Chapter 9:
STRATEGIC SUPPORT

While local communities are made out to be a major problem for biodiversity conservation, it is really the larger – often global – economic forces that usually overwhelm conservation efforts today. Governments alone have the main authority to bring about a greater balance between the needs of biodiversity conservation and those of economic development. Ultimately, the success of community-based interventions depends, to a large extent, on the support of the government. In the absence of supporting policies, laws, or political will, years of community-based conservation effort can easily be laid to waste in the face of economic forces. Practitioners must work closely with governments in policy formulation, management planning, and implementation, and in catalyzing multi-sectorial cooperation. This role requires a delicate balancing act where the practitioner must cooperate and partner with governments, and at the same time oppose them when warranted in the interest of biodiversity conservation.

Community-based conservation is a demanding undertaking, in terms of time, resources, effort, and perseverance. As we have seen, there are constantly emerging issues that require attention, ranging from new threats to biodiversity or the failure of interventions to have the desired impact, to problems arising out of unrelated local conflicts or politics. For the conservationist trying to engage in community-based conservation, the plate is constantly brimming over.

Yet, it is critical that we are able to think beyond the next incremental decisions and the day-to-day contingencies. This is necessary because although local communities are often made out to be a big problem for conservation, it really is the larger external economic forces that globally overwhelm conservation efforts today.

Retaliatory killing of snow leopards, for instance, is a much easier problem to have and to manage compared to e.g. the expansion of mining into important

snow leopard habitat. That's particularly true in a situation where more than 10 % of the GDP of a country comes from the operations of a single mining company. Extreme as it may sound, this is not an imaginary example. It accurately describes a real situation that we have wrestled with.

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Routinely today, conservation goals are pitted against global economic pressures, and they are routinely compromised at the global, national, and local levels. In such a scenario, years of community-based conservation effort can be laid to waste in the face of strong economic forces, or in the pursuit of seemingly legitimate national and local development agendas.

This is where strategic support for community-based conservation becomes so critical. And it comes from an unlikely ally.

Governance and the government

As we have seen throughout this document, community-based conservation is founded on the ideas of equity, devolution, and local empowerment. It aims to shift the responsibility of conservation from solely resting with the government to a governance model where local communities play a central role in conservation.

However, it would be a mistake to view community-based conservation as a zero sum game, where an increased role of local communities translates to any reduction in the role of the government. To the contrary, we desperately need conservation to acquire a higher place in the government order today, more than ever before.

The illegal trade in wildlife products, for instance is already estimated to be over US$ 20 billion annually (Graham-Rowe 2011). The scale and manner in which it needs to be tackled, especially in terms of enforcement, can only be effectively handled if governments and international alliances put in the needed effort. The scale of climate change, similarly, requires governmental leadership, integrative international negotiation, and stricter legislations.

Even at the local and regional levels, the role of governments in biodiversity

conservation remains integral. While infrastructure and development projects are necessary for any nation's growth, such projects become problematic when they are located in important biodiversity areas, or are detrimental to the welfare of local people.

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We were able to make progress with establishing a Protected Area in Tost Mountains of South Gobi, mentioned earlier, thanks to multiple factors and circumstances: the local community was united in their opposition to mining expansion; Tost represented an important snow leopard habitat so we were determined to help protect it; we had a history of collaboration with the local community through Snow Leopard Enterprises (Chapter 10); there was a bedrock of scientific information to demonstrate the importance of the area; and in a pre-election year, there was unprecedented support and pressure from within Mongolia to protect the area as a tribute to Sumbee, our young colleague working in Tost who passed away in late 2015.

But ultimately, it was the government alone that had to decide whether or not to approve the proposal, first to declare Tost a Local Protected Area, which it did in 2010. Similarly, it was up to the Great Hural, Mongolia's parliament, to decide whether or not to upgrade the Tost Local Protected Area to a State Nature Reserve. It chose to do so in 2016. It could have chosen not to.

In a similar manner, when we joined hands with other conservation and human development NGOs to oppose gold mine expansion into Kyrgyzstan's Sarychat Reserve, our collective effort and our experience in the area came in handy. However, the main reason underlying our success was not the strength of our collective voice, but the favorable political circumstances prevailing at that time in the Kyrgyz Parliament that helped our concerns to be heard. The government chose to consider our concerns on that occasion. At another time, it could have easily disregarded them.

There are things we can do proactively, however, beyond just hoping for favorable political circumstances whenever such problems arise.

Policy and management plans

How can we try to bring more balance between the needs for economic development and biodiversity conservation? How can we create more space and support in government thinking for community involvement in conservation? The answer is relatively simple, but getting there is extraordinarily difficult.

It is essential for us to work closely with governments to create supportive processes and structures within the government system. These need to facilitate more rational decisions that better balance economic development needs with the needs of biodiversity. They also need to strengthen the voice of communities in such decision-making – in reality, and not just in rhetoric.

It requires changes in policy, appropriate management planning and implementation, and, ideally, as we will see later, a stronger legal system in support of community-based conservation (see Chapter 13).

Policy and management planning generally tend to be viewed as lying completely within the purview of the government. Yet, there is the space and the need for conservationists to be centrally involved in policy planning and implementation– and there are numerous examples as well.

