

Contribution to discussion 28 January

By Craig Turner

Dear Colleagues,

I have followed the much of the recent discussion with great interest but haven't contributed yet. I would therefore like to offer a contribution that spans many of the themes (hopefully in a logical order) illustrating more issues for discussion but also some possible solution options to some points raised earlier. By means of brief background, I work for a volunteer based organisation (Coral Cay Conservation [CCC]) which recruits international volunteers to work on tropical forest (and coral reef) conservation projects in order to provide resources to help sustain livelihoods and alleviate poverty through the protection, restoration and management of coral reefs and tropical forests. CCC is currently working in the Philippines with the Negros Forests and Ecological Foundation, Incorporated (NFEFI). NFEFI and CCC have established a conservation initiative, the Negros Rainforest Conservation Project (NRCP) in the unprotected North Negros Forest Reserve (NNFR).

A core element of the work we undertake could be labelled participatory monitoring and evaluation of biodiversity, through the use of volunteers to undertake resource assessments. With respect to **theme 1** of the discussion, the NRCP is a long-term joint programme of focussed and strategic conservation, education, and restoration. The overall aims of the project (biodiversity assessment, education, training, provision of alternative livelihoods, sustainable use and conservation) are comparative to many other conservation projects in montane forest areas. However, it is perhaps important to stress that aims are very much locally driven in order to generate and implement a workable sustainable management plan. The NFEFI was born out of 'Save our Negros Forest Movement' resulting from concern by local landowners regarding continuing forest loss they decided to take the initiative to protect and preserve what was left of the forests. From this arose the NFEFI (a non-profit making, non-governmental organisation dedicated to protect, conserve and restore the Negros environment and to safeguard the sustainable use of its resources for the present and future generations) who work with the local communities whom participate on the project. However, acknowledging the obvious hierarchies of stakeholders at a local level, I am curious to whether projects are ever truly locally driven by resource users? Community concern may catalyse conservation effort, but project objectives are surely driven by NGOs at a range of levels.

In formalising the NRCP it became apparent that very little information (ecological, social, economic etc) had been documented or was immediately available on the resources of the NNFR, and thus resource assessment would form a key element of the project. Therefore through the use of international conservation volunteers and involvement of local community members, a resource survey and monitoring programme was structured and implemented by CCC and NFEFI, in order to assess the biodiversity of the forest. Naturally this has been further broken down into assessments of major faunal and floral groups (diversity, abundance, distribution, use etc) and thus biodiversity is very much focused at the species and habitat level. The structure also means that the project is participatory in more than one dimension, integrating local organisation, both government and non-government but involving both local communities and international volunteers in assessments and monitoring. Thus, the project has a comparative structure to the work presented by Raleigh International and the staff and volunteers of the NRCP are very much 'intermediary' actors.

Such participation (using local knowledge and volunteers skills in combination) can provide potentially important information for conservation planning and management in a unique area of forest. But the question remains of how do local communities benefit? Arguably, in the long-term by increased security of their resource base. As to the short-term it has been suggested elsewhere that participatory eco-tourism initiatives have the potential to improve the economic situation of local communities struggling with daily subsistence, whilst also supporting biodiversity conservation. The NRCP maybe viewed by some as eco-tourism through the involvement of volunteers and the project

does provide financial compensation to community members working on the project, thus providing some short-term benefit.

As to the actual value of biodiversity (**theme 2**) in the project area, I would concur to some degree that non-monetary benefits of biodiversity are valued more by some groups of local people, than monetary. Also the 'ecosystem service' benefits of watershed protection are being increasingly recognised at the NGO level but this and other conservation reasoning does not necessarily translate at the local level. Therefore, NFEFI and CCC are attempting to involve local school and community groups (and others) in the project to further expand knowledge sharing on biodiversity values (in a multi-way process), both in terms of tangible goods and environmental services delivered, and values perceived by local groups. The NRCP still has much more work to complete regarding collation of information of different relative values and then applying this in conservation, such as through the use of NTFP's or further development of local eco-tourism initiatives, as mentioned in earlier discussion.

With regard to tools and methods (**theme3**) this perhaps where the NRCP separates itself from many of the other projects that I have seen in the discussion so far. It is the mechanism by which the NRCP achieves its goals that makes the project different. CCC provides the resources to the project in terms of highly qualified scientific and technical staff, equipment, and a constant year-round stream of self-financing conservation volunteers. Under the guidance and training of the NRCP staff and NFEFI staff, the volunteers (including local students, in-country counterparts, and international volunteers from a range of backgrounds) are provided with the necessary knowledge, training and technical skills to undertake natural resource assessments and contribute to the overall objectives of the project. The data generated (e.g. species distributions, abundances, habitat mapping data etc) is then collated, analysed and summarised by CCC (in conjunction with NFEFI) before being returned to the partner organisations and stakeholders (in usable format) for the collaborative development of sustainable management recommendations and use in local conservation policy discussion and development.

