

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Who Should Be Making Decisions?

Principles for Decentralization in Conservation

Recently, BSP Program Officer Patrick Maguire visited one of the remaining forests in Nepal's Gangetic plains, a thin strip of land known as the Terai, near the Himalayan foothills. For 20 years, Nepal has been decentralizing its forestry management, granting new rights to local Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), a process BSP's **Ban Udyam** project supports in the Terai and Middle Hills region. On the whole, decentralized decision making and increased user group rights have promoted reforestation, but not without problems. In some communities, Maguire learned, villagers now conserve their forests by feeding cattle in stalls, rather than turning them loose. Others clear agricultural lands with a more efficient, less wholesale use of fire which often threatens forests. But in one community, disappointed villagers told Maguire that their CFUG chairman had used their funds to benefit himself rather than the community. And it is reported that in other areas of Nepal, CFUGs have successfully managed their community forests, while increasing illegal harvesting in government-owned forests.

"Conservationists sometimes put blind faith in the idea that if you give people control over their resources, they're going to conserve them," Maguire says. "But sometimes local people not only don't have the technical knowledge for sustainable management, they also lack the political capacity and skills to keep the process transparent and avoid the local elite's hijacking the process."

In recent years, conservationists have often treated decentralization as a magic bullet. Enlisting the support of people who are in direct contact with natural resources seems to make good conservation sense, as well as appealing to our democratic instincts. Decentralization, we hope, makes conservation more just as well as more effective.

But does it? A new BSP study, *Shifting the Power: Decentralization and Biodiversity Conservation*, draws a more complicated scenario. The study suggests that, to ensure democratic participation and effective conservation results, it takes careful analysis and

The Biodiversity Support Program

The Biodiversity Support Program's mission is to promote conservation of the world's biological diversity. Our work focuses primarily in Africa and Madagascar, Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. We work with communities and local, national, and international nongovernmental organizations, as well as government agencies, bilateral and multilateral organizations, academic institutions, and donors to support conservation and development initiatives that address both social and environmental needs.

By reviewing our work from around the world and in consultation with our partners, we have identified five critical conditions for success in biodiversity conservation. We believe that all of these conditions must be met in order to reach conservation goals. These conditions form the framework for BSP's *Lessons from the Field* series, which is designed to share with other practitioners what we have learned from the projects we support. Each issue of the *Lessons from the Field* series focuses on one of the five critical conditions and is based primarily on interviews of BSP staff. Where appropriate, we go beyond our own projects and interview other BSP partners.

BSP's Five Conditions for Success

1. Clarity of conservation goals and objectives
2. Equitable and effective social processes and alliances for conservation
3. Appropriate incentives for biodiversity valuation and conservation
4. International, national, and local policies supportive of conservation
5. Sufficient awareness, knowledge, and capacity to conserve biodiversity

This issue addresses Condition #2, Equitable and effective social processes and alliances for conservation, and is illustrated with an example from our Asia and Pacific Program.



DOING CONSERVATION BETTER

BSP's Analysis and Adaptive Management Program

planning, skill building, and above all sensitivity to the setting of institutions and power relations in which decentralization occurs.

The BSP study asked the following key questions:

1. Does decentralization empower the people living in direct contact with natural resources?
2. If this power shift occurs, does it result in environmental policies and management practices that reduce threats to biodiversity?

Based on an analysis of six distinct cases of decentralized authority over natural resource management in both the developing and industrialized world, the BSP study also outlined a set of principles aimed at ensuring a happy marriage – or at least a good shot at one – for decentralization and conservation.

If you would like to know more about our decentralization study, read the publication, Wyckoff-Baird, B., A. Kaus, C. Christen, and M. Keck. 2000. Shifting the power: Decentralization and biodiversity conservation. Washington, D.C.: Biodiversity Support Program (available in print or on the Web) ... In addition, the six case studies, undertaken in Bolivia, Botswana, Florida, Guatemala, Mexico, and Panama, are available only on BSP's Web site, at www.BSPonline.org.

What Is Decentralization?

