

Beyond community involvement: lessons from the insular Caribbean

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This article provides a brief conceptual framework that sets the background to and proposes a rationale for community involvement in the planning and management of protected areas. It challenges common misconceptions about the homogeneity of *local communities*, in the light of the need to understand and reconcile the interests and expectations of a wide range of stakeholders. It summarises the insular Caribbean's experience in participatory planning and management of protected areas, using examples from several countries in the region.

An analysis of these case studies identifies four key points: (i) the need to recognise the diversity of stakeholders and take into account the full complexity of their interests and relationships with the resource and with one another, (ii) the importance of suitable institutional arrangements to the long-term success of participatory management, (iii) the need for transparent, negotiated processes for determining priorities in the face of inadequate resources, and (iv) the relationship between successful participatory management and the provision of appreciable benefits for local communities.

THE WORLDWIDE GROWTH of environmental consciousness over the past three decades has been accompanied by the gradual realisation that conventional, top-down and purely technical approaches to natural resource conservation have often been detrimental to the people most dependent upon those resources for their livelihoods. As a result, debates and actions have focused on reconciling conservation and development objectives, and integrating people and their institutions into processes of development and natural resource management. It is now widely recognised that "ordinary" people have a central role to play in protected area management, especially those local communities reliant upon the natural resources they contain (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2000; Kothari *et al.* 1996; McNeely and Miller 1984; Wells *et al.* 1992; West and Brechin 1991; Western and Wright 1994).

The Caribbean region has been a part of these debates and the focus of much practical work testing and demonstrating links between people and protected areas (Barzetti 1993; Geoghegan and Barzetti 1994; Renard 1991). In this region, the forces contributing to the adoption of new and more participatory approaches to protected area management, have included the failure of many protected areas to fulfil their initial conservation objectives, the negative impacts that some protected areas have had on people and the severe conflicts they have generated or exacerbated, e.g. the case of *Los Haitises* in the Dominican Republic (Stycos and Duarte 1994).

This paper reviews this Caribbean experience in order to extract lessons of relevance to protected area management for this and other regions of the globe. It draws in part on the experiences and reflections of Caribbean resource managers and development workers who have participated in courses and seminars organised by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) over the past few years. This group of individuals has been at the forefront of efforts to integrate conservation and development, and to place the needs and concerns of people and communities at the centre of protected area management.

Conceptual framework

This paper uses the following conceptual framework as the basis for discussion on the relationship between local communities and protected area management:

- Every protected area impacts on people, either as direct users of its resources, or as beneficiaries of the goods and services it provides. Even when a protected area's resources are not directly used, its management is, above all, the management of the relationship (whether economic, cultural or spiritual; permanent or sporadic; immediate or distant)

between people and the area's resources, as well as of the human interactions that are engendered.

- The concept of *local community* helps managers to focus on the needs and rights of categories of users who have in the past been marginalised by conservation efforts. However, it can be ill-suited to the analysis and understanding of the place of people in complex natural resource use systems, because it suggests a homogeneity that does not exist at all levels, and it ignores those people who cannot be identified with a local, geographic community. The concept of *stakeholder* has gained prominence in development and natural resource management circles because of its usefulness in the identification and definition of those who have influence on, or can be affected by, the management process. It recognises, for example, that poor people in urban areas potentially affected by flooding and erosion have a direct stake in the management of upper watersheds; but although stakeholders, they cannot be termed *local*.
- The relationships among and between stakeholders and their uses of/relations with, natural resources, are governed by institutions, both formal and informal, which are almost always complex, fluid and dynamic. These institutions, including rules, norms, laws, policies and organizations, regulate and guide the lives and actions of people.
- Management, including protected area management, is the task of transforming these institutions to meet defined goals. Increasingly these include social and economic goals such as the provision of human needs, the elimination of poverty, social justice, and equity; in addition to environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation.
- The process of transforming these institutions must recognise the complexity and coherence of existing institutions and the diversity and interests of the various stakeholders. It therefore must give stakeholders the opportunity to participate in the design of new arrangements, instead of providing external and technocratic answers. It should also embrace the range of development and natural resource management issues, instead of confining itself to narrow conservation objectives.

Figure 1. Map of the Caribbean.



