Chapter 8:
RESPONSIVENESS

Change is the only constant in community-based conservation. Practitioners need to be responsive to the changing threats to biodiversity, the changes within communities, and to the need for addressing weaknesses in conservation interventions. Monitoring programs therefore must accompany any community-based conservation effort. They need to include threats indicators to constantly evaluate the main threats to biodiversity, process indicators to evaluate how well the conservation interventions are being implemented, and impact indicators that help to assess the actual impact of conservation programs on biodiversity. Conservation is about identifying threats as well as opportunities, and responding to them promptly.

It is in the nature of responsiveness, however, that the practitioner will be faced with difficult decisions when it comes to important community needs that are unrelated to biodiversity conservation. Whether or not to get involved in such cases can be assessed by asking:

- How serious is the problem?
- Is the problem episodic or chronic?
- Do we have the expertise and the resources ourselves, or is it better to facilitate a specialized organization to help address the problem?
- Is it possible to assist the community to meet their biodiversity-unrelated needs through interventions that are biodiversity-linked?
- How mature is the conservation partnership with the community?
- To what extent does a biodiversity-unlinked intervention enhance the social capital?

As I mentioned earlier, timing is critical in conservation, and especially in community-based efforts. New threats to biodiversity are constantly arising, and timely and creative responsiveness is essential.

Responsiveness, however, is important not just because of new threats to biodiversity. There are problems, weaknesses and management issues in the interventions themselves that periodically arise or become evident, and need to be addressed. Or, the interventions may require audit and adaptive improvement, especially if monitoring suggests that the desired or expected conservation targets are not being achieved. However, we need to be responsive not just in addressing problems, but also in seizing conservation opportunities.

Problems as opportunities

Problems are to be expected to arise periodically – if not constantly – in any work, and especially in community-based conservation. They are no doubt a cause of frustration for the conservationist, but they should neither surprise nor distress us.

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The first expansion of our very first village reserve became possible as a result of a problem. In our initial agreement, the community had agreed to protect half the section of a side valley from livestock grazing and other forms of resource use to allow for wildlife and rangeland recovery.

On one occasion, as I passed by the reserve area on my way back to the village after a long day's fieldwork, it was annoying to see several of the livestock that had been brought to a nearby area that day grazing inside the village reserve. The herders were not in sight.

Back in the village, I requested a meeting with community representatives. I had planned to remind them about their conservation commitment, with the hope that they would strictly instruct the herders to ensure that this was not repeated. I was younger and short on both patience and empathy.

The community representatives apologized for what had happened, but, unlike me, rather than appearing to be dissatisfied with the day's herders, their discussions focused on how the topography and boundary of the village reserve made it difficult for the herders to prevent livestock from straying in.

Then came the solution, their solution. Without changing any other term of agreement, they unilaterally decided to double the size of the village reserve. It was extended to cover the entire side valley instead of just half, making it easier for the herders to prevent livestock from straying in. They would also explain to the herders again the importance of keeping the livestock out of the reserve area.

I was delighted and educated; their decision meant that the problem had become an opportunity to protect more area for biodiversity. I was also humbled by the contrast in their way of thinking, especially their empathy, and the deficiency in mine.

One encounters occasional problems in the norms and processes of community-based interventions, and these too can become opportunities for strengthening both the interventions and our relationship with the community.

In the livestock insurance program (Chapter 11), the communities have a clause that if a livestock owning family decides to not join from the outset but wait and watch to see how the program works, they would have to pay a joining fee to start participating later. Otherwise, it would be unfair on the original participants whose premiums, along with our support, created the insurance corpus.

In a cluster of villages we have been partnering with in the Ladakh Trans-Himalaya, we faced a peculiar situation. Several 'wait and watch families' were interested in joining the program, which had been running well for several years. While the original participants welcomed their inclusion, they expected joining fees to be paid. However, the size of the joining fee that the new families were legitimately expected to pay was a deterrent for them to join the program.

At a subsequent meeting, as part of the negotiations to encourage the inclusion of new families and revise the premium and compensation rates (it had been almost eight years since these were fixed), we offered to assist the new families to be included. We suggested that we would pay the joining fee on behalf of the new families through conservation funds.

This gesture, costing less than US$ 25 per family, all of which would go into strengthening the insurance corpus further, was highly appreciated by the community. Because it was only a one-time offer, the insurance committee members voluntarily conducted a drive to make all the non-participating families aware of the offer of the joining fee being provided for. The participation in the insurance program went up by 25 %.

