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## CHAPTER 8

### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING AND ACTION FOR CONSERVATION ON THE QINGHAI-TIBET PLATEAU

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#### ABSTRACT

Some governmental agencies and experts have revisited the idea of local people acting as stewards for an ecologically sensitive area. In response, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) began a planning exercise involving the many stakeholders who influence a grasslands ecosystem in large, remote township in Qinghai that is largely inhabited by nomadic herders. The goal was to find a workable model for conservation of biodiversity on the Tibetan Plateau and test whether local people could be empowered to be an effective force for conservation there. The result was a *Collaborative Management Plan for Conservation of Biodiversity and Community Livelihoods of the Suojia Area*. The project also provided institutional capacity building and training to support the management of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve through creation and training of local Environmental Monitoring Groups supervised by a grass-roots NGO, the Upper Yangtze Organization (UYO). Through the planning process and subsequent implementation, UYO, who represented local communities, was recognized as an effective force for environmental conservation by governmental agencies.

**Key Words:** Community planning, Qinghai, Tibet plateau, training, threatened species, Upper Yangtze Organization.

#### INTRODUCTION

Local people may play an important role as stewards for ecologically sensitive areas. In an effort to link local people with the stewardship of the fragile alpine grasslands of the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) initiated a project designed to involve the many stakeholders in this region. The goal was to find a workable model for

conservation of biodiversity on the plateau, and to test whether local people could be empowered to be an effective force for conservation there.

The project was located in Suojia Township of Zhiduo County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, China. The entire township is within the Sanjiangyuan region, which means the three rivers source, referring to the Yangtze, Yellow and Mekong Rivers, all of which arise from this region of southern Qinghai. The Sanjiangyuan region has a strategically important role in China's Great Western Development Programme. According to the Programme plan, development there should not only create a quality natural environment for sustainable economic development, but also improve the eco-security of southeast Asia and China.

Wildlife present in the region included frigid-zone species, plateau alpine species and a few species that are widespread in the temperate zone of Eurasia. Surveys recorded 5 orders, 11 families and 23 species of mammals; 12 orders, 22 families and 45 species of birds; 1 order, 2 families and 2 species of amphibians; and one species of reptile (Mallon 2004). Eight nationally first-class protected animals were confirmed in the area, including Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*), Wild Ass (*Equus kiang*), Wild Yak (*Bos grunniens*), Tibetan Antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*), White-lipped Deer (*Przewalskium albirostris*), Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) and Black-necked Crane (*Grus nigricollis*), and also 12 second-class protected animals. Three confirmed species from the area, Snow Leopard, Tibetan Antelope and Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*), are listed as globally Endangered in the IUCN Red List (IUCN, 2004); four are listed as globally Vulnerable (White-lipped Deer; Tibetan Argali, *Ovis ammon hodgsoni*; Wild Yak; and Black-necked Crane); and two are listed as globally Near Threatened (Alpine Musk Deer, *Moschus chrysogaster*; Eurasian Lynx *Lynx lynx*). Other species of interest include Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*), Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*), Tibetan Gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*) and Pallas' Cat (*Felis manul*).

Among the various stakeholder groups, local herders are clearly the primary stakeholders, as they depend on natural resources of the grasslands for their livelihoods and directly affect local biodiversity and wildlife protection. Local Tibetans engage in a way of life and production for subsistence that involves nomadic herding of yak and sheep across large areas of grassland and alpine steppe.

Although never entirely isolated from the outside world, the traditional nomadic way of life has been carried on in the region for at least several hundred years (Ekvall, 1968; Goldstein and Beal, 1990; Miller, 1998). However, traditional practices are now changing rapidly. The ideology of development that underlies the official scheme of social and economic policies for the region is based on the assumption that the traditional Tibetan way of life and production (nomadic pastoralism) is backward or underdeveloped. This view holds that progress toward a higher stage of social development needs to be made. Therefore government policies have encouraged local people to change their habits and patterns of consumption, and to adopt permanent housing. Other changes seem to reflect widespread acceptance of cultural influences from outside for reasons of convenience, efficiency or fashion, such as riding motorcycles, and

wearing fashionable store-bought clothes (the latter two of which are more common among the younger generations). These cultural changes also raise household expenditure, indirectly resulting in pressure for increased exploitation of the natural resources as increasing numbers of animals are kept. The combination of decreased mobility of herds and increased stocking densities has led to degeneration of the grasslands from over-stocking on fragile pastures in some areas. With development on the Plateau, especially transportation improvements, the disturbance from activities from people from outside the area is also increasing, and this represents a great threat to wildlife, especially due to hunting from outside.