Previous discussion within this forum has suggested there is a tendency to focus more on methodological development than on the identification and clarification of the objective(s) of the assessment, and the need for the reverse. Whilst I agree with the need for clear objectives, methodological development is an important part of any project and has proved so within the context of the NRCP. From the perspective of using 'volunteers' we have attempted to use 'off the peg' published survey methods (for major faunal and floral groups) but often find that these have to be adapted for volunteers and local community members (who only receive short but intensive training) in order to make them workable, reliable and provide data in a format that is usable. Thus, situation specific development of methods is necessary if accurate and scientifically robust information is to be gained and recognised by peers. The validity of using such a participatory approach (combining local and international volunteers) to undertake baseline biodiversity surveys is often questioned by academic peers, yet it is a question that they often fail aim 'within house' regarding the use of their students (arguably of no greater knowledge or experience than our volunteer participants) for their own conservation research. To this end, I am curious to know how others (who rely on community participants or other volunteers for semi-quantitative or quantitative data collection) validate the data they collect, since inaccurate or unreliable information surely poses a considerable flaw to the whole PM&E process. Arguably greater than having unclear objectives!

Clearly accuracy can be enhanced through the use of appropriate methods and training but there are limits to the capabilities of any individual involved in PM&E work, so while objectives and methods are important (and without wishing to reinvent the wheel!) so are individual limitations and the ability to recognise them. How do others tackle this issue? To take assessments beyond species and habitat surveys, I would partially agree with Karen Lawrence that if we wish to build truly participatory methodologies, these are certainly likely to take more time to implement than less participatory approaches, because they are likely to be meeting objectives that go beyond taxonomic inventories and species lists and will be aimed at building community trust, knowledge, understanding and capacity. They will ultimately lead to a more in-depth understanding of biodiversity in socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Obviously the methods used are largely defined by information needs (**theme 4**) which themselves result from clear objectives. Again, I agree with previous discussion that the type of biodiversity data (biological, socio-economic, cultural, etc.) required by users is as varied as the range of those users (policy makers, scientists, local communities). Gathering such a wide range of data stresses the importance of interdisciplinary work and of overcoming the inevitable communication problems that such work can entail. If data requirements are diverse, requiring the integration of different sectors (social, economic etc) then this often relates not only to the objectives of a particular project but also to its scale. A topic that we have not entered into yet and I am fearful of opening 'the can worms', but at what scale should we address PM&E issues? The NRCP forms part of a wider watershed management project co-ordinated by NFEFI, and thus scales up into a more holistic approach, embracing many of the core elements of the ecosystem approach.

I would also argue that the principles of the ecosystem approach theoretically provide a framework in which to achieve synergy (**theme 5**) between differing PM&E objectives, methods and outputs. I would agree that (as previously mentioned) both local people and biodiversity could benefit from the potential synergy of knowledge generated by committed scientists (from all sectors) and local people. However, place-specific and equitable research partnerships and supportive decision-making institutions are an essential pre-requisite to enable this to happen. These are core principles of the ecosystem approach. Whether this is achievable reality and implementation of an ecosystem approach is a reality, is up for debate. But as to the question of whether it is possible to conduct biodiversity assessments with multiple stakeholders, such that all benefit? I would argue yes but the benefits will obviously vary in type and in the time scale that they are delivered (as referred to earlier). If one benefit to local participants is resource security, then it is likely that this will only be achieved in the long-term (years) and this is likely to be dependent on sustaining PM&E initiatives and other project elements, which are also heavily dependent on funding.

Therefore, when discussing enabling factors (**theme 6**), with reference to the NRCP it is participation and collaboration that greatly facilitate the project. Collaboration with local communities, NGOs and Government greatly aids the activities and outputs of the project. Whereas participation by international volunteers means that the project is primarily self-financed through a unique volunteer participatory scheme with no cost to the in-country partner organisation and no dependence on external funding agencies. Thus the project can look to achieve long-term goals and at a time when many conservation programs are stressing the need to find innovative funding mechanisms in order to provide resources to support local forest conservation.

As to the **future**, whilst quickly reviewing many of the daily summaries it is apparent to me that one recurrent theme is improving communication, and at all levels. Communication is obviously the key to success of PM&E work at all levels. Whilst not wishing to teach the vast majority (who are more experienced than myself) to 'suck the conservation egg' it is clear from many responses that communication issues need to be addressed at all levels of PM&E work if we are all to achieve our objectives more efficiently and effectively. I applaud this forum for taking a great step forward.

Regards

Craig

Craig Turner

Terrestrial Science Co-ordinator, Coral Cay Conservation

The Tower, 125 High Street, Colliers Wood, London,

SW19 2JG, UK

T: +44-(0)20-8545-7722

F: +44 (0)870-750-0667

E: ct@coralcay.org

W: <http://www.coralcay.org/>

"Providing resources to help sustain livelihoods and alleviate poverty through the protection, restoration and management of coral reefs and tropical forests"