

## Participatory Planning for Ecotourism Development in the Peruvian Highlands

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is based on recent experience gained from working on the Huascarán National Park Tourism Management Plan, the first tourism plan in a Peruvian protected area. This experience suggested that ecotourism can be an effective conservation mechanism when designed within a participatory framework. This paper presents the context of the planning process including important contextual information about Peruvian protected areas and tourism activity, specific constraints to the process, and planning of tourism management. Special consideration is given to the participatory mechanisms used and the lessons learned during the process.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews some of the obstacles that we confronted in the process of developing the Huascarán management plan and presents our experience with a participatory planning approach as a potential solution to such obstacles. I will spend some time at the outset of the paper discussing the history of parks, conservation, and tourism in Peru and offer general background on the nature of Peruvian government. My attention to such topics is meant to provide a context in which to understand the process of developing the plan. It also underlines the importance of considering the social, political, economic, and ecological context before planning any eco-tourism or conservation initiative.

The plan was developed with technical and financial support from The Mountain Institute (TMI) under a contract with the Peruvian government. The Mountain Institute is a non-profit, scientific and educational organization committed to preserving mountain environments and advancing mountain cultures throughout the world. The Andean Program is its most recent activity and is focused on community-based biodiversity conservation in the highlands of Bolivia and Peru. I started as part of the planning team, focusing principally on the concepts of park management and stakeholder involvement. Presently I am the Director of Protected Areas Management for the Andean Program.

### BACKGROUND PLANNING

#### THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

It is important for people to remember that the oldest park in Peru dates back only thirty years, and the first government agency

to oversee protected areas has been in existence only twenty years. Most of this time, each area was managed separately. The present *system* of parks having a truly national character, but decentralized and managed at the regional level, has only existed since 1990. The national government gives low priority to management of national parks. This results in a lack of coordination in the creation and management of parks. This lack of commitment to conservation has led to a chronic weakness of protected area management. The national body which oversees protected areas has not been able to effectively manage protected areas, especially with regard to community development. Such ineffectiveness has further eroded any national belief in the importance of protected areas.

It has been difficult to carry out planning activities and set policies in coordination with the government because of the constantly unstable political situation. Within two years, there have been five national Directors of Protected Areas. Because of this instability, the government has never developed a clear definition of protected areas. The most evolved ideas have come from NGOs. This creates jealousy between the state and NGOs, and thus further hinders cooperative planning efforts.

Additional obstacles that we faced during the planning process include:

- An extremely centralized bureaucracy, which does not permit the local park administration to make decisions based on local issues. As a result, the park personnel often could not be involved full time in planning activities.
- The roles of different actors, such as the park staff and the TMI, could not be clearly defined because of the lack of a clear national policy on inter-institutional collaboration.
- Severe tension between NGOs and the government, which limited participation of national NGOs in the process. This led to a loss in valuable technical support.
- Lack of training on the national level of government staff, which meant that every detail of every action had to be painstakingly described to the Lima authorities.
- Many times the park staff was not paid, making it difficult to maintain a high level of energy throughout the process.

#### PERUVIAN VISIONS OF NATIONAL PARKS

The lack of knowledge and appreciation of protected areas by the general population has led to very different impressions of parks. I will present some stereotypes here in the hope that they will clarify

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how people perceive national parks in Peru. First, some people believe that parks are simply from “the north” and are basically playgrounds for foreigners. They resent national parks and are often opposed to their existence. Another group values parks as a means of gaining income from tourists. This group wants to see parks developed as they are in the US, with telephones and ski-lifts and fancy hotels. This group often feels threatened by programs that try to increase involvement of local people in tourism. A third group is conservationists, who see parks as a basis for conserving biodiversity and natural resources. The oldest of these groups in Peru, APECO, has existed about twenty years. But neither APECO nor younger organizations has been able to instill in the general public a sense of the importance of conservation. Not having a base of popular support has led to a lack of power for most conservation advocates in their efforts to protect national parks against commercial development.

The diversity in perceptions of protected areas suggests the need for collaborative and participatory approaches to management. These approaches can help minimize imbalances of power and neutralize political pressures by ensuring representation of all parties.

In addition, local participation can present difficulties of coordination and communication among different interest groups. People who live in small communities often have histories of conflict or hostile relations. It was therefore important to set these difficulties in a participatory framework and to include staff in the project to deal with community relations.

Even though participatory processes are usually costly and prolonged, they are perhaps the only way to establish the necessary dialogue and reduce tensions. But with participation comes the risk of opening new controversies. The challenge of managing such situations is to deal with difficulties slowly, in a controlled manner. In this way, all participants in the process can recognize the roots of conflicts over resource use and confront them together.

