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Conserving India's Biodiversity Through Participatory Ecodevelopment

Indicative Planning of Protected Areas

By Maria C.J. Cruz

In January 1992, India's Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) organized a task force to develop a biodiversity conservation program. It was no simple task to classify and evaluate 75 national parks and 421 reserves, covering 14 million hectares. But everyone agreed on the urgent need to develop a program to preserve more than 15,000 flowering plants unique to India, and more than 81,000 endangered animal species. So the Ministry set up a program to identify issues and solutions which incorporated the voices and knowledge of the people closest to the problem—the tribal peoples and rural groups who inhabit the designated protected areas.

More than 40 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both village-based and national groups, were mobilized to begin the enormous task. During the past two-and-a-half years, they met in some 14 different sites on 32 occasions and, as a first task, selected eight protected areas as pilot sites.

Indian Bousal Tigers or Asiatic lions are found in each of these selected areas as keystone species that have received worldwide attention. But the parks also stand out, and were chosen as pilot sites, because they are areas where protecting people is as important as protecting natural diversity. Each park area is home to traditional farmers and tribal groups who, like the tigers, depend on the natural environment to pursue their livelihood and way of life.

Site-specific activities had to be designed through a participatory indicative plan (or PIP) process, in the next stage of project preparation. At this stage, I began my work with the India Ecodevelopment Project, financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the World Bank. I have followed (and supported) the evolution of the PIP through changes introduced by a range of stakeholders—the government, the GEF/Bank, and local villagers.

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Learning About Participatory Planning

At first glance, I thought that PIP seemed too unstructured and unprogrammed. The GEF/Bank was concerned that project preparation would be delayed by such early, broad-based participation of such diverse sectors as village NGOs, university researchers near the site, and local leaders.

When I met with the project's first task manager, Richard Cambridge (SA2DR), he admitted being nervous about the PIP process' outcomes but, together with colleagues Malcolm Jansen (ASTEN) and Ian Hill (SA3AG), he was proud of how much the MOEF had already accomplished through consultation with the village groups during the project's first phase of site selection.

The Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), a national NGO and coordinator of the PIP process at each park site, took the lead in the next two phases of preparation: data gathering and project design. Considering the number of tribal groups and languages present in just the eight primary project sites, the PIP is no small task. The PIP process will also include residents of protected area's buffer zones since (as the data collection phase has pointed out) conservation of protected areas cannot be considered in isolation.

On my first trip to India, I met two very strong proponents of the PIP process, K.S. Singh, one of the grandfathers of Indian anthropology, and Shekhar Singh, the national coordinator of the Ecodevelopment Project. The first Mr. Singh, author of some of India's most important ethnologic studies, has identified over 2,000 tribal groups among indigenous peoples in India. He has the job of ensuring that the people who go to the field know the local language, customs and backgrounds of the affected groups.

Urali tribesmen in Venchivayal Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala, India.
Photo by Maria C. J. Cruz

I found Mr. Shekhar Singh's view of the PIP to be fascinating and feel sure his vision will be key to PIP's outcomes. He assumed the task of ensuring that all the data collection was done in collaboration with the people living in and around the protected areas themselves.

He described the process to me with pride and excitement. For data gathering, a sense of ownership of the project by local people was promoted through a series of village meetings, some of them were held prior to data collection. IIPA recommended small-scale investments in each village (e.g., village well, health center) to create viable "entry points" with the local groups. Mr. Singh argued that people would be willing to share information only after their confidence had been gained by proving their village had something real to gain from participation.

To encourage participation in project design, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools were used to facilitate communications and to build consensus. For example, in four sites, mapping of conservation core areas helped in identifying options for redefining park boundaries. In another site, time charts identified which livelihood practices interfered with breeding and migratory movements of animals. However, Mr. Shekhar Singh pointed out, it was not easy to conduct PRA training in many sites, especially among state and park officials and NGOs who were unfamilar with the techniques.

We walked as we talked, Mr. Shekhar Singh and I, and he frequently interrupted our discussion with a rapid ecological survey of plants, birds and other animals. Our conversation lasted for more than three hours, and covered the PIP process and techniques (the social maps, lists of issues identified by villagers, pictures of village meetings). Eventually, politeness required me to leave him alone. But I found that I still wanted to learn more and I realized this was the essence of the PIP process.

