

**Douglas Sheil – contribution to discussion 17 January 2003 –
Thoughts on reducing the understanding gap.**

I'm joining these discussions late but wish to make a number of points that draw on our own work in Indonesia. The project description stuff gives some overview. The following raises points I hope are relevant in some context but seems to cut across the themes.

For our work a starting point was the recognition that the importance of natural resources and landscapes to local communities is generally not recognized in activities led by outsiders. This creates unnecessary conflicts to arise and reduces opportunities for locally acceptable outcomes to develop. For many stakeholders, especially commercial enterprises such as timber concessionaires, and mining companies, their preferences and motivations are relatively clear and easily communicated and understood. But, when rural communities with strong indigenous cultures are considered, their needs and perceptions remain veiled or illegible to most outsiders unless a specific effort is made to uncover them. Many decision making bodies (e.g. state apparatus) encourage simplicity and are poor at eliciting or (in any sense) engaging with the complex needs of individual communities (for a beautifully written argument of this fact in a more general context see Scott, J. C. 1998 Seeing like a state. The Yale ISPS series. Yale University Press, New Haven, USA).

The academic approach to biological surveys has generally been to match specific methods to specific ("simplifying") questions. However, the most obvious and urgent practical questions have been too broad and multifaceted for such clear resolution. One such question encapsulates the essence of our study of marginalized Dayak communities in Kalimantan: "How can we find out what we should know to make better decisions about tropical forest landscapes?" . This includes topics generally considered as "biodiversity" but allows for more besides. Thus, we developed our survey methods to identify what is "important" to some local communities in Malinau, East Kalimantan. I'd be interested to hear if other participants have also attempted to work with such breadth.

Ideally, detailed knowledge would be gained through experience, but few decision makers are willing to live for long periods in the communities they will influence. What we felt was needed was a practical suite of methods, that can reduce the understanding gap, to provide a comprehensible summary of what actually matters locally, to determine what is important, to whom, how much and why, and a means to make these local values and preferences more legible and relevant to the decision making process.

Many methods might work. But we sought something that was relatively simple and systematic . something that could perhaps be presented as a "starter package". Paradoxically then our final draft is far from what many would expect from a "fully participatory" approach to doing biodiversity studies. We set the goals (to identify and understand what was important to local people), we designed the methods and we refined them. Our methods are thus our first step in seeking a means of increasing the legibility of local priorities and views to outsiders (and possibly visa-versa). Here the immediate 'outsiders' are us, the researchers themselves. We did, however, require the participation of a wide range of community members for their knowledge and explanations, as research assistants and field guides. While our methods attempt to be systematic, our results, especially our conclusions, need not be. This worries me as it is not easy to know how to proceed. For the topic of local peoples preferences in biodiversity we need to evaluate the complexity while avoiding the pitfalls of simplifications.

There is a strong urge inherent in us "scientific types" to generalise our results but the details can matter. For many results, their significance lies in the specific details they provide (e.g. a single local boat builder has a specific knowledge which supplies all the boats in the community, or medicinal expertise is restricted etc.) - we must try to not to discard such aspects through our own lack of understanding (what the average informant tells us etc.). What are we to do with the many insights and understandings that are gained simply by staying in the villages and undertaking the survey with the community? These may be some of the most precious results - potentially offering the key and

explanation of various puzzles that appear during the survey. These make us understand better but remain hard to express in any systematic reporting approach (as many anthropologists will know) as they don't look like "data". One solution that I hope we will use is to check our main conclusions and recommendations with community members. They will hopefully correct us or help supply the necessary caveats. In the future we will be looking at how to develop the conclusions of the surveys into more useful and relevant outputs to make full use of the opportunities to arise. I would be keen we learn from other experiences.

Though we try and develop a "one-off" systematic "diagnostic" method. Ultimately I think there is a real difficulty in assessing many aspects of local views unless we see the process as iterative. We develop a dialogue by learning to understand each other. There are many ways this might be attempted. Ideally, detailed knowledge would be gained through intimate personal knowledge, but few decision makers are willing to live for long periods in the communities they will influence. What is needed is a practical method, or indeed a suite of methods, that can reduce the understanding gap, to provide a comprehensible summary of what actually matters locally, to determine what is important, to whom, how much and why, and a means to make these local values and preferences more legible and relevant to the decision making process.