#### HUASCARAN NATIONAL PARK

Huascaran National Park is strictly protected, the equivalent of category II in the IUCN’s definitions of protected areas. The Park covers almost all of the Cordillera Blanca, the highest part of the central Andean mountain range. It is surrounded by numerous communities whose residents benefit from traditional grazing rights, harvesting of medicinal plants, and more recently, acting as guides and porters for tourists. There is also constant use of resources and pressure for more use to carry out mining and hydroelectric projects.

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In terms of tourism, Huascarán National Park is the second most popular national park destination in Peru, behind only Macchu Picchu. It contains the only ski area in the country and the best trekking, mountaineering, and rock climbing. It is also quite accessible, being only a short trip from Lima. Peru's mountains are very close to towns and lowlands, so they are easily accessible to tourists. Last year alone, over 85,000 persons were registered in just two of the entrances to the Park. Significantly, over 80 per cent of these visitors were Peruvian. Without a doubt, tourism is the most important economic activity in the region.

#### NATIONAL ECOTOURISM

Peru's interest in ecotourism began in 1990 when the political crisis created by the Shining Path movement had greatly reduced the number of visitors to the country. At that time, the private sector presented "ecotourism" as a new way of promoting tourism. Lack of political will and the many obstacles to cooperative action between the government and private sector, however, impeded the development of any government-sponsored plans for ecotourism development. Indeed, the Huascarán National Park management plan is the first detailed ecotourism management plan for any park in Peru. The tourism sector had not developed any planning document for protected areas; it has not even provided clear guidelines for tourism regulation in Peru. In short, as we started to develop the ecotourism management plan for Huascarán National Park, there was no real precedent to help consolidate the economics of tourism and the conservation of protected areas.

The central administration of INRENA (National Institute of Natural Resources) supported the management plan as a way of opening up the park for infrastructure development. In the name of free market ideology, the government has defined a strong policy of extractive use of resources, without analyzing long-term impacts or exploring appropriate land-use practices for protected areas. Government policy does not distinguish between different categories of protected areas, nor does it attempt to use protected areas for the benefit of local people. The government views a tourism management plan as a way to collect data that will allow for more intensive and extensive development of tourism services in national parks.

#### REGIONAL TOURISM

In Huascarán, tourism developed rapidly beginning in the 1970s, opening new economic opportunities for a population that has had very low incomes. Tourism has become a central part of the lives of the people throughout the area. It has radically changed the social

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relations of the people living in and around the park, especially those between people from rural and urban areas. In the principal city of Huaraz, people who work in tourism look at the mountains on the outskirts of the city and see, more than anything else, economic resources. Such a perspective clearly presents a challenge to any conservation initiative.

In the buffer zone of Huascarán National Park, which is one of the areas with the most potential for tourism, tourism development has occurred in a chaotic manner. The reasons for this are: 1) lack of cooperation between tourist agencies; 2) lack of public and private planning for tourism; 3) lack of training opportunities for people in the tourism sector; and 4) little involvement of community members in tourism management.

### THE PLANNING PROCESS

Negotiations with the Peruvian government, leverage of funds, and relationship building were the first steps of the project, carried out in 1994 and early 1995. Serious planning began in September 1995 with the signing of a contract between TMI and INRENA. It took a full seven months to finish the plan and to negotiate its approval with INRENA.

The planning process contained the following four steps:

1. Creation of an inter-institutional work group.
2. Diagnosis of tourism in the Park.
3. Workshops (capacity building).
4. Formulation of the plan.

Building relationships and confidence with local, regional, and national actors was a constant activity.

### FORMATION OF THE WORKING TEAM

First the working team had to consist of people the park team knew and trusted. There was a lot of concern at the beginning that TMI would bring in outside people or people the park did not trust. Thus, every person on the team was discussed with the park and ground rules were laid to ensure the park's leadership in the management of the team. This reassured the park staff, who were all educated in the region, that they would not be threatened by the more experienced people who would eventually make up the team. The TMI team decided not to have any designated "specialist" on the team, but rather to have different members work on different activities to help strengthen their abilities in new areas and also to avoid the "I am the specialist" mentality.

