

Raleigh International & Biodiversity Assessment

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Introduction

Raleigh International, head office in London, is a youth development charity that works in southern Chile, Costa Rica & Nicaragua, Namibia, Ghana and Malaysia. It is currently undertaking 3-month expeditions with a diverse range of volunteer participants working on environmental conservation and community development projects. The youth volunteers are 17-25 years old and are required to raise sponsorship for the costs of their participation. They include pre-university UK students, 'youth at risk' individuals, international participants and an expanding number of young people from the host country. See the website – www.raleighinternational.org – for more information.

Raleigh is involved in a variety of biodiversity research and conservation projects, either by leading international donor-funded partnership projects or by working in a support role with host country institutions' projects. Current major biodiversity projects include:

- EC-funded 'Biodiversity Aysén' project (www.mnhn.cl/paysen/ayesen.htm) in Chile
- EC-funded 'Wriscs' marine project in Belize (www.wriscs.org)
- UK Government Darwin Initiative-funded project on research for conservation of the endangered huemul deer in southern Chile
- Darwin Initiative-funded research project on large mammal conservation and sustainable use in Mongolia

Example of one project

In the project 'Biodiversity Aysén: Sustainable Management of Protected Areas in Region XI, Chile' we are working to develop the capacity of the Chilean protected areas agency (CONAF) through a number of means to manage five national parks and reserves covering ca. 5 million hectares in area. These means include:

- an extensive programme of baseline biodiversity research,
- development of an information management programme and
- environmental education initiatives & community involvement initiatives.

Further project information, including a project outline, newsletters and workshop proceedings, is available on request from rich@raleigh.org.uk

The involvement of volunteers

The primary involvement of Raleigh expeditions and volunteers in this project is in supporting the research programme fieldwork, which is directed by Chilean and British scientists from the Natural History Museum (London), Museo Nacional de Historia Natural (Santiago) and various universities, and focuses on a broad range of species groups. Raleigh volunteers, who generally possess no previous biological knowledge, identification skills or field experience, are involved in all aspects of data collection in the field. Tasks and challenges are set by the project scientists, Raleigh volunteer staff and the youth participants themselves, whereas the methods employed may be 'simplified' to facilitate appropriate application by the volunteers. Experience has shown that quantitative methods not requiring sophisticated measurement and requiring broad-scale coverage and replication, can work well with the volunteers. Additional to its objective to strengthen the capacity of the protected areas agency, Raleigh facilitates the individual development of young volunteers through experiential learning, including greater understanding of environmental issues, biodiversity conservation and the scientific research process.

Objectives and information needs of various actors

The 3-year research programme was set-up through a participatory workshop in Chile in August 2000 bringing together interested scientific and conservation bodies to agree a set of

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prioritisation/orientation criteria for proposed research objectives. These criteria were mainly based on accepted ecological and conservation factors, but also included biodiversity use (actual or potential) by local communities. The resulting agreed research objectives largely comprise species inventories, including specimen-collecting for museums, but also includes more applied ecological studies and habitats characterisation and, in some cases, genetic studies. The main focus and challenge for the project is to make the scientific studies' information of practical use to CONAF protected area management, including appropriate formats and tools useful for parks personnel.

A second project workshop, held in September 2001 in Chile, brought together information generators (mainly scientists) and a range of potential information users (including park rangers, government agencies and local NGOs) to discuss their information needs, data management systems, appropriate products and enhanced regional co-ordination. The project is developing an information management system based upon standardised formats for data collection and analysis in ArcInfo Geographic Information System (GIS). This information will support further biodiversity research studies and future product development for a range of other, mainly local, users.

Monitoring & training

The project intends to develop an outline for an ecological monitoring system for CONAF, primarily for park rangers but aiming to include local communities as well. Fundamental training in biological sciences (theory and methods, by broad taxonomic groups) for all rangers in the region, as well as ecotourism guides, was delivered by project scientists through a one-week training course recently. The project intends to follow this up with a further detailed and focused training course covering certain biological groups for particular park rangers, as well as considering monitoring strategies. Furthermore, rangers are actively involved in supporting research studies in the field including a practical training component in species identification, biological survey and other research methodologies.

Challenges: involving local communities

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the project is seeking to promote effective dialogue with and involvement of local communities in the neighbouring protected areas, beyond the schools-based environmental education. Presently there is a programme of local school visits to nearby research project sites in which various educational activities are run by park rangers, scientists and Raleigh volunteers to foster understanding and involvement of schoolchildren in international biodiversity assessment. Teacher training and classroom materials are to be developed in future. A strategy for working with local communities, including pilot initiatives, is to be developed following a 'scoping' study looking at current theory and practice in the local area. The overall aim is to make the protected areas and biodiversity conservation more relevant to local people, including a role in decision-making and development of compatible economic activities such as ecotourism.

Our interest in this workshop

The Biodiversity Aysén project and other similar Raleigh projects are undertaking work of relevance to the workshop on participatory monitoring and evaluation of biodiversity. We are keen to learn from the experience of others, particularly concerning ideas for new innovative methods of involving non-scientists in biodiversity assessment, to move forward beyond more conventional scientific research, ecological monitoring and environmental education.