

Chapter 4:

RESPECT

Respecting people's dignity is a basic human imperative. Treating local communities ethically is particularly critical in community-based conservation, where local people can become instruments to an end. A respectful and ethical stance goes beyond our conduct and civility in interactions with them. It begins with one's internal psychological orientation.

An equal partnership implies that conservationists do not view local communities as recipients of aid, and themselves as the providers. Community-based conservation efforts must follow the code of beneficence and non-maleficence, and individual and societal differences or divisions should never be used for pushing the conservation agenda.

Basic dignity

Local communities comprise people like us, who have fundamental dignity, like we do. This is particularly critical when it comes to the participants of community-based efforts, since engaging with them is more than a value-neutral social interaction.

Local people become an instrument to achieve what is primarily, or at least proximately, our goal – the conservation of biodiversity. Although the desire, and often the outcome, is that they benefit from community-based conservation interventions, the conflicting impulse of viewing people as instruments to an end on one hand, and respecting general ethical norms of interacting with people on the other hand, can create an object-subject tension (Cohen 2001). Such issues make the ethics of community-based conservation rather important to consider.

It is useful to share an example. This involved an instance where a snow leopard was killed a few years ago, inside a livestock corral, in one of our focal landscapes in the Trans-Himalayas.

Long after the forest department had investigated the incident, a few members of our team visited the hamlet. They were tasked to determine the circumstances under which the killing took place, and, based on what they'd find, conduct discussions with the community members and report to us their collective thoughts on what could be done to prevent such incidences from recurring. Our team members met the herder who had lost many livestock in the incident, and, with the help of others, had killed the snow leopard.

Our team, on this occasion, happened to comprise young and relatively inexperienced staff. Additionally, I suspect we failed to brief them sufficiently before they left. While talking to the herder, they decided to suppress information about themselves, and to not disclose their actual purpose. They feigned marginal interest in the snow leopard incident. They felt that doing so would help them get more accurate information, and that disclosing their actual identity would deter the herder from sharing details.

Our team did manage to gather detailed and accurate information regarding the circumstances under which the snow leopard was killed. And they could do so over cups of tea, enjoying the hospitality of the unsuspecting herder, inside the comfort of his house.

There was no malice involved in what our staff did. The intention was never to deceive the herder, nor was he harmed in any way due to our actions. We could eventually start a conservation partnership with the community. We entered into an agreement, and collaboratively predator-proofed all the corrals in the hamlet. We now have a strong and continued relationship with the residents of this hamlet.

From an ethical perspective, however, our initial interactions and actions were rather questionable. They represented a classic manifestation of the object-subject tension to which I will return shortly.

It is critical in community-based conservation that we interact with local communities with fairness and honesty (also see chapter 4: TRANSPARENCY). It requires us to have a respectful stance. It requires that we refrain from deception or coercion. It requires viewing local people as equal partners, which also implies respecting their autonomy.

A respectful stance entails aspects of external behavior, but also our deeper attitudes. It is not just about external conduct and civility in interactions, but

one's internal psychological orientation towards the other party (Cohen, 2001). This orientation, knowingly or unknowingly, can have a considerable influence on behavior.

Looking back, we were unfair and even deceitful – albeit inadvertently – to the herder. We did what we believed at that point was – correctly or not – best suited to meet our objective, and compromised on standard ethical norms of interacting with others. The knowledge that the herder had killed a snow leopard had presumably influenced our internal orientations, our stance, biasing our actions.

In Cohen's (2001, p. 750) words, the challenge lies in "...seeing the fundamental dignity of people despite their instrumentality." The challenge for the conservationist in community-based conservation can be even more testing. Seeing the fundamental dignity of a person despite their occasional, seemingly antithetical – and even illegal – behavior, such as killing a snow leopard, can be difficult.

Provider or recipient?

"We did so much for them, but they still did not stop hunting." One occasionally hears this sentence, or its variants, from a wildlife manager or a conservationist who has tried community-based work. Words expressing frustration. Words that communicate a feeling of betrayal.

The problem here is not only that a community-based program did not have the desired effect on biodiversity, perhaps because it wasn't designed or implemented well. Or that it may not have worked due to some extraneous factors, despite being planned and implemented well. When programs don't have the desired effect, frustration is understandable. But there is more to it.

