

What does it mean for conservation to be inclusive

by Jesse Hastings - Wednesday, April 19, 2017

In the conservation sector, it has become *de rigueur* to talk about designing conservation and sustainable development initiatives that incorporate the input of stakeholders at all levels, especially those of local communities and indigenous people.

'Participation' and 'Inclusivity' are supposed to bring in new perspectives, create buy-in, reduce non-compliance, promote environmental stewardship, and help to construct pathways towards alternative livelihoods that reduce reliance on natural resources.

However, actions have not always matched words. For example, the 'fences and fines' approach to protected areas (PA) – keeping local and indigenous people out and sometimes displacing them from their ancestral domains and stripping them of their rights – was the dominant approach to PA governance worldwide until the 1970s or later.

While the discourse (and sometimes practice) around protected areas has changed in the decades since, 'fences and fines' still continues in different places, and there have been ongoing critiques that supporting organisations (such as NGOs) are still not doing enough to support local ambitions and indigenous rights. The shift since the early 2000s towards large-scale, science-driven conservation approaches has further given rise to fears that those at the local scale will be marginalised in search of donor-friendly, high impact results.

In Search of Inclusivity

Despite the challenges, there are a plethora of ongoing initiatives at all scales that support inclusive conservation. The list is long, but a couple of examples include:

- The [Locally Managed Marine Area Network](#) works to link up research institutions, NGOs, donors, government agencies, and others with local communities to support and enhance community-based marine resource management throughout the Pacific.
- The [Indigenous peoples' and Community Conservation territories and Areas Consortium](#) operates on multiple continents to support indigenous rights and empower local & indigenous groups to participate in conservation and sustainable development initiatives on their terms.
- The [Sustainable Development Goals](#), particularly Goals 5 (Gender Equality), 14 (Life Below Water), 15 (Life on Land), and 17 (Partnerships for the SDGs), link to and enable inclusive engagement with communities.

But what does it truly mean for conservation to be inclusive of local and indigenous people? Altus Impact believes inclusive conservation includes the following:

A commitment to inclusivity: All supporting organisations, from donor agencies to government departments to IGOs/NGOs partners, should share a vision of productive community engagement and empowerment.

An understanding of the legal, political, and cultural framework: In some countries, the extent of local and indigenous engagement in conservation might be circumscribed due to existing legislation, cultural norms, or historical pathways. An understanding of these contextual factors is necessary before the process begins. Supporting organisations should also have a strong understanding of local and indigenous culture, including a familiarity with any traditional beliefs and resource management practices.

A focus on an inclusive process, not just an outcome: An initiative that focuses on involving local and/or indigenous people will fall on deaf ears if the design is presented to these stakeholders fait accompli. Communities must be involved from conceptualisation through to implementation and monitoring/evaluation, with their needs listened to and balanced fairly against those of others.

Support for equity and rights: Communities are not monolithic entities. Some members or sub-groups may be naturally more empowered than others to engage in conservation processes. Inclusive conservation includes strengthening the voices of traditionally disempowered groups, such as women and youth, as well as ensuring that communities can assert their legal ancestral rights to land and sea space.

Support for good governance: IUCN defines good governance as including legitimacy and voice, direction, performance, accountability, and fairness and rights. Adherence to these principles in designing governance mechanisms should anchor any effort.

Space for Adaptive Learning: Lines of communication between stakeholders at all scales should remain open, with space to make changes as lessons are learned and implementation continues. A solid participative monitoring framework is a key element of this.

How Altus Impact can contribute to inclusive conservation

Altus Impact can help your organization engage with communities and develop an inclusive conservation approach in many ways, including assisting with your:

- *Strategic Planning* so that these plans incorporate the perspectives and feedback of local and indigenous people;
- *Land and Sea Space Mapping* using Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) and Remote Sensing technologies, to provide you an understanding of conflicting land uses and ancestral claims;
- *Policy Analysis* so that you understand how legislation enables or constricts your participatory processes;
- *Socio-economic and Cultural Analysis*, so that you understand the particular local context in which you want to work;
- *Community Consultations and Workshops* to gain the community's perspective and develop joint ideas;
- *Monitoring and Evaluation* to enable adaptive learning, and
- *Communication and Storytelling* to spread the story of your initiative's success through compelling narratives, made in consultation with local and indigenous people.