- The rationale for stakeholder participation in planning includes (a) the quality of management decisions that integrate the knowledge, needs and aspirations of all parties; (b) the feasibility of management decisions that are accepted and owned by stakeholders; and (c) the empowerment and democratization that result from the involvement of people and their organizations in formulating and implementing policy and management decisions.
- Despite this strong rationale for participation, stakeholders cannot all and always be involved in management. Indeed, it would be naïve to believe that management authority can be shared among a myriad of state and civil society actors; or that all government responsibilities could or should be delegated to local groups and organisations.

Within this framework, the challenge for protected area planners and managers is to design and implement planning processes and institutional arrangements that use the tools of participation to achieve objectives as diverse as environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation, poverty reduction and provision of basic human needs; and equity and social justice. It is this challenge that a number of Caribbean initiatives are attempting to meet, in several ways.

The diversity of the insular Caribbean experience in PA management

The insular Caribbean is a region of great ecological, cultural and social diversity. At the same time, there are similarities of experience that give its people a shared sense of history and identity, despite political and linguistic barriers. The region contains a wide range of protected natural and cultural resources of international importance, from the rain forests and volcanic features of the Morne Trois Pitons National Park and World Heritage Site in Dominica; to the Marine Mammals Sanctuary on the Silver Banks in the Dominican Republic, where most of the Atlantic's humpback whales congregate each winter; the pristine coral reefs of the Saba Marine Park in the Netherlands Antilles, which attract divers from around the world; and the fortifications in the San Juan National Historic Site that have looked over San Juan Harbor in Puerto Rico for more than four hundred years.

Diversity is also found in the region's approaches to protected area management, reflecting a spectrum of opportunities for, as well as constraints to, the participation of stakeholders in the management process. These approaches can be catalogued roughly as follows:

- management governed by a standard system-wide regulatory and policy framework and implemented by a national government agency (e.g. the protected areas of the French departments of Guadeloupe and Martinique and US territories of Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands);
- management governed by a standard regulatory and policy framework, but implemented through a variety of governmental and non-governmental agencies and inter-agency arrangements (e.g. Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica);
- management through legislative and policy frameworks tailored to the individual protected areas, though sometimes within the context of a broader national system plan, and implemented through a diversity of agencies and institutional arrangements (e.g. St Lucia, Netherlands Antilles).

This diversity of approaches makes the region particularly interesting to study, allowing for the comparison of approaches and results and the development of both theory and practice. In addition, in many countries of the region the institutional and policy frameworks for protected area management are not yet set in stone but continue to evolve, providing opportunities for testing and refinement of participatory approaches.

Experiences in participatory policy formulation

Over the past decade, two initiatives have demonstrated that in the development of policy regarding important natural resources, an entire country can be part of the "local community". The development of a national plan for a system of protected areas for St Lucia, in the early 1990s

(Hudson *et al.* 1992) had the peculiarity of seeking a range of conservation and development objectives and of following a rigorous consultative process that led to the formulation of a comprehensive national plan for protected areas. Recently, Grenada employed a participatory approach to the development of a new national forest policy that would among other things guide the management of the nation's forest reserves and national parks (Bass 2000). A "Forest Policy Development Committee" that included representatives of a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders guided the policy review process. Techniques employed to incorporate the interests and views of all sectors of society were both broad (radio call-in programmes and questionnaires distributed through the national press) and specific (community and sectoral consultations). The process resulted in a policy document that had widespread public support and was quickly approved by Government. It also resulted in the need to transform the institutional landscape for forest management as well as the structure, operations and culture of the lead management agencies to make them more participatory and responsive to the interests and needs of stakeholders. This difficult process of institutional change is now underway.

Experiences in participatory planning

In planning for individual protected areas, input from stakeholders is generally solicited in one way or another. Although some consultations remain perfunctory and their results largely ignored, the trend in the region has been towards more inclusive planning processes. The following cases from Puerto Rico, St Lucia, and Jamaica (Geoghegan *et al.* 1999) illustrate some of the approaches used.

A university-led process to establish a marine reserve on the southwest coast of Puerto Rico involved the local fishing community of La Parguera in the selection of sites. The fishermen recommended a nearby reef where they did not themselves fish, but where persons from another, more distant community, who were not consulted, did. Following protests from affected fishers from the other community, the planning process was aborted.