At times, the problems are rather serious, but they too can become opportunities for conservation. A few years back, on one of my first field trips to Mongolia, we realized how serious mining had become as a threat to the snow leopard habitats of the country, especially the Tost Mountains in the South Gobi Province. The Tost Mountains form the study area of the most comprehensive and successful snow leopard radio collaring project ever undertaken.

Our study area, we found, was covered almost entirely with mining licenses. As I mentioned earlier, although we had been running a community-based intervention for many years, the problem of pervasive mining had crept up almost unnoticed, or rather unacknowledged, from a snow leopard conservation perspective.

The situation was distressing. We had to reprioritize all our activities, and take up the threat of mining in Tost as one of our key preoccupations. Years of hectic efforts with the Central government began. Our team, led by country Program Director Bayarjargal (Bayara) Agvaantseren, worked closely with the local government, as the local communities too were opposed to the idea of losing their grazing land to mining. The fact that we had been running the Snow Leopard Enterprises program with local communities in the region helped us quickly get together and form an alliance to address the external threat posed by mining, both to the local way of life as well as the area's biodiversity. We did not have to start building a relationship with the local people from scratch. Little time was wasted.

Finally, this problem turned into a small opportunity when the government relented and agreed to the proposal of declaring this area as the 6500 sq. km. Tost Local Protected Area, which, at least on paper, created a large, connected landscape of wildlife reserves, with the Great Gobi National Park on the west, and the Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park contiguous to the north.

The problem hadn't gone away though. Local Protected Areas offer only the weakest levels of protection under Mongolia's conservation laws. The status is temporary and time-bound. So our collaborative efforts with the local people and with the government continued, as we tried to acquire the status of a state-level reserve for Tost, which would be long-term, and afford a much stronger legal basis for protection.

It took many years of hard work, risks faced by Bayara's team members, and the tragic loss of our colleague Sumbee, one of Mongolia's young and rising conservation stars to whose memory this book is dedicated. Finally, in the summer of 2016, the Great Hural (Parliament) of Mongolia approved the proposal to turn Tost into a State Nature Reserve. Our work in the region, of course, hasn't ended. Conservation is a life-long job.

Tost is an illuminating example of a crisis being turned into an incredible opportunity for conservation. Tost is also a classic example of why community-based efforts, by themselves, are far from being enough to achieve sustainable conservation, unless supported by appropriate legal and policy frameworks, a subject I will come to later (see Chapter 8: STRATEGIC SUPPORT)

Responding to opportunities promptly

As I have discussed earlier, building resilient relationships with the local communities is most important; effective conservation interventions follow. At times, however, opportunities for conservation interventions present themselves when one least expects them, and when that happens, we must seize them; the relationship building then follows. Effective conservation is about timing, about creating or finding opportunities, and responding to them.

The predator-proofing of corrals in the hamlet where a snow leopard was killed is one such example (see Chapter 4: RESPECT and Chapter 6: EMPATHY). Our standard predator-proofing intervention is different from what we did here. In our standard intervention, we supply the raw material and inputs into design, while the community provides labor. Jointly, we strengthen the walls of the corrals, cover the ceiling with chain-link fence, and affix strong doors.

In this case, there were strong walls and doors in the corrals already. What was required was to reinforce the windows with predator-proof grills. We needed to act quickly to preclude the possibility of another predator attack. So even during our first visit, we suggested a cost-sharing arrangement for predator-proofing, and the community readily agreed. Within a month, all windows were reinforced.

Now that the corrals have been predator-proofed collaboratively, is our job in this community done? Far from it. Although we have a signed agreement with them where they have committed their support to conserving wildlife, our corral improvement effort should be viewed more as a community entry conservation activity; the beginning of a relationship. Constant communication must follow, as is now being ensured by our field staff.

The subject of community entry activity is a good point of departure to try and tackle a difficult question that conservationists are often confronted with. Should we, or rather, when should we get involved in community work that is unrelated to biodiversity conservation?

Responsiveness when societal needs are biodiversity-unrelated

I have visited a community of 300 or so in a tropical rainforest in the Eastern Himalayas, where more than 40 people had lost their lives during the previous two years to avoidable and treatable infections. They did not have access to basic healthcare.

I have had the privilege of breaking bread with some wonderful families in snow leopard habitats of the Pamirs, inside the comfort of their yurts, while it snowed outside. Their generosity notwithstanding, these people were food-secure for barely half the year, their lives ravaged by decades of war and factional fighting. They had to rely on aid and opium to get by during the rest of the year.

