

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 Zado (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 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).