

Community-based conservation programmes

Be it the tropical rainforest or the African savannah, every country and ocean comprises an incredible wealth of natural resources. Over thousands of years, ecosystems have changed and developed their magnificent beauty and diversity. Animals lived in harmony with human beings for centuries. But rapid population growth, burgeoning resource consumption and changing land use have destroyed habitats and exterminated biodiversity worldwide, and are continuing to do so.

Conservation efforts started a long time ago. National Parks and Reserves were created and still they only cover a small piece of the cake that is slowly being eaten up by human beings. Outside protected areas, the land is used by a constantly increasing population of human beings and in many countries this has led to monocultures and the extinction of many animal species. At the same time, human-wildlife conflict is becoming more and more frequent due to the overlapping animals' habitat with new or growing human settlements.

In the past, most policies and regulations focused on the protection of fauna and flora and ignored the needs of local people who were often moved out of these protected areas and excluded from their own land and activities. But it soon became obvious that the involvement of local communities, who used to live in and depend on these resources, and who were given no alternatives when forcibly removed, was critical for the success of conservation activities.

The involvement of the local communities brought a change of approach to conservation efforts. A variety of initiatives have been developed in the attempt to organise communities for natural resource extraction and management, with the aim of bringing about sustainable management of these resources in ways that benefit local communities. These initiatives are called community-based conservation (CBC): the natural resources' protection by, for and with the local communities.

CBC projects include ecotourism, creation of tree nurseries, production and selling of local craft work, hunting and collecting traditional medicine products, direct involvement in conservation work by becoming a scout, guide, manager of the region, and environmental educational programmes. The aim is that the local people protect and sustainably use their own land by becoming directly involved and responsible. In some cases, this can be a slow process, as local communities have been excluded for a long time from any decision-making process. Some have never learned how to, or been given the chance to, live from their own land in a sustainable manner.

In many countries where the most fascinating animals on earth live, local people have not always had chance to see them. Most of the inhabitants of Kenya, for

for example, have never seen a rhino! They may not be able to afford National Park entry fees, or won't have access to a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Reaching children and adults through environmental education programmes is one way of addressing this. As Baba Dioum, from the Ministry of Agriculture and Ecology from Senegal, once said: "In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught".

The key to successful conservation work is systematically to integrate the communities into the projects for profitable cohabitation for all.

Friederike von Houwald and Renaud Fulconis



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