

Contribution to discussion 25 January

By R. Howorth

Having followed the workshop discussions and emailed summary notes with much interest, I wish to contribute the following points, related to a number of workshop themes, based upon my experience of working on biodiversity conservation both in the UK and in South America.

Theme 3 - Methods and tools

The integration of paying lay volunteers predominantly from the UK in environmental conservation projects overseas, working on biodiversity research studies presents various challenges to obtaining high quality scientific results (the principal project aim). This relates fundamentally to the nature of the individuals (professional scientists, experienced project staff and youth volunteers) involved and their capacity to communicate their differing perspectives and agendas effectively. Selection and development of appropriate projects for volunteer involvement, according to criteria which meet an identified development need, promote individual development and understanding of global environment, development and citizenship issues, presents a challenging mix of elements to integrate within a single project! The context of the research work, its relevance to broader environmental issues, and the nature of the scientific process is important to communicate, for volunteers to be able to engage effectively in repetitive scientific measurement and recording.

Theme 4 - Information needs

In the context of the EC-funded Biodiversity Aysen project in Southern Chile, described in my previous contribution, the needs for information are principally determined by the Chilean protected areas agency to enhance their management of the region's national parks and reserves. Other potential information users include state entities involved in resource development and land management (with various examples of conflicting agendas and overlapping or unclear remits); the private sector (harder still to involve and influence); local communities and small-scale productive land use activities, and visitors as part of the expanding tourism sector. Evidently the challenges of generating appropriate biodiversity information for such a diverse range of actual or potential stakeholders are great, and they have now started to be addressed through a participatory workshop and development of regional working groups on information management. However, the principal challenge for the project remains that of promoting close connections between the baseline studies of individual scientists and the conservation management function of the protected area body. Scientists tend to be motivated principally by their own academic/research career agendas and highly focused upon generating data for publication in refereed scientific journals. The parks body, meanwhile, lacks clarity over the relative importance for management of a diverse range of species groups, particularly in respect to their ability to undertake follow-up studies and monitoring, and furthermore struggles to integrate additional information on habitats and ecological processes in their decision-making. Such concerns require resolution if scientific information of applied use to protected area management, for example on ecological corridors, human impacts and sustainable use, is to be generated. Furthermore, the scale of field research possible in such a vast area, even with extensive logistical and volunteer support, raises doubts over the representativeness and validity of extrapolation of the research findings to the wider area, thus making direct support to both protected area management and land use planning problematic. These issues require further resolution before the biodiversity information being generated can be effectively related to the issues faced by local communities operating in agriculturally marginal environments.

Theme 5 - Synergy

Further to the contribution of Miriam van Heist on local community-level identification of significant biodiversity for application of scientific techniques, many interesting examples exist of community involvement in the development and implementation of Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) by local authorities in the UK. An example I was involved with in 1997 was the initiative of the London Borough of Bromley encouraging the public to select (through nomination and voting) their favourite

species representing local biodiversity, with subsequent development of public monitoring schemes to generate time series data on these locally chosen indicator species. Many other recent examples exist of public involvement in recording of national priority species, including those conventionally considered less attractive/accessible to the public such as the greater stag beetle in London, facilitated by the Peoples Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), county wildlife trusts and others.

Theme 6 - Enabling policy and institutional factors

Related to the previous point of LBAP initiatives in the UK, the Local Agenda 21 process here offers many examples of local authorities' experience of seeking to facilitate connection, superficially or more profoundly, between local people and global environmental and sustainability issues through their everyday activities and sense of locale. Ultimately, the process is about the ability and willingness of state authorities to relinquish control over setting the agenda and devolve power of self-determination to the people they serve through democratic and pragmatic means.

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