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Local Communities and Conservation on the Tibetan Plateau: Two case studies of collaborative management in the Sanjiangyuan region

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative management is a relatively new approach to resource management and conservation in the Tibetan grasslands of China. Such community co-management has been trialed in at least two Tibetan herder communities, with two different emphases, over the past decade in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. In essence, co-management implies a partnership between local communities and other agencies including government bureaus, protected areas, and local/external NGOs. Of particular importance is a common understanding of partnership, and participation, in such collaborative management schemes. Community conservation efforts in the ‘Six Western Townships’ (西部六乡) in Zaduo (杂多), Zhiduo (治多) and Qumalai (曲麻莱) counties – the geographic focus of Plateau Perspectives’ community conservation and development work over the past decade – precede (or pre-date) the establishment of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve (三江源自然保护区). At present, new efforts are now underway to mainstream such indigenous/local efforts into the broader conservation agenda in Qinghai Province, in fact to ‘scale-up’ lessons learned to date.

Background

Conservation of biodiversity arises from a combination of protection and sustainable utilization of biological/natural resources. Such protection and sustainable utilization can occur either within, or outside of, officially recognized Protected Areas (or PAs).

Long-term conservation achievements have been attained by indigenous peoples and local communities for millennia – long before formal PAs were conceived in the late 19th century (initially in North America, and later exported to the rest of the world).

As community conservation initiatives begin to receive more formal recognition in different parts of the world, a relatively new term is introduced here: *Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas* (ICCAs). Use of this generic term is not meant to label any group or community, but rather to help promote dialogue and communication.

ICCAs are as old and widespread as human civilization itself. Several international policies and programs – most notably under the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), of which China is a signatory nation – encourage all countries to recognize and support ICCAs.

In the Tibetan Plateau region of western China, several ICCAs are now encompassed within formal, government-established PAs; various forms of shared governance, including Collaborative Management, are presently being discussed, trialed, and/or evaluated.

Collaborative Management within the broader IUCN Protected Area Matrix

IUCN – The World Conservation Union has developed a matrix to categorize and describe PAs within countries and around the world. The IUCN set of categories includes the following:

- Ia. Strict Nature Reserve
- Ib. Wilderness Area
- II. National Park
- III. Natural Monument
- IV. Habitat/Species Management
- V. Protected Landscape/Seascape
- VI. Protected Area with Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

In Qinghai Province, the main PA under consideration is the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve (SNNR) — covering an area around 153,000 km², the size of England and Wales combined, and including within its boundaries a human population of more than 200,000 people. Under the IUCN matrix above, the SNNR – with its stated goals and 3 different management zones – *de facto* falls under several different categories, simultaneously:

Ia - Strict Nature Reserve

Strictly protected areas set aside to protect biodiversity and also possibly geological/geomorphological features, where human visitation, use and impacts are strictly controlled and limited to ensure protection of the conservation values. Such protected areas can serve as indispensable reference areas for scientific research and monitoring.

II - National Park

Large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities.

V - Protected Landscape/Seascape

An area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values.

VI - Protected Area with Sustainable Use of Natural Resources

Protected areas which are generally large, with much of the area in a more-or-less natural condition and where a proportion is under sustainable natural resource management and where low-level use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims of the area.

In addition, the IUCN PA Matrix also includes a description/categorization of types of governance, as follows:

- A. Governance by government
 - National ministry/agency in charge of management
 - Sub-national ministry/agency in charge of management
 - Government-delegated management (e.g., to an NGO)
- B. Shared governance
 - Transboundary management
 - Collaborative management (various forms of pluralist influence)
 - Joint management (pluralist governance bodies)
- C. Private governance
 - Declared and run by individual land-owner
 - Declared and run by non-profit organizations
 - Declared and run by for-profit organizations
- D. Governance by indigenous people and/or local communities
 - Indigenous territories and indigenous conserved areas
 - Community conserved areas – declared and run by local communities

In the SNNR, in those instances where local communities are involved in biodiversity conservation and sustainable utilization of natural resources – such as the case studies presented herein – the SNNR is formally managed by a national/sub-national ministry (Forest Bureau), yet since its establishment the SNNR also has come to recognize the role played by local Tibetan herder communities, both in the present and indeed prior to the establishment of the nature reserve. Hence, there is movement toward a form of Shared Governance, namely Collaborative Management, which recognizes and works in the context of multiple influences on natural resource utilization and conservation.