In Soufriere, St Lucia, competition and conflicts over the use of coastal and marine resources, particularly between fishers, hoteliers, and water sports operators, was becoming increasingly bitter and the resource base was declining alarmingly due to a lack of management. An eighteen-month consultative process, which involved representatives of all the main groups with an interest in the area, resulted in the development of an "Agreement on the use and management of marine and coastal resources in the Soufriere region." This agreement was essentially a zoning plan, which formed the basis for the establishment of the Soufriere Marine Management Area (SMMA). The agreement failed, however, to take into account the diversity of stakeholders that existed even within individual households, where, for example, the needs, expectations and resource use strategies of older fishermen are very different from those of younger water taxi operators. Following an institutional review and restructuring that has addressed such weaknesses in the original institutional design (Brown 1997), the SMMA, now in its sixth year, has recently been named by the International Coral Reef Action Network as a centre of excellence for the demonstration of best practices in marine protected area management. While the representatives of the major resource use sectors, including fishing, yachting and yacht servicing, and diving, have been continuously active in the management of the SMMA, efforts to involve a wider spectrum of the community have been largely unsuccessful because of an inability to demonstrate the benefits of involvement. This has led to the recent establishment of a broad-based Stakeholder Committee within the overall institutional structure.

In Negril, Jamaica, local concern about rapid, unplanned tourism development resulted in the establishment of local environmental organisations and proposals for a Marine Park. It soon became clear, however, that Negril's marine resources were doomed unless the land-based impacts upon them could be controlled. This led to local advocacy for a protected area



Seaweed farming now provides additional income opportunities to coastal communities in and near several marine protected areas in the Caribbean. Photo: Chris Huxley.

comprising the entire Negril watershed and coastal zone, resulting in the legal establishment of the Negril Environmental Protection Area in 1997. Management of the Area consists of a patchwork of regulatory instruments implemented by a range of government agencies. But coordination, as well as tasks such as research, monitoring, and environmental education, is the responsibility of the Negril Area Environmental Protection Trust (NEPT), a consortium of local and national government agencies and local community associations and NGOs. The structure of NEPT, with its broad membership, provides an avenue for representation of most members

of the Negril community as well as national agencies and stakeholders. In the absence of a strong regulatory framework, however, NEPT's ability to coordinate the management of Negril's resources is impeded by Jamaica's centralised and highly politicised processes of decision-making on development issues.

Experiences in co-management

The concept of co-management, although not always well understood, has become increasingly popular in the Caribbean, where it is seen as a mechanism for improving management by supplementing the limited resources available to most of the region's governments with those of the community, private sector and NGOs. It also formalises the rights and responsibilities of management partners. In the development of co-management arrangements, naïve assumptions regarding the nature of local communities can sometimes be observed.

The Policy for Jamaica's National System of Protected Areas (NRCA 1997) seeks local community involvement through partnerships between government and "qualified local groups" in the management of protected areas. The policy has been operationalised through the formal or informal delegation of management responsibility for four protected areas. A recent evaluation (CANARI 2001) concluded that Jamaica's initial experience in co-management has not been successful. Only one of the four delegated management agencies was a pre-existing local organisation. Two others were established largely for the purpose of managing the protected area, and one was a national NGO. In most cases, the partners represented only a narrow spectrum of local interests. All the organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, have been hampered by severe human, technical and financial constraints, as well as by the absence of a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework. In some cases, participation of the community has been limited to a few influential stakeholder groups and there have been no common guidelines or policies to assure and encourage widespread local participation. For the most part, the level of management has been low, with problems such as high staff turnover and continuing financial crises. However, these issues have been recognised by all parties involved and recently a participatory system planning process has been proposed in order to develop a more adequate framework for effective management (CANARI 2001).

Protected areas and local social and economic benefits

As experience from some of the region's protected areas (such as the Jaragua National Park in the Dominican Republic, Negril and Montego Bay Marine Parks in Jamaica, and the Soufriere Marine Management Area) have shown, programmes aimed at providing benefits to, or mitigating the negative impacts of management on disadvantaged stakeholders, tend to increase their interest and involvement in the area's management (Geoghegan *et al.* 2001).