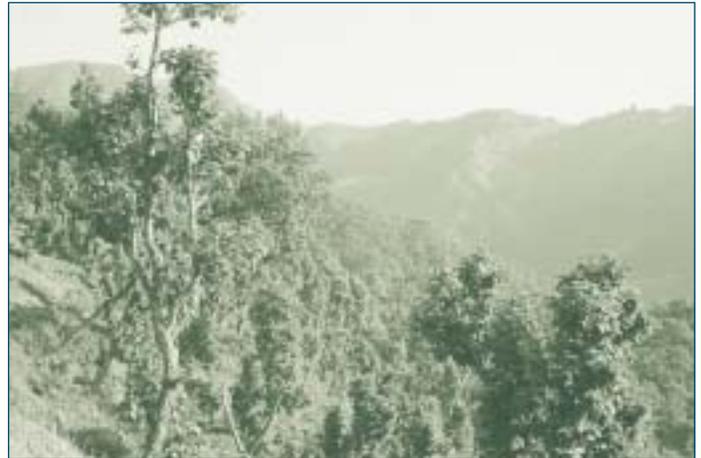
Decentralization takes many forms. In Nepal, the emphasis is on community forestry. In Indonesia, sweeping reforms are shifting power from Jakarta to the villages. Many African countries remain highly centralized but have decentralized some natural resource management. For instance, Cameroon's new forestry law,

unlike any other in Central Africa, grants villagers the right to establish community forests.

The BSP study used a working definition of decentralization as any process that increases the fiscal, institutional, or political autonomy of part of a country in relation to the country as a whole. Decentralization can imply a shift of power and responsibilities from government to community organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, or organized groups of resource users.

Obstacles to Decentralization in Conservation

Adopting laws to decentralize power does not guarantee that decentralization will occur, or that it will prove favorable to conservation. As Laurent Somé, Senior Program Officer in BSP's **Africa and Madagascar Program**, comments on the introduction of Cameroon's Forestry Law, which states that communities are entitled to benefits from logging: "It was a big shift from the old practices where benefits were all for foreign timber companies, the urban elites, and the central government. The question is, how can you make it really happen?" The **Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE)** decided to carry out a forestry mapping project to give communities a tool they can use to negotiate with logging companies. But CARPE, like other BSP projects, ran into many of the obstacles to decentralization that the new BSP study identified.



Dalchini is the local name for these cinnamon trees (Cinnamomum tamala), in the Middle Hills region of Nepal where both its bark and its leaves are used by local communities.

S. Kelleher

Decentralization may simply be a cover for the central government's abdication of its conservation responsibilities, or, it may empower local elites rather than the grassroots.

Decentralization has often accompanied "neoliberal" reforms that reduce government's responsibilities across the board. If the central government abdicates all accountability for natural resources, including the task of ensuring that local actors carry out their new responsibilities, the results can be devastating for conservation. As the BSP study suggests, building in reciprocal forms of accountability between local and national levels is optimal. Such reciprocity can help avoid problems that arise. As Somé notes, "Decentralization may give local communities more opportunity to put more pressure on natural resources." Maguire points out: "In many countries, the rural elites are often best positioned to take advantage of the process of handing over the forests to local control."

Of course, local elites may be supportive of biodiversity conservation. In some of Cameroon's highly organized and hierarchical villages, CARPE found that the attitude taken by the chiefs is vital. During its mapping program in three communities, Somé recalled, success depended

on traditional structures of power. “Where there’s a strong chiefdom, if you get the chief on your side, you get all the villagers too. But if the chief is not on board,” he says ruefully, “it won’t work.”

Conservation alone cannot solve the local problems that lead to resource depredation.

Communities and regions face a wide range of problems, from the harshness of a subsistence economy to disparities in power. For instance, according to Tatiana Zaharchenko, former Senior Program Officer in BSP’s **Eastern Europe Program**, the difficult transition from a planned to a market economy can put biodiversity at risk by tempting governments to accelerate the extraction of natural biological resources – such as forests for timber – to generate much needed capital. Such is the case in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, in Ukraine, where BSP sponsored a participatory priority-setting exercise called the **Conservation Needs Assessment for Crimea**. Decentralized conservation pro-

grams may help address these problems, but they are unlikely to overcome them.