India's Project Snow Leopard, a national strategy and action plan meant to guide conservation of high altitude biodiversity in all five Himalayan provinces of the country, was a product of years of our collaborative effort with the Central and Provincial governments. We catalyzed the process, drafted the document on behalf of the government, and lobbied for its official endorsement. Similarly, as we helped catalyze the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program, aimed at the highest levels of all 12 snow leopard range-country governments, our teams assisted various national governments in creating their related strategies (called National Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program).

Needless to say, the global program mentioned above as well as the national program in India recognize a central role for local communities in conservation and conflict management programs; and they facilitate collaborations among

local communities, wildlife managers, and conservationists. They adopt a landscape-level approach to conservation that looks well beyond the boundaries of Protected Areas.

Similarly, we have assisted some of the Indian snow leopard provinces in the identification of important snow leopard landscapes to be brought under comprehensive, community-based conservation efforts. In some of the provinces, our teams have helped create landscape-level management plans. We are now assisting the wildlife managers in implementation, especially in engaging better with local communities (see Chapter 13), and trying to catalyze multi-sectorial cooperation.

While the government continues to remain a key player, a greater emphasis on community-based conservation does imply some realignment and refocusing of its approach at the local level. In this approach, wildlife managers, rather than relying on their own limited human resources, try to achieve conservation in cooperation with local communities who assume a dominant role in conservation micro-planning and implementation. The interaction is mediated by conservationists.

Our catalytic efforts are helping to bridge the distance between wildlife managers and local communities, a relationship that has traditionally tended to be edgy. Improving it will in turn, we believe, make conservation efforts more resilient, and will improve our collective ability to negotiate when external forces threaten to destroy local biodiversity.

Multi-sectorial cooperation

The distance, however, is not just between local communities and wildlife managers. It also exists between the various departments of the government itself. For landscape species like the snow leopard, as I have discussed earlier, a Protected Area approach is ecologically insufficient (see Chapter 3: APTNESS). But in any land outside of Protected Areas, there are numerous stakeholders, including several administrative bodies. Various government departments have a role here, such as those responsible for building roads and infrastructure, for conservation, agriculture, etc., whose mandates are often conflicting with each other.

Conservation suffers because these departments don't talk to each other as much as they should, and because the mechanisms for inter-sectorial communication

within the government tend to be poor. Our colleague Yash Veer Bhatnagar has spent years in India trying to get various government departments to cooperate for conservation. Using his experiences, he now assists other range countries in their management planning and multi-sectorial cooperation.

We have learnt from experience that facilitating better communication and cooperation between various government departments can help not just better safeguard conservation interests, but can actually assist in generating more resources for community-based conservation as well.

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For example, as free-ranging dogs are becoming a serious threat to wildlife and a human health and economic hazard in many snow leopard landscapes, we have been able to initiate a pilot program in cooperation with various government bodies including the wildlife and veterinary departments, the district administration, and the local communities, to address the problem. As a result of this cooperation in the Western Trans-Himalaya, our colleague Ajay Bijoor has been able to help channelize the expertise and resources of various departments – rather than solely taxing conservation funds – for activities like dog sterilization and vaccination, and garbage management.

Thus, through appropriate management planning and actions, conservationists can catalyze collaborative multi-sectorial efforts for biodiversity conservation and human welfare. However, such multi-sectorial cooperation depends on the government's willingness, underscoring again the fundamental role of the State in community-based conservation.

The art of finding middle ground

Conservation is the art of finding meeting ground amidst conflicting interests and priorities. It is about tradeoffs between the need to protect biodiversity and the need for development and prosperity. It is about finding effective solutions through integrative negotiations.

In almost every case, we need to compromise to a certain extent. We can improve the resilience and sustainability of community-based efforts by

strategically partnering with the government. By generating strategic support of the government, we improve the chances of tilting the balance in negotiations in favor of biodiversity conservation.

But, as discussed earlier, the nature of the problem is such that no amount of effort or strategic support, can guarantee positive outcomes for biodiversity and human welfare. Indeed, under the pressures of economic development, policies are sometimes ignored, and even laws are circumvented or broken by the very same bodies that are responsible for creating, implementing, or upholding them.

Working with governments can be frustrating, just like it can be occasionally with local communities. It tests the conservationist's patience, perseverance, and negotiation skills. Conservationists are in an unenviable position where they must collaborate with the government and oppose it at the same time when warranted in the interest of biodiversity conservation. Good diplomacy and negotiation skills can help traverse this delicate path. A set of PARTNERS Principles for effectively working with governments is much needed.

For conservation efforts and impact to be sustainable, strategic support of the government is essential. If we want to enable local people to have a strong voice in conservation, paradoxically, we must invest time and effort into working with governments. If we are unable to make this investment, community-based efforts will not get the strategic support they need, and external economic pressures will easily overwhelm conservation efforts and goals.

Returning to the communities themselves, the next three chapters (Chapters 10-12) provide descriptions of three specific community-based initiatives that the Snow Leopard Trust has been involved in. These are written from the perspective of the practitioner who might be considering piloting such an initiative themselves. None of ours is perfect. We try to improve as we go along.

Dos:

- Proactively collaborating with government and sharing expertise
- Facilitating cooperation and communication between various government sectors
- Acting as a bridge between local communities and wildlife managers

- Compromising and reconciling, while being prepared to oppose the government when it is warranted

Don’ts:

- Viewing the government as anathema for community-based conservation
- Assuming there is no role for the practitioner in policy formulation, management planning and implementation