There is an underlying stance problem here. When programs don't have the desired effect, or even when they do, the nature of our work is such that it is easy to start viewing ourselves as the provider, and the community as the recipient.

Such a stance probably arises because conservationists and managers help bring resources into an area or a community. Resource mobilization and expenditure, in fact, form a significant part of doing conservation. Considerable societal funding is spent in what could be construed as community aid.

We spend time and effort finding those resources. We work hard to use them diligently, and to implement conservation programs. We invest effort accounting for resources, and reporting back expenditure and progress – or lack thereof – to our governments or funding agencies. This reality of the importance of funding, and the role of the conservationist as its conduit, can lead to an implicit donor-recipient hierarchy. It compromises the sense of equality that should characterize our relationship with the local communities, and can even render us paternalistic towards them.

It is helpful, and even humbling, to consider that in many ways, the communities are the main provider in this interaction, in the form of their potential support for biodiversity conservation that we are seeking.

If our stance makes us view local communities as the recipient in community-based conservation, there will be no equality in the conservation partnership. There will be no fairness. This is a problem, as the very starting point of community-based conservation, alongside pragmatism, is the pursuit of fairness.

It is helpful, and even humbling, to consider that in many ways, the communities are the main provider in this interaction, in the form of their potential support for biodiversity conservation that we are seeking. We try to achieve this by supporting and empowering the local communities. Community-based conservation relies on the devolution of conservation responsibility to local people.

Thus, in most ways, in community-based conservation, we are the recipients – or, at best, catalysts for change – who depend on the community to meet conservation goals.

Our ability to view the community as an equal partner in conservation is critical in community-based work. Not just in the civility of our interactions with them, but, importantly, in our fundamental attitude. If our psychological orientation tends to view the community as the recipient, we would have lost the plot of community-based conservation even before we began.

Respecting discord and avoiding harm

Many cohesive forces keep the members of a local community together. There is the shared space, resources, history, kinship, interdependence and reciprocity, local institutions, and traditions and rituals that keep people together. This social capital forms a most important resource for effective community-based conservation.

Yet, local communities are not homogenous bodies. Like in any community, there are social divisions, class divisions, political divisions, and individual disputes. Sometimes, such internal divisions impede the progress of community-based work, even though conservationists may not be responsible for them or involved in them in any way. At other times, we may be drawn into these disagreements.

It is no doubt useful, and even important, to be aware of local divisions and disputes, because, though unrelated, they can have unintended consequences in retarding the progress of our work. Being aware of them helps to better decide on the social institutions to partner with, and the individuals to talk to (see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION).

When faced with opposition from a section of the community, however, we are sometimes tempted to make use of the local divisions, especially political ones, to address dissent. This temptation is to be avoided at all costs. It is important that working with communities, we respect the value of human relationships, and try to ensure that our work does not weaken existing relationships among people. It is also useful to keep in mind that communities have their own systems and arbitration mechanisms for resolving disputes.

Attempts to use differences within the community for conservation would be unethical, and constitute an undue intrusion. Indeed, beneficence and non-maleficence form important twin guidelines of any community-based work (Gambrill 2012). We must try to ensure that to the extent possible, our community-based conservation actions are able to help local communities and do not knowingly cause them harm.

Patience, communication and negotiation are the only way to circumvent such road bumps in community-based work created by internal disputes (see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION). Getting into divisive haggling or into alliances based on local power equations must be avoided. Apart from being unethical, this strategy yields only short-term gains at best – but those tend to come at a large long-term cost to conservation efforts. Power can change sides quickly.

There are also instances, especially when there is a long-term relationship with the community, when conservationists may be requested by the community for advice, or even mediation, in settling internal disagreements. Under such situations, it becomes important to share opinions in a neutral manner, while reminding the community of our core competency, which is not in arbitration.

Factionalism, discrimination and favoritism are damaging for community-based conservation. On the other hand, maintaining neutrality and equitability, following fair and transparent processes, and if possible, promoting social justice become our responsibilities.

Dos:

- Treating community members with respect
- Seeking to create an equal partnership with the community
- Engaging in open and honest communication
- Taking note of societal divisions and individual differences within the community

Don'ts:

- Viewing local communities as recipients of aid, rather than as providers of conservation services
- Using societal divisions and individual differences within the community to advance the conservation agenda