Local people may distrust conservationists, fearing that conservation programs diminish their traditional access to natural resources.

BSP’s partner Sistem Hutan Kerakyatan (SHK) is a consortium that has been supporting community forest management in Indonesia for years. Since the passage of that country’s 1999 Regional Autonomy Law, SHK, with the support of BSP’s **KEMALA** program, has become even more active in promoting decentralization. SHK must now show that villages are willing to accept the



B. Leighty

In 1997, BSP’s Conservation Needs Assessment for Crimea used an open, transparent process, involving stakeholders from Crimean and Ukrainian government agencies, scientific institutions, and NGOs, to evaluate threats to Crimea’s biodiversity, and determine both geographic and thematic conservation priorities.

Other local needs may take precedence over conservation.

Maguire points out: “The goals of villagers in Nepal are not 100 percent aligned with conservation.” But he adds that a project like **Ban Udyam** makes it possible to address local needs and further conservation simultaneously. “Our twin goals are improved forest management and improved rural livelihoods, through an enterprise-based approach to conservation – supporting communities to develop enterprises dependent upon conserving the natural resource base,” he said.

Human resources and funding may be scarce at the local and regional levels.

In Central Africa, CARPE is trying to involve NGOs in natural resource management so that they become real partners in the conservation dialogue at the regional level. But as Somé notes, “Giving power to someone doesn’t mean much if you don’t teach them how to use this power. Many times NGOs don’t have technical background – and in that case is it really worth pushing the government to involve the NGOs? My



S. Kelleher

The woman and boy here are from the Durga Community Forest User Group in Bardiya District, in the Terai. The fruit-bearing plant is a non-timber forest product known locally as bayar; its scientific name is Zizyphus sp.

sense is that it's not. That's why we work to create capacity at the same time we promote dialogue among all stakeholders in government, local communities, and civil society."

Principles for Effective Conservation Practice

None of these obstacles to effectively combining conservation and decentralization are insurmountable. The BSP decentralization study proposes several principles for effective conservation practice to smooth the way.

Know the meaning, value, and existing rights to the natural resources for all stakeholders in a given setting, and know who benefits most and least from conservation actions.

The need to know how villagers use their forests, and why, led BSP to support the CARPE participatory mapping exercise in Cameroon. "We need to start with participatory mapping to see how the local people view and manage their natural resources," Somé explains. Participatory mapping can help clarify what resources mean to their users, an important point when working across cultures, or with traditional user groups. As the BSP study points out, resources are the "stake" in natural resources management, and this stake represents very different cultural, political, and economic values to different stakeholders.

Identify institutional partners with authority and legitimacy.

In Cameroon, CARPE found that in highly organized and hierarchical communities, working through traditional organizations – in this case the local chiefdoms – was crucial. Once those chiefs were on board, CARPE's forestry mapping projects progressed more easily.

Assessing potential partners is an ongoing

process. As Maguire notes, "We didn't work with FECOFUN (Federation of Community Forest Users of Nepal) when the **Ban Udyam** project began, but over the past few years FECOFUN has matured as a voice representing the grassroots. Now we'd like to explore how we could work with FECOFUN to promote decentralization of forest management."

Identify local nonconservation goals and their relationship to conservation goals.

CARPE has forged strong ties with communities in Cameroon by acknowledging the need for economic progress. The country's economic crisis has forced many urban residents to return to their rural villages, bringing with them increased pressure on local resources and a connection to the urban cash economy that could spell disaster for the forests. Participatory mapping offers the migrants, many of whom have advanced schooling and outside networks of relationships, a new way to value their resources – and a new weapon with which to defend them.