The desire to conserve gets us to difficult places and situations. How does one even begin to discuss conservation when people are at the edge of existence? Indeed, these are extreme examples, but they help to put the problem in perspective.

To rephrase the question, do we have an obligation to get involved in issues affecting the community that do not have anything directly to do with biodiversity conservation, our key mission? There is no easy answer to this question. Perhaps the answer is different in every situation, and for every individual or institution.

When people are living in abject poverty, livelihood-based interventions such as Snow Leopard Enterprises assume even greater importance. Livelihood enhancement can enable people to better deal with many of the challenges they face.

At least on the face of it, interventions like Snow Leopard Enterprises (Chapter 10) can potentially enable a win-win for conservation and human development. However, it is useful to be aware that unless the per capita livelihood enhancement is substantial, such efforts could deprive the already underserved people even further. For instance, in some situations, curtailing hunting can cut off a critical source of protein, which would be difficult to replace for the poor unless livelihoods are strengthened substantially.

> One useful way – though neither sufficient, nor perhaps always appropriate – to assess the extent to which we need to get involved in issues unlinked to biodiversity is to examine whether the problem and the need are chronic or episodic.

Interventions such as the livestock insurance program (Chapter 11) may also be useful for livestock-based people in poverty, though it would be important to keep premiums much lower, and rely on greater conservation subsidy to build the insurance corpus.

These interventions, of course, are linked to biodiversity. The reason to invoke them here is to reiterate the point that strengthening peoples' livelihoods substantially can enable them to better meet their basic needs of education, healthcare, and nutrition, which themselves may be less related to biodiversity.

Getting back to the main question of whether or not, as conservationists, we should get involved in addressing societal needs that are unrelated to biodiversity. One useful way – though neither sufficient, nor perhaps always appropriate – to assess the extent to which we should get involved in issues unlinked to biodiversity is to examine whether the problem and the need are chronic or episodic.

There was widespread devastation in China following an earthquake in 2010 that was epicentered near Yushu, Qinghai. Thousands of people lost their lives. Our Chinese colleagues dropped all their work and dedicated themselves to rescue efforts. When the dzud led to several million livestock dying in Mongolia following the winter of 2009-10, our team dedicated effort and funding to assist our community partners in rebuilding their livelihoods.

These, and other potential situations such as a drought, or a disease outbreak, are unexpected, acute and episodic situations. Helping communities in such emergency situations – irrespective of any biodiversity linkage – is a given, and a humanitarian imperative. As I have discussed throughout, community-based conservation is about relationships. What good is a relationship that cannot come to the assistance of a community in distress?

These are serious situations. What if the issue may be episodic, but not as serious? Sometimes, agreeing to assist the community with issues unrelated to biodiversity could help strengthen the relationship substantially. However, being creative and helping them meet their unrelated needs through interventions that are actually biodiversity-linked may be a much better approach than providing direct assistance for biodiversity-unrelated issues. I will explain this with an unlikely example.

During the establishment of our first village reserve, the community had requested advance payment for two years, which we had agreed to. It turned out that they used the money for cooperatively repairing the village temple, and improving access to it.

Because the funding was used, from their perspective, for a noble cause, it ended up helping our relationship quite a bit. The funds they had received, though, were in lieu of the village reserve, and not specifically for temple repairs. They were, of course, free to use the funds in the way they desired. This experience helped to understand that such unrelated needs can potentially be incorporated in conservation negotiations with the community (see Chapter 6: NEGOTIATION).

Deciding whether or not, or to what extent, to respond to biodiversity-unlinked societal issues is more difficult when the problem is chronic. Multiple issues become important, but a few that stand out and perhaps merit some consideration here include the seriousness and resource needs of the issue, our expertise (or lack of it), our resources, and the risk of creating undue expectation. As we will see, none of these is simple.

Healthcare is a good hypothetical example to consider. It is a critical need, and though unrelated in many ways, it does determine the ability of a community to participate in conservation and most other individual and societal pursuits. It is serious enough to make it worthy of consideration. How then can we assist a community living in an important biodiversity area with a basic need such as healthcare? Should we?

One of the important things to consider here is that healthcare is a sustained, resource-intensive need. So we need to be clear that unless it is an episodic event (such as an epidemic outbreak), an ephemeral involvement is not really of much value for the communities, and may end up creating expectations that we are unable to meet.

Secondly, do we have the expertise? Healthcare is a technical subject. There are also ethical issues involved. For example, having to close down a healthcare program after having created expectations – and without an alternative in place – is perhaps a worse situation to be in than not having been involved in the first place.