The second aspect of team creation was building the capabilities of the team in technical aspects as well as in human relations as-

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pects. The team assessed the tourism situation within the park and identified the strengths and weaknesses of the park management. This was also a convenient time for training the park employees about participatory facilitation methodologies. This activity prepared the park to take criticism from the different sectors without becoming overly defensive. It also reinforced their knowledge of issues related to ecotourism and encouraged them to start to reflect on concerns that might be brought up during the workshops. This team strengthening and planning proved vital to the following phases of the process.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

Figure 1 summarizes the initial concept behind the plan, which came out of the workshop involving the Park and TMI. Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework devised by all the participants in the process in the final workshop which included indigenous communities, INRENA, the tourism sector, adventure tourism agencies, conventional tourism agencies, municipalities, and the Working Team (Park and TMI staff members in charge of conducting the planning process).

As the figures illustrate, despite their different structures and despite periodic changes in the basic idea of the plan throughout the process, in the end, the vision defined by the planning team and the vision of the stakeholders were quite similar. This is important because it shows that the process allowed the people involved to better understand the linkages between tourism development and conservation. It also shows that, despite differences between park administrators and the local tourism sector (including communities offering tourism services), there is, to some extent, a common ground between these key players.

### FIELD INVENTORY (DIAGNOSTIC)

Even though there are existing publications on Huascarán National Park and a good general knowledge of the area, we felt it was important to do a complete field inventory of the park. We believed it was important for the following reasons: 1) It allowed the park staff, who had no camping equipment, to explore and get to know parts of the park that they have never seen before, making them more competent managers and better informed for the workshops with private guides; 2) It allowed the team to work closely together in the field which created trust and a mutual understanding of the problems associated with tourism in the park; 3) This better under-