There is much evidence that Caribbean protected areas, especially those with high levels of management, produce significant economic benefits (e.g., Dixon *et al.* 1993). However, there is also evidence that benefits are not equitably shared, with most economic benefits going to the tourism industry (often owned and managed by expatriates and foreign investors) and social benefits, such as education, given little importance (van't Hof 1998). Restrictions on traditional activities, including fishing in marine reserves and timber cutting in forest reserves, have actually resulted in negative economic impacts for local resource users, at least in the short term. Research in the SMMA over the past several years however demonstrates that fish stocks in areas adjacent to marine reserves can increase substantially in just a few years, resulting in increased yields for local fishers (Roberts *et al.* 2001). This research has enhanced the commitment of Soufriere's fishing community to the success of the protected area.

One significant local benefit identified through a recent survey of Caribbean marine protected areas has been the mitigation of conflict between users as a result of effective zoning and ongoing consultation (Geoghegan *et al.* 2001).

Lessons from experience

On the basis of this experience, we can extract four key lessons of direct relevance to the relationship between protected areas and local communities.

Lesson 1

Effective management requires the integration of the full diversity of stakeholders and takes into account the differing ways they are impacted by and impact upon protected areas

Approaches to community participation have often made assumptions regarding the homogeneity of local communities that fail to take into account the extreme diversity of stakeholder interests, and, at times, result in the marginalisation of important stakeholders. This exclusion has been detrimental to people and it has also hindered the achievement of environmental and natural resource management objectives.

In addressing this issue, protected area planners and managers should consider the following points:

- While communities may have a coherence and unity that must be taken into account and can be built upon, the interests of the stakeholders within communities can be very diverse. Sex, age, social class and cultural capital are among the factors that determine the stakes of individuals and groups.
- Some stakeholders are prominent and easily identifiable, while others can be forgotten or ignored in protected area planning and management processes. This can have negative impacts, transforming power relations in favour of some stakeholders and at the expense of others, usually those who already have the least power. The reasons for the “low visibility” and the resulting lack of involvement of some stakeholders include:
 - a) local power structures, that allow some sectors, groups and individuals to dominate institutions and processes;
 - b) conditions of the planning and management processes, which often favour those who are able to follow formal rules, use official languages, and feel comfortable within formal and official settings;
 - c) the seasonality of some resource use activities;
 - d) the geography of stakeholders, which may cause those that live at a distance from the protected area to be left out; and
 - e) the social conditioning and biases of the planners and managers, which can cause them to overlook or discount certain groups and individuals.
- Resource use patterns, institutions and power relations are in constant evolution. This presents an additional challenge to planners and managers, as it is not sufficient for them to identify and understand stakeholders and their relationships at a given point in time. They also need to observe and integrate these perpetual changes and assess their implications for management; and
- Protected area managers and planners are not neutral parties but stakeholders themselves, and neutral facilitation is often needed to assure that planning processes are not skewed towards their interests.

Specific approaches and methods are needed to understand and embrace this diversity. For the planners and managers of protected areas, the most useful among these are the tools of stakeholder analysis, which allow for the identification and understanding of the interests of the individuals, groups and institutions that can affect or be affected by the outcome of a management intervention, the assessment of the dynamics among and between these groups, and the application of this information to project design, implementation and monitoring (Renard *et al.* 2001).

Lesson 2

The long-term success of participatory management depends on the suitability of the institutional arrangements

The experiences described above suggest some principles to guide the design of institutional arrangements, namely:

- They need to be democratic and to contribute to the empowerment of disadvantaged groups.
- They must include structures and mechanisms that allow stakeholders to influence management decisions.
- They must be efficient and effective in their pursuit of management objectives.
- They must be flexible and capable of responding and adapting to change, and also of dealing with unforeseen circumstances and exceptional events such as natural disasters.
- All key stakeholders must own them (legally or at least symbolically), and they must be suited to local conditions and compatible with the local socio-cultural and political landscape.
- They require structures and mechanisms that promote and sustain linkages between sectors, and the involvement of non-traditional actors in management arrangements.

