

# Challenging common myths in protected area management

**Protected areas often aim to improve the wellbeing of local people as well as achieve ecological goals. To date, they have often failed to do so. Can rethinking the widespread assumptions underlying protected areas support more equitable conservation?**

## Key messages

1. It is a widely held myth that the integrity of protected areas is threatened by poor people in the local area. The evidence does not support this assumption.
2. Protected area managers should recognise that conservation activities can affect many aspects of local people's wellbeing, including non-material aspects.
3. Compensation is rarely sufficient to offset the negative impacts that local people may suffer when their access to and use of natural resources is restricted. There should be a shift from one-off compensation to ongoing and adaptive engagement with affected communities.
4. Governance of protected areas must be more equitable, allowing for full and effective participation by and partnership between protected area managers and local communities.
5. Tenure rights can play a vital role in securing local people's rights and incentives to conserve the environment but must be approached sensitively, to ensure that formal tenure processes do not marginalise poor people further.

## Protected areas and human wellbeing

Protected areas (PAs) remain a cornerstone of efforts to conserve biodiversity and ecosystems globally. They are rapidly increasing in size and number. Aichi biodiversity target 11 of the Convention on Biological Diversity<sup>1</sup> calls for 17% of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10% of coastal and marine areas to be protected by 2020.

This is to be accomplished through more formally protected areas as well as other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), including, for example, indigenous and locally managed reserves. In this brief we cover this extended range of management types from strictly protected to sustainable use PAs, and from government-managed to community-managed areas. We include both marine and terrestrial PAs.

PAs can impact local people's lives in a variety of ways. International conservation policy and practice is increasingly considering the localised social impacts of PAs: incorporating broad definitions of human wellbeing, equity and human rights.<sup>2, 3</sup> Understanding the relationship between PAs and wellbeing is essential to support equitable and effective management. However, we find that some of the widespread assumptions relating to the relationship are not based on evidence.



Women's focus group, Lake Mburo National Park, Uganda

Photo credit: Francesca Brooker for ESPA

## Five common myths about local communities and protected areas

### 1) Because poor people are disproportionately dependent on ecosystem services, protected areas are a means to reduce poverty and are inherently pro-poor.

**The evidence is mixed. PAs are only likely to help poor people in the local area if they can still access natural resources within the PAs.**

PAs can play an important role in food security. In Tanzania, areas under community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) did not improve household wealth compared to non-CBNRM areas, but did improve household food security, perhaps due to greater access to PA resources.<sup>4</sup>

While the availability of ecosystem services can act as an important social safety net, preventing people from sinking deeper into poverty, they are seldom a pathway out of poverty.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, when PAs restrict access to ecosystem services such as food, fibre and medicinal plants, they may push poor people deeper into poverty. The poor and most marginalised tend to be most negatively affected by a PA, and the impacts are not only on their economic wellbeing but on their sense of security, autonomy and social relations and cultural practices.

Wealthier people are also reliant on ecosystem services, and may be able to benefit more due to their higher capacity, power and status enabling them to capture resources and opportunities.

- *PA management should ensure that the poor have long-term access to ecosystem services that support human wellbeing, either within the PA or, as a last resort, by creating opportunities outside of the PA.*

### 2) Because poor people are disproportionately dependent on ecosystem services, improving their material wellbeing will reduce pressure on protected areas.

**Although this assumption is the premise of many alternative livelihood projects or integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs), there is little evidence in the scientific literature that increases in material wellbeing are reducing pressure on PAs.**

The poor are often strongly dependent on certain ecosystem services that can limit their livelihood options. For instance, this strong dependency may limit their flexibility to engage in other activities – e.g. if completely reliant on fish, fishers will have limited flexibility to engage in tourism schemes that offer them alternative livelihood sources or incomes, or limit their access to fish. Moreover, such schemes are also

rarely accessible to all groups within communities, due to biases associated with knowledge, age, gender or wealth, which will prevent certain groups from participating.

Alternative livelihood projects often do not address communities' needs, interests or culture. This makes them short-lived and likely to fail. Benefits are often small, giving no incentive to support conservation.

Improving material wellbeing can exacerbate pressure on PAs if incomes earned from alternative livelihood activities are used to invest in activities that threaten PA goals. However, it is not just the poor, but also the wealthy, who create pressure on PAs. For example, wealthier landowners have a higher impact and extract more forest resources from the Nargu Wildlife Sanctuary in India.<sup>6</sup>

- *In developing long-lasting and cost-effective alternative livelihoods programmes, there should be early dialogue with communities so particular activities or schemes introduced match the needs, values, and culture of a particular community.*
- *It is important that PA programmes and interventions do not just focus on the poor, but also recognise the role of the wealthy in resource extraction/creating pressure on PA resources.*

### 3) Unavoidable social costs of protected areas for poor people can be mitigated by providing appropriate compensation.