Figure 1: Huascarán National Park Tourism Management Plan

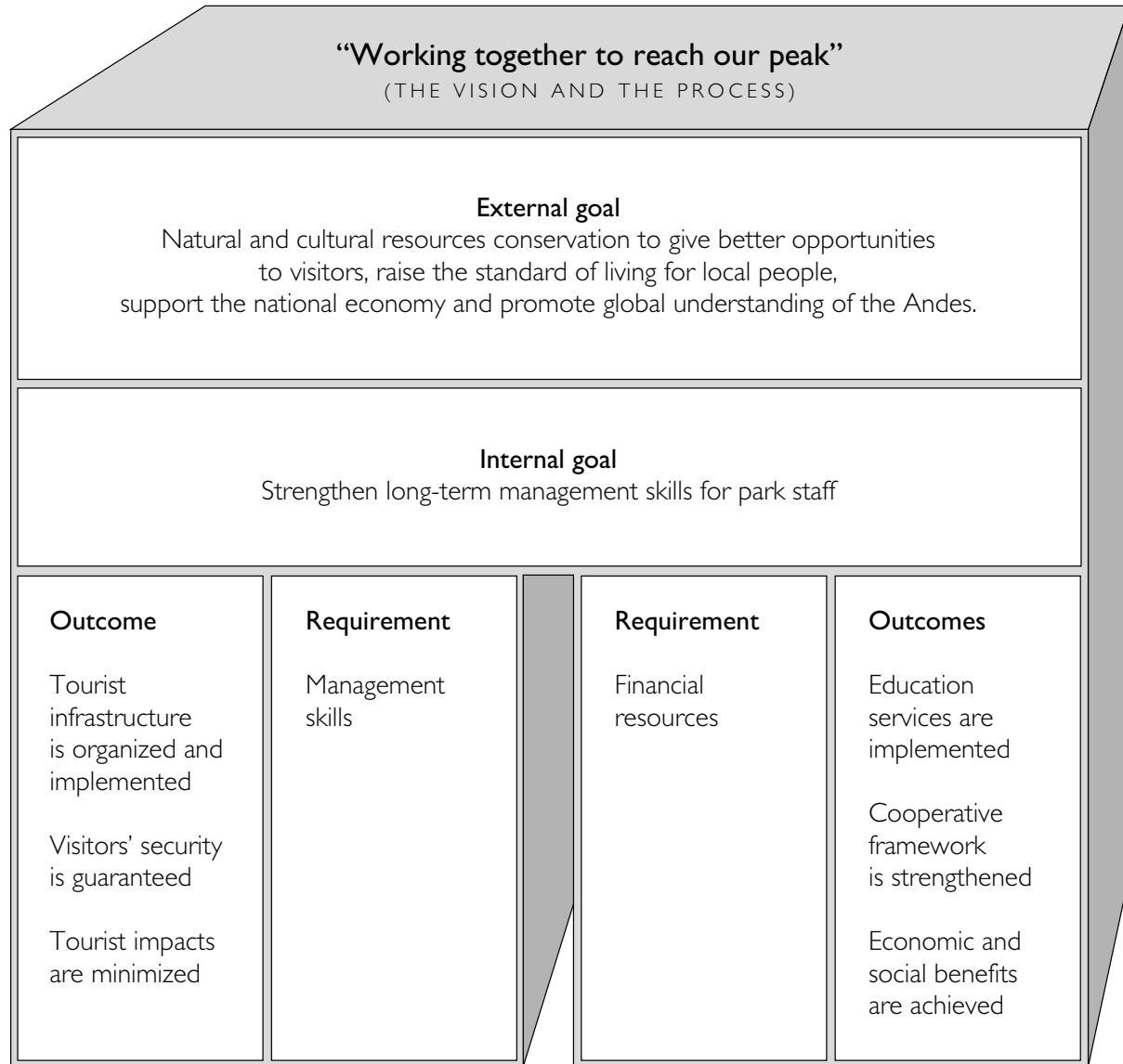
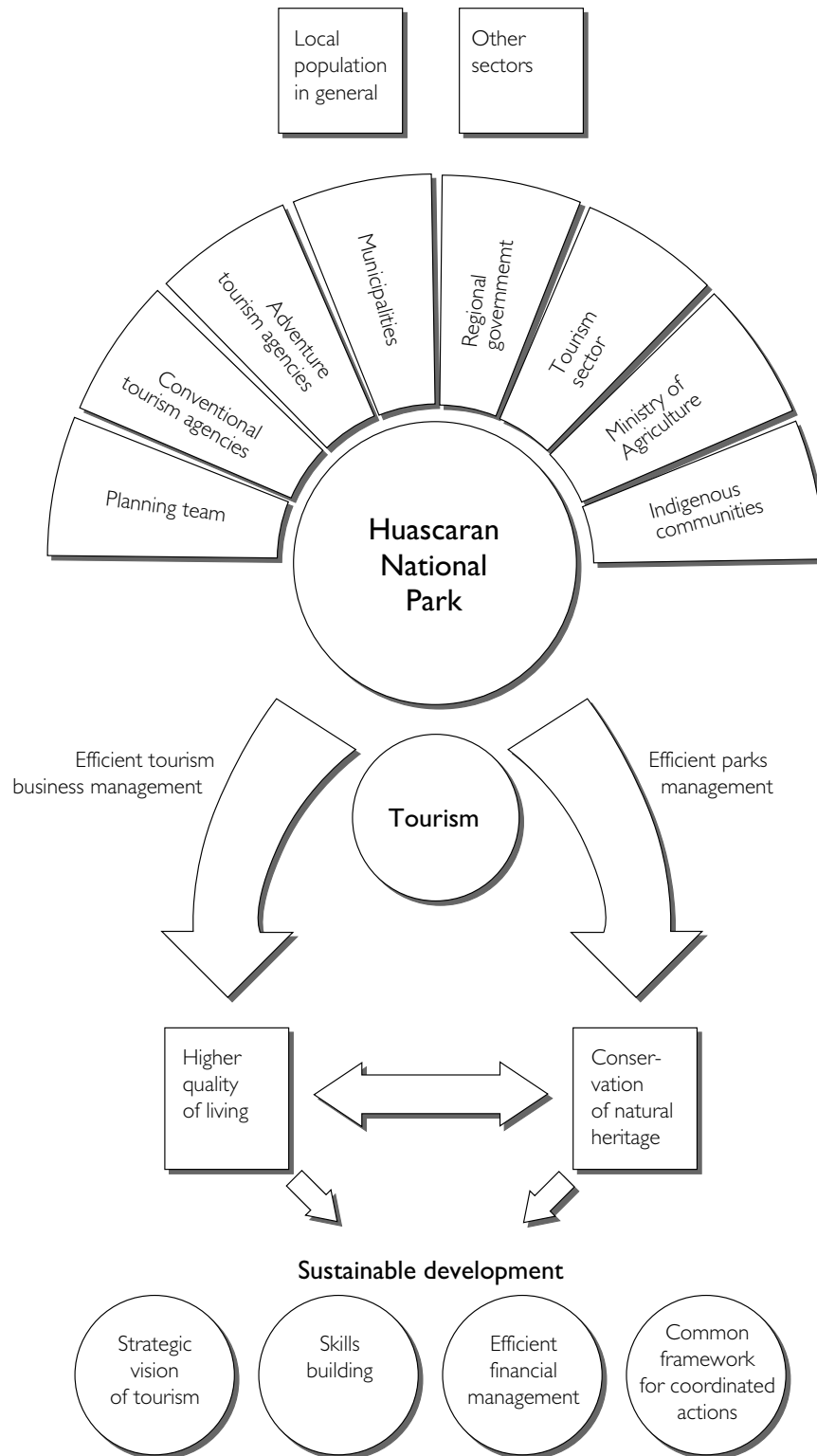


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



standing of the problems gave the park staff greater confidence to develop new projects, to discuss with the private sector the alternatives for future tourism management, and conceive of common criteria; and 4) It gave other sectors confidence in the park, ensuring that park proposals will be received with greater respect.