As will be discussed in more detail below, three forms of Collaborative Management have been noted in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in SW Qinghai Province:

- Community Co-Management (currently being trialed in Zhiduo County)
- Contract Conservation (currently being trialed in Qumalai County)
- Other community conservation efforts, not formally recognized

Additionally, it should be noted that, even if/when local community conserved areas fall within the boundaries of a formal PA, such as the SNNR, they should/could still be recognized as ICCAs (Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas); as agreed by China through its participation in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), with its encouragement for all signatory countries to recognize and support ICCAs.

Collaborative Management implies, indeed requires, genuine partnerships

The global dialogue on justice and equity (and, more recently, the dialogue on the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources; cf. CBD) has given rise to the incorporation of ‘local participation’ in development/conservation initiatives. This is reflected in part even in the adoption, within PA management, of new Collaborative Management approaches. Yet there are many ways in which the concept of ‘participation’ may be interpreted and applied, as can be seen in Pretty’s (1995) excellent Typology of Participation (also see Table 1):

1. Passive Participation
2. Participation in Information Giving
3. Participation by Consultation
4. Participation for Material Incentives
5. Functional Participation
6. Interactive Participation
7. Self-Mobilisation

According to Mowforth and Munt (1998), these types of participation “range from manipulative participation, in which virtually all the power and control over the development or proposal lie with people or groups outside the local community, to self-mobilisation, in which the power and control over all aspects of the development rest squarely with the local community. The latter type does not rule out the involvement of external bodies or assistants or consultants, but they are present only as enablers rather than as directors and controllers of the development.”

Therefore, because of the various (sometimes opposing) ways in which the concept of ‘participation’ can be used, one may move closer to the ‘heart of the matter’ by using instead the term/concept of ‘partnership’ – which, in essence, was the original intent of promoting local participation. Partnership is “a cooperative relationship between people or groups who agree to share responsibility for achieving some specific goal.”

In the context of our attempts to reach conservation goals, it should be noted that many of the key challenges to effective conservation are not biological or scientific, but rather social and economic – incorporating the needs, interests, desires, hopes and aspirations of the communities living in the geographic areas of conservation interest.

Drawing on experiences of IUCN–The World Conservation Union, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and the World Resources Institute (WRI), Carew-Reid (1993) has summarized some key lessons learned for successful conservation:

- Strategies are not one-off events. They should rather be action-based, building on priority areas where government and people are already committed...
- Strategies should be seen as a continuous, cyclical process and integrated into conventional development cycles. They are not just something to be ‘added on’...
- Successful strategies are not possible unless the capacity to carry them through is built up at the earliest stage...
- Centralized planning and decentralized implementation don’t mix...
- Participation needs to increase as a strategy develops...
- In poor local communities strategies may first need to identify and meet immediate needs, so that benefits can be felt. Strategies need to be processes of action and reflection...
- The appraisal of strategies needs to stress the way things are done as well as the outcome...

In sum, choosing to work within a conservation model of Collaborative Management implies cooperation amongst key partners, cf. genuine partnership, working together toward common agreed goals. At a minimum, a circumscribed or limited conservation goal is agreed; but, in its richest form, adoption of a Collaborative Management model or approach to environmental conservation will also lead to greater exchange between the partners and a learning cycle will develop, expanding the scope of each partner in

the process. And where one or another partner's broader needs or interests cannot be met from the cumulative experience, expertise, knowledge or assets of the original partners, others may also be sought and invited to join – thus widening the circle of stakeholders, often involving non-government organizations (NGOs) at this stage of the formal conservation process due to their ability to focus more tightly on specific needs or geographic areas (as compared to government partner agencies, who must maintain a wider, regional overview of conservation and sustainable development).

Plateau Perspectives: International organization focused on community-based conservation and sustainable development in the Tibetan Plateau region

Plateau Perspectives is an international non-profit organization that aims to promote community development and environmental protection in the Tibetan Plateau region of China. It is officially recognized in Canada, Scotland, and China. The organization has worked in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture since its establishment in 1998, most notably through its collaborative project with the Biodiversity Working Group of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED); the research project *Health Status and Risk Factors for Tibetan Herders*, undertaken with University of Montreal, funded by the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC); the *Yangtze River Headwaters Sustainable Development Project*, funded by a variety of private donors and foundations; and its key project, entitled *Community Development and Biodiversity Conservation in the Sanjiangyuan Region of the Tibetan Plateau*, funded by the Government of Norway (NORAD) and other donors.