The Caribbean experience further shows that decentralisation and partnerships do not necessarily result in participatory management. Institutional arrangements that appear on the surface to be democratic and decentralised may in fact be controlled through legal regulation or political or economic influence, by central authorities or a small group of powerful stakeholders. Co-management agreements between state agencies and non-governmental organisations can easily exclude and further marginalise poor and powerless stakeholders, while giving the illusion of participation. The promotion of local community organisations and the vesting of management authority within them can modify local power relations, again at the expense of the poor and the powerless.

There is a fundamental difference between representation and representativeness: in the design of protected area management institutions, it is almost always impossible to ensure that all stakeholders are represented, but it is possible to ensure that people involved in decision-making are truly representative of the various interests. Lastly, participation is not only found in the structure of an institution or an organisation. It must also be part of its culture and of its operations. In order to achieve active participation in protected area management, it is often more important to have ongoing public consultation programmes than to have a few selected representatives of stakeholders sitting around the table at meetings of boards of directors.

In this participatory framework, the role of protected area management agencies and professionals changes significantly, in order for them to become:

- animators and facilitators of stakeholder participation in management decisions;
- builders of capacity among state and civil society partners;
- mediators, capable of managing conflicts among stakeholders on the uses of the area's resources.

In the process of institutional design and capacity-building, planners and managers need to be realistic about the roles and capacities of community organisations. Community development work in the past three decades in several parts of the world has emphasised the need for strong community organisations. In the field of protected areas, proponents of community participation have followed that trend, often insisting on the need for strong and organised community partners as a condition for participatory management and delegated authority. This approach certainly offers benefits, but it also presents several dangers. Formal structures are useful, but they can undermine existing, informal community institutions and they inevitably introduce new rules that can transform power relations and introduce hierarchical relationships. At the

same time, community organisations, simply because they exist and represent sectors of the community, cannot be expected to have the interest or capacity to become automatically effective partners in the management of protected areas. Technical skills, access to financial resources and commitment are more important requirements for day-to-day management than representativeness. There is therefore a need for ways to involve stakeholders without imposing forms of organisation which may not be timely or suited to local needs and conditions.

Lesson 3

Given the limited resources available for protected area management, transparent processes of negotiation are required to determine how much participation is possible and what objectives are given priority

Most of the region's protected areas are seriously lacking in management and financial resources, and diverse conservation and social objectives must be approached incrementally. When decisions regarding priorities and trade-offs are made in an ad hoc manner, they can be misinterpreted, alienate key stakeholders and compromise management. Mechanisms that are transparent and provide the opportunity for stakeholder negotiation on priorities and approaches provide a way to move towards the achievement of difficult objectives in the absence of resources adequate to reach ideal levels of management over the short term.

Lesson 4

Participatory management of protected areas must yield appreciable benefits for local communities

If it does not yield real benefits for local people, community involvement in protected area management cannot be meaningful, especially in the developing world. While there is still very little evidence that participatory approaches are capable of bringing such benefits on a sustained basis, some observations may be useful in assisting managers to address the issue of stakeholder benefits:

- As negotiated processes that recognise the legitimate needs of all parties involved, stakeholder participation in protected area planning tends to result in the identification of objectives and programmes aimed at the provision of local benefits. Participatory processes can lead to a sharing of agendas, where conservation agencies embrace development objectives while economic sectors integrate conservation requirements.
- Inequitable participation is likely to be reflected in the objectives that are defined. For example, the heavy influence of the tourism industry on the development of marine protected areas in the Caribbean region may explain why the objectives of so many of these areas are weighted towards the maintenance and enhancement of the tourism product, at the expense of fisheries and other traditional, less powerful sectors.
- Not all the potential benefits from protected areas are economic. Local populations expect that protected areas will provide them with recreational, cultural, and educational opportunities equal to or greater than those provided to other visitors and they are aware and resentful when this is not the case.

Conclusion

In the past few decades, the Caribbean region, like the rest of the developing world, has made significant advances in its search for more effective and equitable approaches to protected area planning and management. This work has revealed the values and benefits of community involvement and participation, but it has also begun to question initial assumptions. It has

confirmed the need to go beyond some of the clichés that are part of the dominant discourse on participation, and to explore in greater depth the impacts and benefits that participation brings to protected area management.

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