. Empathy therefore helps the practitioner assess the idea of conservation and conservation interventions from the perspective of the community. Similarly, our ability to identify conservation opportunities or to create meaningful conservation interventions is influenced by our understanding and empathy.

It was our awareness of a community's past practice of leasing out relatively distant pastures to migratory herders that gave birth to the idea of leasing out land for wildlife recovery. The community agreed to the village reserve because the idea wasn't alien to them. Leasing out land was a familiar concept, and in this case, their pastures would get much needed rest from grazing, rather than being degraded as in the earlier system due to intensive grazing by migratory livestock. In the absence of familiarity and empathy, it would have been difficult for us to conceive the idea of village reserves.

Research suggests that empathy is not just an inherent quality, but can be taught and increased, thereby making it possible for conservation practitioners to become more skillful and effective (Gerdes and Segal, 2011).

Immersion in the community is an important way to improve contextual familiarity and our ability to empathize with them (Chapter 2: PRESENCE). A simple but important lesson one learns through such immersion is that while conservation may be the most important pursuit for us, it is only one of the various aspects of life, sometimes even a peripheral one, for the local people.

This might appear like a small issue, but is actually an important lesson for any conservationist. At a minimum, it teaches us to be patient when, for instance, people are unable to gather for community meetings as planned. It helps us appreciate the community's time and support for conservation programs much more than we would otherwise do. It helps us better gauge what kind of conservation interventions would be effective in a given situation.

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And in many ways, it makes our attitude towards our conservation partners – the local communities – more accommodating, generous, and understanding. It teaches us patience, for instance when people are sometimes not able to honor their conservation commitment. When conservation agreements get violated, empathy helps us try to identify and address the root causes and improve the program, rather than only looking to apportion blame and fix responsibility. Blaming, incidentally, is consistently counter-productive in such partnerships, even when it is justified (Fisher et al., 1991).

Livestock predation by large carnivores is often due to human error, and in such cases, it is natural to rest the blame on the herder. While grazing in the mountains, some livestock get separated from the herd, and it is these stragglers that tend to get killed more by predators. We know this, and the local people know it. Yet, livestock predation happens often – partly because herding in the mountains is not an easy job, partly due to lax herding, because the herder was drunk, or unwell, or whatever.

In many ways then, livestock depredation in the pastures is really the local community's problem; why can't they just herd better? This is a legitimate point of view. But it doesn't capture the whole picture, as some amount of empathy and common sense can help us understand.

How often do we end up partying late into the night, knowing fully well that we should have been at our desk, completing that important and much delayed, unfinished assignment? Or we take the car out for a short drive to the nearby store, knowing fully well that the insurance has expired and the car should not be on the road because it is both dangerous and illegal? We are usually aware of what the 'right' thing to do is, but we don't do it. We are only human.

I had earlier mentioned the incident where a snow leopard had entered a corral and killed almost the entire livestock herd, and in turn had been killed by the local people (Chapter 4: Respect). By the time I managed to visit this hamlet, some two years had passed. When we reached the house of the herder involved in the incident, a badly injured cattle and a dzomo (female yak-cattle hybrid) stood outside, receiving basic veterinary care.

They had been attacked by a snow leopard the previous day in a gorge near the hamlet, but had managed to escape with the injuries for which they were being treated. This hamlet is located right inside snow leopard habitat, and occasional instances of livestock predation were to be expected.

After spending time with the herder, we visited the corral where two years prior, the incident of multiple killings had taken place. It didn't appear as if any significant effort had been put into predator-proofing of the corral, despite the catastrophic loss of livestock two years earlier.

This one was an old corral. Later, we visited the three other corrals in the hamlet, some of them relatively new; and found that not a single one of them was predator-proof. There were gaping holes to allow for light, through which a snow leopard could easily enter. Where there were windows, they were flimsy glass ones, some already broken.

Even as we examined the corrals, a quick and discrete discussion with field staff suggested that the cost of predator-proofing these already roofed, enclosed corrals would have been rather low, though it would have required some effort in material fabrication and transport from the welder at the nearest township. When I asked the owners why they hadn't made the corrals predator-proof even after the devastating incident, I did not get a satisfactory answer. Local people too, after all, are only human.

Our offer of collaboratively predator-proofing the corrals by jointly developing a plan and sharing the costs equally between the community and us was readily accepted. Within a month, thanks to the excellent follow-up by our field coordinator, Tanzin Thinley, and the cooperation of the local people, all corrals were predator-proofed. It cost us a total of US\$ 125, and the community invested

a similar amount. That is all it took.

Indeed, this is something that the community members would have been fully capable of doing on their own, both in terms of the effort and the cost. Yet, in this case, they didn't, even though it was really their problem. A conservationist, in such a situation, could easily decide to leave things as they were. After all, it was their problem, and the solution was perfectly within their reach, only if they made a small effort.

The conservationist could be forgiven for deciding to not get involved. But that wouldn't help anyone, including snow leopards. Indeed, a chance to establish a conservation partnership with a community would also be lost.

Empathy allows us to better understand why things get done in a particular way – or why they don't. Empathy helps us realize that sometimes, a little push and support is all that the community needs, just like we do at times. And it is up to the conservationist to play the role of the catalyst.

Another dilemma that the conservationist occasionally faces comes in the form of requests for obvious and dire needs of the community that are unrelated to conservation, but are nonetheless important. For instance, to help do something about the absence of basic educational or healthcare facilities in a community. Or to help a community get over catastrophic economic setbacks due to occasional weather extremes such as the dzud or a flash flood. As a conservationist, does one get involved in these issues at all? If so, to what extent? How does one decide?

While it is not sufficient, a high level of empathy is essential in being able to make informed decisions on such issues. But as I shall discuss in the next chapter, these are complex issues and difficult questions, with no easy answers.

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Dos:

- Trying to look at conservation issues from the community's perspective
- Taking both rational and emotional aspects into account when making decisions
- Making the effort to increase our capability for empathy
- Assuming that most community members – like most other people – are decent and intelligent

Don'ts:

- Forgetting that our own behavior can often be irrational or irresponsible
- Walking away because of perceived inaction on part of the community, rather than catalyzing action