

## Section II: Interaction of Knowledge Forms in Conservation Introductory Remarks

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The title of this section is “Interaction of Knowledge Forms in Conservation,” and I’m sure that all of us can think of many issues and questions relevant to this topic. The conference organizers posed the question thus: “How have natural science, social science and indigenous knowledge been differentially influential in the creation and implementation of conservation projects?” I’m tempted to respond to that question by saying that, sadly, in too many cases, and in too many parts of the world, neither “indigenous knowledge” nor the best-informed academic knowledge has had any significant impact on the implementation of conservation projects. Nor has such knowledge really influenced the broader policies that subsume those projects. Were the situation different, perhaps we wouldn’t need to have this volume. Our purpose is to address the question of how natural science, social science, and indigenous knowledge can be more influential, in ways that are complementary and synergistic, and thereby to help with the implementation of successful conservation projects in the Sangha region.

I’m somewhat of an outsider, as I don’t work in Sangha region myself. And although I study the biology of endangered non-human primates who happen to live in forests in African countries, my professional efforts do not go directly into planning or implementation of conservation policies or into the analysis of the historical or socioeconomic dimensions of conservation issues. I also do not claim to be a spokesperson for the Ugandans and Rwandans I have worked with in my own research, although I have been a student of theirs in many informal ways. Yet I could hardly do what I do and remain unaware of the complexity and importance of the issues that are before us here. How can conservation NGOs best incorporate results of well-informed social and biological research? (I recognize that “well-informed” is not necessarily synonymous with “universally true.”) How can conservation NGOs best use research results in their own planning and advocacy efforts? How can national governments, foreign governmental donors, and international financial institutions be induced to understand better the implications of such research and to incorporate these implications into their policies? Can social scientists and biologists, who sometimes perceive each other as working at cross-purposes, instead use their differences in perspective for cross-pollination?

I will offer a relevant personal anecdote that is perhaps an extreme statement of an issue that has already been raised, and that may inspire discussion. It comes from a conversation I had a couple of years ago in Uganda with a colleague who has been at the forefront of the attempt to gain an influential place for sound biological research in formulation and promotion of policies for protected areas. In our conversation my colleague had disparaged people who promote integrated conservation and development, calling them “homohuggers.” This criticism is an interesting play on corporate anti-environmentalist rhetoric here in the United States. I’m sure that most people here would be upset to hear so derogatory a term used to describe them, especially by someone who should be their ally. I don’t share the sentiment of my colleague, but I can understand the frustration that inspired it. This frustration comes from seeing too many projects fail, and from watching environmental destruction continue despite the comparatively huge amounts of money pouring into the country in the name of sustainable development and conservation.

I would articulate that frustration differently: despite the modest but significant gains in conservation here and there in Africa, the contradictions between the rhetoric of sustainability and the realities of most people’s lives in this age of globalization and of structural adjustment programs have not disappeared, to say the least. I would add that my colleague is correct in saying that, given the chance to act in the way they want, not all indigenous people would act in a way that we outsiders think is in their best long-term interests. But my colleague would not quite acknowledge the imbalances of power that too often deny indigenous people any good options in shaping their interests for the future. Still, resolution of this opposition requires turning rhetoric about empowerment and sustainability into reality.

As we face questions about how those of us who are policy planners and resource managers understand local needs and perspectives and how we incorporate those into conservation planning, we become spokespersons for people who don’t necessarily have voices in the larger world community. We face challenges in helping to give voice to local communities and to empower them. Although a remarkable group of people participated in the conference and in this volume, I don’t see Cameroonian or Congolese small farmers or hunters or traders here, questioning us about how faithfully we outsiders really do speak for or about them. Surely indigenous knowledge is not monolithic, either. Were local people here to share their knowledge of natural resource use relations with us, probably they would not all agree with each other, in addition to not agreeing with the rest of us on every point.

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