"Even though the maps are not yet complete, they have already been used to challenge the decisions of a local governor who wanted to allocate the land to another use," Somé says. "The villagers were aware of the resources on their land and said no to the governor. It may not be a big step compared to other parts of the world, but to see villagers



With funding from a BSP-CARPE grant, participatory mapping was conducted at Tikar Plain, Cameroon. On the left is the official cartographer from CETELCAF, the Center for remote sensing and forest cartography. On the right, local village cartographers, who are participants in the mapping project, input field information into maps.

challenging the government is still unusual in Central Africa."

Research and address underlying social factors behind environmental threats.

Zaharchenko found that researching the effects of Ukraine's market reform process on biodiversity conservation proved crucial during BSP's **Conservation Needs Assessment for Crimea**. Research showed that privatization and market reforms represented potentially large threats to conservation, so BSP encouraged the Committee for Land Resources, the government agency in charge of land privatization, to have a voice in the assessment.

Pay attention to the position any potential conservation allies hold within the local community as a whole.

When BSP's **Conservation Needs Assessment for Crimea** project had to hire a local coordinator, several candidates were considered. Originally, BSP sought a coordinator with English language capability and strong computer skills to support mapping efforts. In the end, BSP hired a person who did not

speak English and only had basic computer skills. But he had a crucial advantage: he was highly regarded in Crimea. “This is what helped BSP to build trust,” said Zaharchenko. “Half of our success there was owing to the fact that we hired this man as coordinator. He has very high moral authority, and it paid off wonderfully. You can train a person to use a computer, but you can’t build a moral reputation in one year.”

Find institutional partners with capacity.

Researching the local and national setting of a decentralized conservation effort may lead conservationists to fine-tune their program design. Somé notes that, although CARPE’s initial intentions were not to work directly with govern-

Where feasible, help build the capacity of existing local resource management structures instead of working to create new ones.

Working to build the capacity of existing institutions is not always easy, but often proves invaluable. In Crimea, for instance, the State Committee for the Protection of Nature endured political turbulence and various leadership changes during the **Conservation Needs Assessment**. BSP nevertheless focused on helping them build their capacity, and it paid off in a number of ways. For instance, BSP used information supplied by the committee to create a map of Crimean protected areas. The agency now uses the new map as its own.



K. Salerson

Hiring a local coordinator [left] who was highly regarded in Crimea was crucial to the success of BSP’s Conservation Needs Assessment project. Here he is shown looking at maps in the company of a Crimean scientist and the workshop facilitator [man on right].



Among the products of the Crimea Conservation Needs Assessment was this map of 50 priority areas of conservation importance in Crimea.

When working to facilitate stakeholder participation, consider groups normally marginalized from the public arena.

As Somé notes, “Sometimes marginalized people are the most receptive to new ideas.” Even groups normally considered hostile to conservation may

ments, “In the mapping exercise we ended up involving relevant government agencies. The reason was that they have the technical know-how, and, moreover, their involvement gave the maps legal status. We found that there’s no way to achieve anything if you don’t work with the government.”

prove valuable allies. This was the case of a group of poachers who moved in on one village’s territory in Cameroon. With the help of the village, the project was able to identify the poachers, determine some of the reasons why they hunted illegally, and design activities to address some of these problems. “In my country,” says Somé, “we have a saying: If you want to keep your child safe, you must give him to the witch.” He continues, “When you get the poachers on your side, they know how to track other poachers down. To deal with poaching

you need to involve the poachers. In Cameroon, we did just that.”

Encourage local-national linkages, and discourage mere divestment of functions and authority, to ensure mutual accountability and protect the public interest.

The **Conservation Needs Assessment** helped to foster exchange between the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the national government of Ukraine. Connections between Ukrainian and Crimean scientists had, in many cases, broken off because funding for joint projects was scarce. The assessment process helped re-establish strained or broken connections and build new ones. Similarly, though the head of the department of special protected areas of the Ministry of Environment had not visited Crimea for several years, he visited Crimea’s State Committee for the Protection of Nature when the project began, and sent representatives to take part in the assessment.