With numerous changes affecting (or potentially affecting) the lives of local herders in the target area – not least, some government policies and programs that encourage people to move away from a grassland-based livelihood, into newly created towns – an additional, new theme for Plateau Perspectives, indeed a new goal or purpose, has also begun to emerge. Not only are the provision of social services and conservation goals intrinsically valuable, but now also the demonstration that (a) herders can live sustainably on the land, not harming the natural environment (and, indeed, they can assist and promote biodiversity conservation practices), and (b) government services including health care and education can be provided in cost-effective ways to herder communities, without need to relocate people away from their traditional homes and communities in grassland areas.

The main geographic focus of Plateau Perspectives' work in Qinghai Province has been the so-called "Six Western Townships" (西部六乡, or *xibu liuxiang*) of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; specifically, in Zaduo (杂多), Zhiduo (治多) and Qumalai (曲麻莱) counties. This target area was originally suggested by the Yushu Prefecture Health Bureau due to the difficult living conditions encountered by local herders with respect to transportation, provision of social services, a harsh and often unpredictable environment, and high altitude, as well as the region's environmental value. Several local community leaders also supported this choice of geography and Plateau Perspectives' thematic focus on community-felt and -expressed needs.

In the course of Plateau Perspectives' conservation and community development work in the headwaters of the Yellow, Yangtze and Mekong rivers, from 1998 to present, it has also learned much about local communities, including their genuine concern for

sustainable resource use and wildlife protection—sometimes an explicit concern, and other times a practice more deeply enmeshed within traditional cultural practices (but not necessarily recognized explicitly).

Prior to the establishment of any formal PA, at least two different communities had already established community PAs – i.e., genuine ICCAs, with the recognition and support from local government – and they also had agreed and instituted regulations to control illegal poaching in their respective territories. Several community NGOs have emerged as well. In other instances, some individual herders have expressed a desire to contribute to wildlife conservation through regular monitoring of wildlife populations; but didn't know how best to feed into broader monitoring programs. All of these examples demonstrate how local communities can in fact be excellent allies (partners) to attain local and regional conservation goals. Such partnership, however, is most readily developed and maintained in the context of external agencies, such as Plateau Perspectives, also placing themselves alongside local communities with their other key interests or concerns such as promoting community health, basic education, income generation, mitigation of human-wildlife conflict, etc.

Case studies of Collaborative Management in the Tibetan plateau region

Two community conservation efforts will be introduced in more detail here. The first community, Muqu village (in Suojia Township, Zhiduo County; 治多县索加乡莫曲村), has developed its approach over more than a decade. The second community, Cuochi village (in Qumahe Township, Qumalai county; 曲麻莱县曲马河乡错池村), has equally invested many years into reaching the present situation.

In both situations, a form of Collaborative Management has been adopted as the local communities work in concert with the SNNR to achieve regional conservation goals.

Muqu Village, a model for Community Co-Management

Plateau Perspectives has collaborated with the people of Muqu village since 1998, with approval from township and county government and for many years in close collaboration with the grassroots Upper Yangtze Organization (a local community-based organization). In 2005, the above partners also began to collaborate with the SNNR and thus began a journey that ultimately led to the present 'Community Co-Management' arrangement for collaborative management of natural resources and biodiversity conservation.

Under the agreed co-management model, local people participate in the monitoring of wildlife populations, report poaching incidents, and promote environmental awareness. In so doing, they also may gain increased respect (from government leaders, planners, academics, etc.) as they learn the 'language' of science and thus, hopefully, may also be given greater voice in the future about local or regional development planning and decision-making. Under this model, however, local people are not given independence in decision-making; instead, more often the community is regarded as implementer of conservation projects or strategies that are decided, in large part, outside of the project area. Nonetheless, the level of local participation – and the degree of partnership – is still much greater in this model than in most other PA management models in China, particularly because of the local specific circumstances whereby an ICCA that pre-

dated the reserve has now been incorporated into the SNNR management plan. Thus people who before the nature reserve was established chose to participate in natural resource management and wildlife conservation activities, can still continue to do so under the present arrangement.

A specific example of Community Co-Management efforts in Muqu Village is the ongoing Snow Leopard Conservation Project, which is being carried out as a genuine partnership comprised of the local community, SNNR and Plateau Perspectives. Local monitors have for several years been monitoring key snow leopard habitats and have documented their findings. Simultaneously, automatic camera traps have been trialed for comparative purposes, to determine the degree of overlap and/or complementarity of the two methods – with the goal of better understanding the distribution and hence the conservation needs of snow leopard, as well as supporting community efforts for wildlife conservation and raising environmental awareness in the region.

