

Chapter 2:

PRESENCE

Community-based conservation cannot be done effectively from a distance. It is founded on resilient relationships between local communities and conservationists, which require the practitioner's sustained field presence. Inadequate field presence and participation of conservation organizations is perhaps a larger constraint for effective community-based conservation, compared to the extent of participation of local communities.

While it is neither possible nor necessary to be present in each community, being based in a relatively larger community in the focal conservation landscape, with periodic visits to others, is useful in building strong relationships with local people, and generating current and contextual knowledge. Importantly, such immersion also serves as an early warning system to track and tackle new and emerging threats to biodiversity.

Being there

How does one engage with local communities? In project proposals submitted to funding agencies, and in practice, community engagement is typically suggested to be undertaken through periodic visits and structured workshops and meetings with local people. These are no doubt useful when conducted in an inclusive and democratic manner. They help to evolve and formalize conservation agreements with the community transparently, and to better monitor and evolve the programs adaptively. They may even be adequate for successful joint implementation of initiatives that benefit the community. However, by themselves, these are unlikely to achieve effective on-ground biodiversity conservation.

We often fail to recognize that in addition to specific conservation or conflict management interventions such as Snow Leopard Enterprises or livestock insurance programs, building strong and resilient relationships with the community and maintaining effective communication with them is essential in securing peoples' support for conservation.

Sustained presence in the field and participation in the way of life of local communities is critical for building these relationships. While participant observation – relying on immersion of the researcher in the community within permissible limits – is a well-recognized technique in anthropology, the value of such immersion for conservation continues to remain underappreciated.

Indeed, just like the setting up of a Protected Area is a long-term commitment, so is community-based conservation. Brief or periodic community-based interventions that are not founded on a continuing and communicative relationship with local communities carry the risk of causing a mismatch of expectations between conservationists and the local community. Misguided programs can also create problems within the community by causing societal divisions, disenchantment with conservation organizations, and can, over the longer term, cause more damage than good for the biodiversity that ones seeks to protect.

When community engagement largely relies on periodic structured meetings and workshops in lieu of immersion in the community, several elements of the PARTNERS Principles tend to get compromised. Insufficient and infrequent local presence of conservationists allows only a limited and even flawed understanding of the threats that need to be addressed, leading to misdiagnosis of conservation problems, and, therefore, continuing decline in the status of biodiversity.

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In one of our community-based conservation sites in the Gobi Altai and in another one in the Kyrgyz Tien Shan, where we had programs running for many years, we discovered far too late that the main threat to snow leopards was no longer poaching or retribution killing – which our programs were designed to address – but rather the expansion of mining operations into snow leopard habitat. Although we were able to reprioritize our activities and catalyze effective action in both situations at a short notice, these examples serve as reminders of the risk of misdiagnosis due to inadequate field presence.

Long-term and sustained presence within the community allows the creation and delivery of long-term conservation programs, and also facilitates almost every other aspect of the PARTNERS Principles. Sustained field presence serves

as an early warning system when new threats to conservation emerge, or when there are societal developments that can damage conservation efforts unless they are adapted appropriately to the changing situation (Chapter 8: RESPONSIVENESS).

Constant interaction with local people as fellow human beings improves the ability of the conservationist to understand the community's constraints and outlooks, and the hardships they face (Chapter 7: EMPATHY). It better enables the conservationist to relate to community members in an equal and respectful way (Chapter 4: RESPECT), rather than viewing them as, at best, a stakeholder in conservation, or a recipient of conservation aid. Or, at worst, as the "other side", the root cause of conservation problems.

Immersion in the community also helps provide a deeper awareness and understanding of the local socio-political and cultural situation, the social capital and the key threats to biodiversity, thereby enabling the design of contextually relevant conservation initiatives (Chapter 3: APTNESS). An understanding of local political and societal aspects, and perhaps most importantly, the development of mutual trust that sustained presence makes possible, help create integrative initiatives based on mutual interests, rather than distributive ones based on positional bargaining (Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION).

Indeed, it is not possible, or even necessary, for the practitioner – or the anthropologist – to be present in each community all the time. In my experience, the conservationist being based, long-term, in any of the communities inhabiting the focal landscape of interest, and periodically visiting other communities, appears sufficient in building strong relationship and trust. Other things being similar, it helps to be based in the larger of the communities because of the greater number of people one can reach directly.

Training and hiring individuals drawn from the local communities can really help strengthen local presence, bring immense knowledge, and add value to the team (see more discussion on hiring locally in Chapter 5: TRANSPARENCY). Over time, such individuals must be supported and empowered to be able to run community-based conservation programs on their own.

Importantly, while hiring locally is an effective way to strengthen conservation efforts and make them sustainable, it doesn't absolve the practitioner from the need for immersion. Certainly not for many years, until strong relationships and adequate local capacities have been built. Researchers, who are often based in

the field for extended periods of time, can also play a vital role as agents for conservation.

Interestingly, the discourse on community-based conservation focuses a lot on the importance of ensuring the participation of local communities at various levels of conservation planning and implementation. A few useful frameworks for community-engagement – such as Participatory Rural Appraisal and its modifications like the Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (Jackson and Wangchuk 2001) – have been advocated. Yet, the key bottleneck for community-based efforts to be effective that often goes unrecognized is not so much the participation of local communities, but rather, the extent of participation of the conservation organizations themselves. A strong and resilient relationship with local communities is the cornerstone of effective conservation, and unless there is a long-term presence, the relationships between communities and conservationists will remain weak.

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The idea and the individual

As practicing conservationists, we tend to focus on the biological, economic, and development aspects while engaging in community-based conservation. A report to a funding agency, for instance, typically lists criteria such as the number of people that benefited from a community-based intervention, the additional income the participants generated, the extent of anti-poaching activities that the community undertook, the extent of threat reduction, or biological responses such as the increased population of the target species. Project performance indicators also tend to include metrics such as the size and number of meetings held with local communities and other stakeholders.

Useful as these indicators are, they ignore the role of emotion and relationships in community based conservation. It is helpful to keep in mind that a community is made up of individuals, with emotions, perceptions, and worldviews different from each other and from those of the conservationist trying to effect change. In pushing the conservation agenda, one is, knowingly or unknowingly, appealing to peoples' emotions.

Individuals in the community will support a conservation program not just because they stand to personally and directly gain from it. In fact, in many community-based initiatives, including some of ours such as the village reserve, the gain at the individual level is diffused compared to the more tangible benefits at the level of the community. Individuals in the community will often choose to support a program – or oppose it – because of emotion, an under-recognized aspect in conservation.

At an informal gathering over tea in the village of Kibber, which was the first to start a community-based livestock insurance program in 2002, Chhering Tandup Makhan reminisced his feelings from more than a decade earlier. Makhan was one of the key local people who had helped initiate the program. He recounted with pride, amusement, and a hint of exaggeration. “I have to admit I did not understand much at all about what the insurance program would do. But Charu was a friend. I knew he meant well. So because of our friendship, I decided to support the idea without understanding it! It did eventually turn out well!”

Individuals, whether it is the conservationist or the local champion like Makhan, matter a lot in community-based efforts, not just ideas. While Makhan’s recounting may point to the inadequacy in how well the idea was communicated and discussed with the community, it underscores the rarely recognized value of emotion and trust in community-based conservation. These are not easily quantified or written about in publications and technical reports. Nor do they get built over formal meetings and workshops.

Do:

- Sustained-field presence and immersion in the community
- Building strong relationships with local people
- Training and hiring local people in the conservation team

Don’t:

- Forget that people’s emotions can be as important as their rational motives