K. Saterston

Conclusion

Supporting effective decentralization may take conservationists into uncharted territory. In Gabon, for instance, CARPE has been encouraging local NGOs to form coalitions in order to strengthen their role in a country where their legal status remains very unclear. “That’s not our mandate,” Somé admits, “but it’s necessary.”

Given the wide variety of national institutions and local settings – even within a single country – decentralized management demands flexible mandates. Conservationists need to adapt to local conditions as they avoid the fallacy that decentralization per se is the solution for biodiversity conservation. As the BSP study concludes, decentralized processes demand a set of skills and sensitivities that conservationists have not always valued but must begin to learn. Sensitivity to local politics, institutions, and the socioeconomic setting offers a big payoff: decentralized resource management that is both more fair and more effective. ■



This Nepali woman is collecting Piper longum, a commercially valuable non-timber forest product found in the Terai. BSP has helped several Community Forest Users’ Groups to realize the commercial potential of this species, and has been working with them to conserve it and to market it both locally and internationally.

Local-national linkages enhance the operation of decentralized natural resources management. The Conservation Needs Assessment for Crimea provided an opportunity to restore or create connections between Ukrainian and Crimean scientists.

Case in Point

Building Local Governance in Indonesia

Indonesia’s rainforests are among the most species-rich on earth, with a dazzling array of plant and animal species, many of them endemic to this immense, 17,000-island Pacific archipelago. The country’s biodiversity roster wins it star billing among the world’s “megadiverse” tropical nations: Indonesia ranks first in the world in the number of mammal and palm species, third in reptiles, fourth in birds, fifth in amphibians, and seventh in flowering plants.

Accompanying this biological diversity is an equally impressive cultural diversity. Indigenous, or adat, communities living in and around the forests use age-old sustainable management prac-

tices that allow them to rely on the forests to survive. Because these traditional strategies hold the key to balancing biodiversity conservation and human well-being, one component of BSP’s five-year, \$10.5 million **KEMALA** program supports decentralized structures to enable local participation in political life. According to BSP/KEMALA Senior Program Officer Nonette Royo, “We believe that with a combination of secure rights and improved management capacity, communities will take care of the biological diversity.”

A National First: The 1999 Regional Autonomy Law

KEMALA’s approach recently got a boost from Indonesia’s 1999 Regional

Autonomy Law, the first decentralization law in the country’s history. Before the law passed, Indonesia’s system of governance was highly centralized, with all power flowing from the Presidency. Today communities are redefining local governance in accordance with their traditional systems. With BSP support, one of KEMALA’s partners, the East Kalimantan member of the national consortium, SHK (SHK-East Kalimantan), is helping eight villages in the Kedang Pahu Hulu river catchment area of East Kalimantan to develop community legislative bodies, known as BPDs, under the new law.

Though the law holds great promise, Royo notes, “Decentralization is a threat as well as an advantage.” For instance, logging represents the great-

est danger currently facing Indonesian biodiversity, and the Regional Autonomy Law makes it possible for villages to cut and sell their trees to concessionaires.

Principle: Identify institutional partners with authority and legitimacy.

KEMALA is fortunate to have in SHK an institutional partner with demonstrated capacity for supporting community resource management, as well as the legitimacy to keep the communities' trust under changing circumstances. With logging offering the temptation of quick cash, some villages began to hesitate to work with SHK-East Kalimantan. But the consortium's proven commitment to community resource management helped minimize local concerns. As the option of logging for cash arose, SHK-East Kalimantan wisely avoided a confrontation.

Principle: Identify local nonconservation goals and their relationship to conservation goals.

"SHK-East Kalimantan's approach was to assure the community that they wouldn't oppose community logging per se, if the community, through the assessment of the village legislative bodies, decides it is vital," Royo explains. "But they also said they would help communities find sustainable models of forest use. And since SHK is seen more as an advocacy group than a conservation group, the villagers need its help in their dealings with the government." For the villagers, Royo points out, managing the forest is a rights issue more than a conservation issue. SHK-East Kalimantan's experience shows the value of integrating the two.