Cuochi Village, a model for Contract Conservation

Under the ‘Contract Conservation’ model, currently being trialed in Cuochi village, local people are given nearly full autonomy in how to conserve wildlife and protect the environment; and as long as agreed conservation targets are achieved, they will receive a small financial contribution, which the community can disburse at its own discretion. Generally, such funding is used for community purposes in health and/or education, and sometimes also for social assistance (e.g., for community members in desperate need). It must be noted, however, that even here conservation goals must be agreed beforehand with the SNNR or other government authority. Thus there is not an independence in decision-making, as was the case of some pre-nature reserve ICCAs, but rather (as with community co-management) a collaborative form of management.

As outlined by Ma Hongbo (2010), most “land management and conservation rights [in China] belong to the government, including nature reserve authorities. Local communities often have willingness, but no rights, to conduct effective conservation.” But in the case of Cuochi village, a special exemption has been made, to trial a new form of PA management and conservation, namely Contract Conservation. The main addition to previous models is that the local community is given “appropriate [legal] rights” to manage natural resources for conservation. Through the process of carrying out a Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP; the term used within the partnership of Conservation International, CI, with the SNNR and the local community), this new model of Contract Conservation has several key stages including a feasibility study, signing of conservation contracts, transfer of legal rights to local herder communities, implementation of contracts, and finally project evaluation, followed by consideration of how to extend or scale-up the PA management model (i.e., this is the current stage).

Major dates in the timeline of developing the new Contract Conservation model in Cuochi village:

- 1999 Community mobilization, with significant local financial contribution (as well as livestock) to establish the village school and village clinic
- 2000 Translation and dissemination of wildlife conservation regulations; anti-poaching group established; request for assistance/input from Plateau Perspectives and grassroots Upper Yangtze Organization

- 2001 Site visit by Plateau Perspectives with community workshop, training about conservation and wildlife monitoring, support to village school and clinic; establishment during this trip of Wildlife Monitoring Unit; Plateau Perspectives donation of 13 binoculars for wildlife monitors
- 2002 Beginning of formal, regular monitoring of selected wildlife species
- 2004 Establishment of the grassroots organization, Friends of Wild Yak
- 2006 Initiation of Conservation Steward Program (CSP) with SNNR and CI
- 2009 Initial evaluations of CSP, with consideration of scaling-up the model

As can be seen, both of the above models of PA management, based on collaborative principles, have been developed over approximately a decade. Both models are quite endogenous, at least in their original form. And both of the models continue to exist, at a basic level, based on trust and partnership, which continuously needs to be built and reinforced; and on a sense of local ownership not only of the resources / wildlife but also of the processes of conservation and decision-making.

The evident initial success of the contract model, and also the co-management model, also may present some potential pitfalls, particularly as some conservation authorities seek to extend at rapid pace the observed successes to a larger geographic region and population. What may be most difficult to replicate is the many years and effort that have been invested by local community leaders or other individuals, to developing and refining each of these models in their specific socio-cultural and environmental contexts. Therefore a more moderate rate of growth and extension of the two aforementioned models may be most appropriate, along with targeted in-depth studies, time for internal mobilization of communities, and time for full adoption by communities and government of the models' most important ICCA elements and key concepts.

Yet, as environmental concerns in Qinghai Province are so important, community-based conservation must be pursued now, not delayed indefinitely. Further study of different forms of Collaborative Management is therefore amongst the most important activities that can be undertaken at the present time. In the end, it is only by engaging with all of society, partnering with all segments of society, that we can achieve greater sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and long-term socio-economic development.

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Table 1. Typology of participation (Pretty *et al.*, 1995)

Typology	Characteristics of Each Type
1. Passive Participation	People participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened. It is a unilateral announcement by an administration or project management without listening to people's responses. The information being shared belongs only to external professionals
2. Participation in Information Giving	People participate by answering questions posed by extractive researchers using questionnaire surveys or similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings, as the findings of the research are neither shared nor checked for accuracy.
3. Participation by Consultation	People participate by being consulted, and external people listen to views. These external professionals define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in the light of people's responses. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision-making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
4. Participation for Material Incentives	People participate by providing resources, for example labour, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Much on-farm research falls into this category, as farmers provide the fields but are not involved in the experimentation of the process of learning. It is very common to see this called participation, people have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
5. Functional Participation	People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organisation. Such involvement does not tend to be at early stages of project cycles or planning, but rather after major decisions have been made. These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-dependent.
6. Interactive Participation	People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. It tends to involve interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. These groups take control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
7. Self-Mobilisation	People participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. Such self-initiated mobilisation and collective action may or may not challenge existing inequitable distribution of wealth and power.