Unless we have public health specialists on our team, it may be prudent not to get involved directly. If the issue is important enough, the best way to assist the communities might be by encouraging and assisting specialized healthcare organizations to come in and establish public health programs.

Indeed, it is useful to be aware that even helping to set up a collaboration like this requires a fair amount of time and effort. When the community's needs are chronic, the effort needed is much greater, and decisions must balance empathy with prudence.

Another aspect to keep in mind while making decisions on unrelated interventions is the nature of overall partnership with a community. As the relationship with any community matures, unrelated interventions become easier to manage in terms of expectations, and become more useful in strengthening the relationship.

This is in contrast to the standard practice of community entry activities in social work. Here, unrelated needs are sometimes considered under the broad categorization of community entry activities. I would suggest, instead, that community entry is best served through communication, information gathering, and biodiversity-related interventions, rather than unrelated ones. It can otherwise send incorrect messages to the community, and create false expectation right from the outset.

It is also useful to keep in mind that those unrelated activities, including exposure visits and training, that have a greater ability to encourage collective work, skills enhancement, and general improvement of social capital, are to be preferred over those that don't. As I have mentioned before, the conservation threats and the socio-ecological situations change over time. It is the combination of our community relationships and their social capital that is important in determining the resilience of community based conservation programs.

Monitoring and adaptive improvement

Evidence for the effectiveness of community-based programs in achieving biodiversity conservation remains limited. On what basis do we decide whether or not a conservation project is having the desired impact? Monitoring and adaptive improvement are fundamental parts of any conservation effort.

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As mentioned earlier, biodiversity goals may not be achieved at times, either because the implementation of conservation interventions was not done well, or because the interventions did not address the main threats, or due to external limiting factors. A good monitoring program helps diagnose where the problem lies, and accordingly, allows for adaptive improvement.

What should we monitor? In community-based conservation efforts, there are typically three types of indicators that we need to monitor to varying degrees.

These include (i) keeping a constant watch on the nature and severity of threats to biodiversity in any area, (ii) process indicators that help assess how well the conservation interventions are being implemented, and (iii) impact indicators that help assess the actual impact of conservation interventions on the biodiversity that one is trying to conserve.

A good monitoring program relies on a variety of indicators, because biological variables such as snow leopard populations, prey populations, and the status of rangeland vegetation, convey different kinds of information compared to say poaching records, or the extent of livelihood generation for community members.

The information content, utility and robustness of different indicators varies. For instance, biological indicators tend to have greater natural variation and longer response times, making them more difficult to interpret on their own. Therefore, it is useful to combine their monitoring with other indicators such as changes in peoples' attitudes, or other measures of threats reduction.

The techniques to quantify and monitor the various indicators vary, as do the periodicity and spatial extent over which each indicator needs to be quantified.

For instance, estimating snow leopard abundance in key conservation landscapes once in 2-3 years may be desirable and feasible, while it may be possible to undertake prey abundance monitoring in representative parts of this landscape once in two years or even annually. Some program indicators such as the number of local livestock insured, or the extent of livelihood generation supported, are best monitored at least on an annual basis.

It makes sense to measure some biological indicators such as the snow leopard population at larger scales, and it is difficult to relate them to a specific community conservation intervention. Indeed, such monitoring is best done in collaboration with the Government – or to at least share the results of such efforts with them constantly. It is, after all, the Government that is the overarching body usually administering larger landscapes with various land tenures such as community land and protected areas and various stakeholders (Chapter 9: STRATEGIC SUPPORT).

If a community intervention is designed to influence the prey population, the status of vegetation etc., it would be sensible to monitor those indicators at the level of community-owned land.

Monitoring can be resource – and manpower – intensive; and therefore, the extent of monitoring is often decided by logistic constraints. Within these constraints, though, and much like community-based interventions, monitoring too is best done in as multi-pronged a manner as possible. It ideally focuses on a combination of biological, socio-economic and attitudinal indicators; some of which may describe program implementation while others help evaluate conservation impact.

Dos:

- Monitoring threats, interventions and impact
- Adapting and improving interventions whenever possible or necessary
- Helping communities when they have urgent, episodic needs unrelated to biodiversity
- Looking for ways to assist communities in biodiversity unrelated needs with interventions that are linked to biodiversity

Don’ts:

- Assuming that threats and priorities remain stable

- Forgetting that problems are opportunities to improve conservation interventions
- Creating expectations that one cannot meet
- Getting directly involved in biodiversity unlinked interventions when the team lacks the necessary expertise