**The idea that benefits such as jobs and income can compensate for any losses, such as access to resources, is a bedrock of contemporary PA conservation, implemented through a range of mechanisms including PES, ICDPs and compensation for wildlife damage. We found that economic benefits are often important, but they are rarely sufficient.**



A legal wood collector, Lake Mburo National Park, Uganda.  
Photo credit: Francesca Brooker for ESPA



Compensation schemes can be viewed as positive if they are reinforced with greater engagement and commitment beyond the provision of one-off compensatory payments. For example, swift compensation for the predation of livestock in India, facilitated by mobile phone technology, has improved tolerance of wildlife. The compensation programme was combined with other methods to mitigate conflict, including protecting livestock corrals and locating conflict hotspots, which showed authorities' commitment and recognition of the problem.<sup>7, 8</sup>

However, more commonly, compensation is rarely viewed as sufficient by the affected people. It is considered too small, less than the overall costs experienced, and unable to address long-term needs. The form of compensation is often unsuitable. For example, material compensation is not commensurate nor sufficient for loss of life, nor for a cultural loss. There needs to be a better recognition of loss and a process of engagement. Compensating displacement or loss of land with money is also not suitable for the poor who do not have the capacity to use cash compensation effectively where they lose their means of subsistence.

- *Financial compensation is rarely sufficient to offset the costs that local people suffer from human-wildlife conflict or when their access to and use of natural resources is restricted. There should be better recognition of these costs and a shift from one-off compensation to ongoing and adaptive engagement with affected communities.*

#### **4) Participation in protected area governance is a route to sustainable conservation.**

**Participation by affected communities can be linked to positive social and ecological outcomes, especially where there are adaptive, devolved governance or co-management approaches. However, our findings emphasise the need to overcome constraints to full and effective participation.**

Devolved governance can provide greater control and feelings of ownership of PAs even in the absence of substantive material benefits.<sup>9</sup>

Participation that is superficial or tokenistic, and purely a means to satisfy donor requirements, will do little to overcome power asymmetries as required to genuinely include communities in democratic governance, and create little incentive to conserve PA resources.

Barriers preventing participation include costs in terms of time and resources for communities, so that partnership-building between conservation agencies and local stakeholders that shares costs and benefits may be the best approach. Poverty, gender and other axes of social difference can constrain participation,

unless participatory processes are inclusive and care is taken to engage all groups.

Overall, no one governance type can explain social or ecological outcomes, but inequitable decision-making processes and elite capture are common concerns even under co-management approaches.<sup>10</sup>

- *Participation in PA decision-making must be meaningful. Affected stakeholders must be able to effect change. Moreover, this participation should be ongoing, and should occur during the designation and planning stages of a PA and not just in implementation.*

#### **5) Resource tenure underpins improved conservation outcomes (social and ecological) in and around protected areas.**

**There is increasing recognition in conservation that securing and enforcing rights to land and natural resources can provide people with a stake in their long-term management. However, we found mixed evidence, with possible negative outcomes for the most marginalised.**

Secure tenure of resources can protect access and use rights to resources, improving wellbeing outcomes for those users with tenure. For example, Cambodian PAs provide security of land tenure and forest resource access so that households reliant on non-timber forest products (resin) and with small plots of land improved their poverty status at a greater rate than those outside PAs.<sup>11</sup>

Having the rights to exclude others is important in motivating communities to participate in conservation and giving them control and authority over resources. For example, when farmers lost their traditional rights to exclude others from Soppinabetta forests in India, this led to unsustainable resource extraction and eventually led to farmers selling their land to non-native farmers for monoculture crop plantations.<sup>12</sup>

However, the process of securing tenure may exclude other previously long-term resource users, such as mobile groups. Tenure reform tends to marginalise women, indigenous groups and the poor, especially where collective rights are transferred to individuals, a process which more often benefits men and wealthier, more powerful people at the expense of the poor. In India, forest tenure reform was found to marginalise indigenous women from rights to forest land and resources in village forest reserves as their customary rules were replaced by new legal institutions that benefited men.<sup>13</sup>

Where rights to resources are overlapping and fuzzy – such as when the state retains control over the most valuable resource, but other resources are communally owned – this can cause conflict, and restrict local resource use, resulting in negative impacts.

## Credit

This Policy and Practice Brief was written by Claire Bedelian and Emily Woodhouse (University College London). They are grateful for contributions from the project working group: Kate Schreckenberg, Neil Dawson, Katherine Homewood, Adrian Martin, Julia Jones, Nicole Gross-Camp, Neil Burgess, Elisa Morgera, and Paul Barnes. The briefing is based on a synthesis of the evidence from 100 of the latest peer-reviewed papers on the social outcomes of protected areas by the *Issues and Myths in Protected Area Conservation: Tradeoffs and Synergies* (IMPACTS) project. In addition, it draws upon 25 interviews with protected area researchers and practitioners, who bring insights of practical experience in the field.

## About the ESPA Programme

ESPA is a global development research programme established in 2009 with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESPA is one of the most comprehensive research programmes exploring the linkages between ecosystem services and human wellbeing. ESPA aims to provide new worldclass research evidence demonstrating how ecosystem services can reduce poverty and enhance wellbeing for the world's poor.

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[support@espa.ac.uk](mailto:support@espa.ac.uk)

- *In securing tenure over land or resources, it is crucial to understand the existing system of rights of different stakeholders to resources, including both customary and statutory rights, to avoid rights or access to resources being lost. Tenure reform needs to pay particular attention to marginalised or vulnerable groups such as women, indigenous and mobile groups.*

## Summary

Many of the underlying assumptions about how protected areas relate to poverty are not borne out by the evidence. More equitable and effective conservation outcomes will be achieved if PA managers consider how costs and benefits are distributed among different stakeholders, and if they support inclusive participation and recognise local rights and values.

## Endnotes

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