#### WORKSHOPS, MEETINGS, AND CAPACITY BUILDING

First, we learned that the methods used should ensure the building of trust and prohibit small groups from manipulating meetings. This can be accomplished by allowing all participants to have full access to information before decision-making occurs, and through reporting opinions discussed and decisions made immediately following each meeting. In this way, all involved in each step of the process can help correct errors, make it so that no significant information is left out and monitor the involvement of all groups such that no favoritism occurs.

This process facilitated the development of an understanding among the participants that to achieve a common goal, there are common responsibilities that also must be shared. The planning process, in this case, worked very well and allowed everyone to see the benefits of cooperation as well as their own responsibilities to the project and to the future of the national park.

In presenting the results of the process, the same people who participated in the creation of the plan were the ones to present the findings during the project meetings and to the public. This created the incentive to carry out the projects while giving credit to the people who had worked on the plan and shared their ideas. This process of having the participants become the presenters reinforces and strengthens the plan in the eyes of the government agencies. They see the project as not only belonging to the park or TMI but also to all communities who have participated, thus making it harder for the agencies not to support the process and the final plan.

We tried to ensure that the working team responsible for the project was always clear and honest about the extent and the limits of making decisions for the participants of the process, while maintaining their role as facilitators rather than decision-makers. In addition, the working team had to be willing to explain the limitations of the process within the context of national policies and financial constraints.

It is important that the supporting agency respect the authority of the park, facilitating the analysis of the implications of the decisions for them who must carry out and achieve a balance between the opinions and mandates of the administration of the park and the opinions expressed by other participants in the process.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Even when projects have a local and rural focus, exceptional efforts must be made to build trust and negotiate with governmental organizations. Governments have the authority. They determine project opportunities and implementation. Therefore, strong personal and institutional relationships must be developed with government officials.

2. There are no recipes for building relationships between government and conservation organizations. At the project design stage, planners have to be aware that negotiations with government officials involve more than what is officially required. In defining a project time table, it is necessary to set aside significant amounts of time to build relationships with counterparts and government officials. That is especially true in countries with poorly organized and centralized governmental institutions.

3. It is important to understand that it will be difficult to involve National Park officials continuously in the planning process. To reduce the negative effects of this limitation, conservation organizations should offer a strong sense of continuity while at the same time being careful not to threaten park officials' authority. If such an effort is not made, projects often become the "NGO project." This produces tension between governmental officials and the NGOs and increases the likelihood that the goal of raising public awareness about the importance of conservation will not be achieved.

4. High priority must be placed on the training, skill-building, and development of self-confidence among park staff during the project. The goal is not just to accomplish the project steps, but also to help park officials understand the roots of their institutional problems and consider solutions. It is also essential that Park officials be able to apply to park management what they have learned in the areas of networking and participatory decision-making.

5. Project timing must be flexible. This is a very difficult issue given the requirements of funding institutions. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the need for flexible timing. Otherwise, the planning process will not allow all stakeholders enough time to internalize the process. Nor will park staff have the opportunity to accomplish other activities. Without adequate time for stakeholders to build relationships, a participatory process is simply not possible.

6. Participants should be made aware that it may not be possible to implement every aspect of the plan or to pursue the participatory approach at all levels of negotiation. Uncertainty about future political, social, economic, and ecological realities may limit the effectiveness of a participatory approach.

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7. Although each situation is unique, we can conclude that it is essential to anticipate problems and build relationships among donors, government officials, and local stakeholders if there is to be cooperative management of tourism.

8. The key question is how to make viable a planning process that seeks to achieve equilibrium between conservation and community development when the government structure is inflexible and government officials do not believe in and are threatened by a participatory process.

9. The most difficult part of any plan is not technical information gathering or research, but dealing with power struggles and diverse histories, on the local, regional, and national levels. That is, the planning process and methodology are as important to the outcome of the plan as are the data and proposals.

Finally, it is important to mention that there is no one correct solution. All management plans and planning processes must be shaped for and by the specific social, political, economic, and ecological context. However, this paper and its account of one planning project may be useful to others interested in ecotourism, participatory planning, and protected area management.

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