Before we parted company, however, he asked what I thought about PIP and ecodevelopment and whether or not this approach would work. I recall telling him that we had tried, in our offices in

Washington, D.C., to capture what he had just said in a set of "guidelines" for our task managers (see *Incorporated Social Assessment and Participation in Biodiversity Conservation Projects*, GEF/Bank 1994). He smiled and said politely, "Guidelines are guidelines." He did concede that perhaps what they had done with PIP may be helpful for improving the guidelines.

Walking, talking, listening and wondering whether or not the process is working may actually be the underlying guidelines for participation.

PIP Outcomes

IIPA's first report on the residents' assessments of issues surrounding the ecodevelopment and biodiversity conservation is now completed. It describes about 10 key issues for each park and sets out strategies for their resolution. The project strongly promotes environmental protection by supporting peoples' livelihoods, traditional lifestyles and other needs, especially in sites occupied by indigenous peoples.

Obviously the solutions to ecodevelopment and biodiversity conservation will not come in a single investment package but rather as part of a long-term, sustained effort involving both the areas' residents and the government. Discussions thus far have made it clear that government authorities and park residents cannot conserve the protected areas alone, that links must be established with villagers living outside the parks, and that multi-purpose buffer zones must be created.

One issue which must be addressed is the common problem of illegal poachers and grazers inside the protected areas. Together, people have come up with some creative solutions. Many of the grazing animals belong to farmers living outside the protected areas. Villagers inside and outside the protected areas have joined to propose the establishment of fodder lands on wastelands outside the protected areas, or the introduction of stall feeding. They have also made plans to mount joint anti-poaching squads, recognizing their joint interest in conserving the resident fauna.

Most people in parks are also concerned about the conservation of trees, given their dependence on fuelwood and on leaves (used for fodder), on sal seeds (used for medicinal purposes), and Kendu tree bark (for construction). As demand for some products grows outside the protected areas, residents may increase their harvesting of the park forest products and tip the delicate balance that has existed until now in the protected areas. Proposed strategies include a careful monitoring of the park's flora, and cultivation of key crops on lands outside the protected areas.

The problem of natural and man-made hazards—mainly floods and fires—also poses threats to the sustained life of village residents and the protected areas' environments. Organizing residents to help in flood mitigation and fire prevention offers a clear way for them to contribute to the preservation of the environment.

PIP Reviewed

Experience with India's participatory planning for a biodiversity conservation project demonstrates that active involvement of villagers is not only desirable, but necessary. Local people look to outsiders for financial and technical support (rather than direction) and outsiders need the input and collaboration of the local people. Sometimes the issues come down to simple survival. As one park guard told me, "Of course we have to work with the residents. If we don't, they'll kill us."

So far, as a project preparation method, PIP appears to be slow but steady. The project is not going to be resolved with a single, big, flashy investment, but with a series of little advances of NGOs, conservationists, government and park area residents working together.

The initial successes of the India Ecodevelopment Project, financed by the GEF and the Bank, are showing that the people who have lived with their environment and economic problems for years, even generations, know where the roots of a problem lie, and are thus in the best position to design their own programs.

On the Bank's side, the lessons from India seem to have already trickled down (or up). The Bank's pre-appraisal team, under a new task manager, Jessica Mott (SA2AG), is impressively multidisciplinary, looking much like one of IIPA's PIP teams. The team has a checklist of key issues to investigate, but the procedure for verifying and gathering information is open-ended and iterative. When problems are observed in the field, solutions and options are to be jointly discussed with government, IIPA and other sectors.

I have just returned from my second visit to India and my first to project sites. I was pleased to apply what I had learned from Mr. Shekhar Singh about the essence of the PIP process: walk, talk and absorb information, then ask, "What lessons have I learned from the people?"

Thinking back on my meeting with the two Mr. Singhs, though, I have reason to believe that, in this situation at least, real participation seems to supplant any formal guidelines. The PIP process transforms each problem into a component of the solution by involving affected communities at the earliest stage of preparation to become the real planners and designers of the project.