SHK has also been able to help some of its partner communities manage the difficulties that arise when decentraliza-

tion seems to empower local elites. In the villages of Kedang Pahu Hulu, a company began negotiating with a wealthy *adat* leader, who also happens to be member of the community legislative body, for a concession to clear nearby forests for an oil palm plantation. Fortunately, the communities learned of the deal and, putting to work democratic procedures SHK-East Kalimantan had shared, the community legislative body voted to take a stand against the concession.

Principle: Encourage local-national linkages.

SHK and KEMALA are making sure these valuable experiences aren't limited to the eight villages in East

Kalimantan. SHK fosters a hands-on exchange program in which participants share experiences as well as skills, immersing themselves in the work underway in a host village. BSP helps fund these exchanges, which last an average of six weeks. "Villagers are teaching each other and feeling proud about what they've done for their village," Royo says. KEMALA also supports

extensive networking among its partners, including SHK, in five focus areas throughout Indonesia.

By backing an organization with a hard-won reputation for supporting village rights, KEMALA has been able to put decentralization to work for biodiversity conservation. "These villagers have nowhere to go," Royo explains. "If they sell their land, they'll become refugees. But the same villagers' experiences in the past show that forest management has enabled them to put their kids through college. Cash can blind people, but the communities have figured out that conservation is really important." ■



Since the 1999 passage of Indonesia's first Regional Autonomy Law, SHK-East Kalimantan has been helping eight villages, such as this one on the Mahakam River, to develop community legislative bodies, known locally by the acronym, BPD.

P. Breshin

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The Biodiversity Support Program (BSP) is a consortium of World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and World Resources Institute, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). BSP's mission is to promote conservation of the world's biological diversity. We believe that a healthy and secure living resource base is essential to meet the needs and aspirations of present and future generations.

A Commitment to Learning

BSP's Analysis and Adaptive Management Program and our Communications Program work together to produce the *Lessons from the Field* series as part of AAM's Doing Conservation Better Library. Our communications activities are designed to share what we are learning through our field and research activities. To accomplish this, we try to analyze both our successes and our failures. We hope our work will serve conservation practitioners as a catalyst for further discussion, learning, and action so that more biodiversity is conserved. Our communications programs include print publications, Web sites, presentations, and workshops.

BSP Web Site and Listserv

We invite you to visit www.BSPonline.org to learn more about BSP, even after the program closes down in 2001. Through June 2001, you can receive e-mail updates through the Web site. To join our listserv, click on **stay informed** and send us your e-mail address. We'll keep you posted on project highlights, upcoming events, and our latest publications.

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Recommended Resources

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Biodiversity Support Program. 1999. *Governance and biodiversity: Weaving resilience into the web of life*. Washington, D.C.: Biodiversity Support Program.

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Also of Interest

The six case studies that were the foundation of our research leading to the publication *Shifting the Power: Decentralization and Biodiversity Conservation* are available on the Web at www.BSPonline.org.

Mac Chapin. *Defending Kuna Yala: PEMASKY, The Study Project for the Management of the Wildlands of Kuna Yala, Panama*.

Robert K. Hitchcock. *Decentralization, Development, and Natural Resource Management in the Northwestern Kalahari Desert, Botswana*.

David Kaimowitz, Gonzalo Flores, James Johnson, Pablo Pacheco, Iciar Pavéz, J. Montgomery Roper, Cristian Vallejos, and Roger Vélez. *Local Government and Biodiversity Conservation: A Case from the Bolivian Lowlands*.

Michael J. Kiernan. *The Forest Ejidos of Quintana Roo, Mexico*.

Estuardo Secaira, Andreas Lehnhoff, Anne Dix, and Oscar Rojas. *Delegating Protected Area Management to an NGO: The Case of Guatemala's Sierra de las Minas Biosphere Reserve (also in Spanish, as Delegando el Manejo de un Area Protegida a una ONG: El Caso de la Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra de las Minas, Guatemala)*.

Barbara Wyckoff-Baird. *Institutional Arrangements for Ecosystem Management: The Case of South Florida, United States*.