Despite these changes, the Tibetans in the area believe that their traditional way of life and production can be harmonious with the existence of wildlife and habitats. The local practices and relevant knowledge and culture are the embodiment of social and cultural adaptation of the Tibetans to their specific environment, which have been formed and sustained over thousands of years. The primary type of natural resource exploitation is the utilization of pasture, and due to the large land area and low human population density in this area, pasture is plentiful. In addition, the local culture is conducive to community-based conservation. Local herders believe that the protection of pasture will benefit their livestock, ensuring plenty of grazing. Hunting by local people occurred in the past (Ekvall, 1968, Zhaxi Duojie, pers. com.), but it is now rare, largely because of cultural and religious beliefs.

For these reasons, and because the area to be protected is huge and remote, community-based conservation is one effective choice for wildlife protection on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Community-based conservation is based on the premise that each herder can be actively and effectively involved in conservation.

## **METHODS**

### **Overview**

During the first two years of the project (2001 to 2003), extensive baseline information was collected on vegetation types, habitat condition, and wildlife abundance during over 70 days of field surveys. Baseline socioeconomic data and a sample of attitudes were collected through interviews in the project area during the two months of fieldwork in November 2001 and July 2002. Most interviews were conducted in the homes of herders on site, but some also took place in government offices at the township, county, prefecture and provincial level. Throughout the three years of the project and after (2003 to 2005), the process of collaborative planning and capacity building for grass-roots NGOs and local community associations has been documented.

### **Field survey**

A series of field expeditions were carried out to collect the bulk of the biological and socio-economic data. A short preliminary field visit of ten days (Xining to the study area and

return) was made in November 2001 by a joint FFI, Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) and UYO team, but adverse weather limited the time spent in the Project Area. A subsequent expedition was carried out between 5 July and 21 August 2002, lasting seven weeks in the field. A final evaluation mission in December 2003 involved 15 days in the region. Most parts of the Project Area and all five local protected areas were visited during the course of the field work. Wildlife surveys and assessment of habitats, vegetation communities, and rangeland condition were also carried out in other areas. Socio-economic surveys were conducted out in three parts of the Project Area. Formal meetings were held with UYO and relevant government agencies at the beginning and end of each field trip to collect information and discuss results. Additional interviews and desktop research work related to the project was carried out in Xining, Beijing and the UK.

These extensive baseline surveys supplied basic information to track future changes and impacts of development and conservation interventions. They also provided a basis for future comparisons of the impacts of the community-based approach adopted here with those of alternative approaches adopted in nearby areas.

### **The process of multiple stakeholders' collaborative planning**

The participation of communities in natural resource management and conservation was a new approach in the project area. Moderate interference and effective conservation could be looked on as part of the natural system, but excessive interference often caused man-made damage. However, many stakeholders with many agendas all contribute to the management of the plateau grasslands. The objective of producing a "co-management plan" was used as an incentive to bring all of these stakeholders together to discuss issues related to environment and development. In accordance with local traditional conventions and religious beliefs, the co-management planning process also aimed to encourage local stakeholders, both in government and outside of it, to commit themselves to biodiversity conservation. The planning process was also a vehicle to build public and government awareness of the value of biodiversity and threats to its existence.

The stated goals for the co-management plan were to facilitate natural processes; to set up a management system consisting of management organizations and community associations; to encourage local people to actively participate in management of natural resources and wildlife protection; to control and alleviate the deterioration of the environment and degradation of natural resources in this area; to recover damaged ecosystems; to realize the sustainable use of natural resources; to develop Suojia into a pilot area for biodiversity and ecological conservation in Qinghai Province; and to share its experience with other districts in the headwaters region of the three great rivers.

Issues to be considered in the plan were outlined after extensive discussions in a facilitated workshop that lasted three days. Representatives of the provincial environmental protection bureau, forestry bureau and animal husbandry bureau, senior staff of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve, local and foreign scientists familiar with the area, and representatives of local

and international NGOs active in the area were brought together with members of the NGO Upper Yangtze Organization, who represented local herder communities. Other international and local NGOs also participated. Three trilingual translators were provided to facilitate communications, so that herder representatives could use their native dialect (Yushu Kham) throughout the proceedings.

The participants discussed threats to the environment in the project area, and proposed actions that they felt were necessary to deal with these threats and to promote local development. The text of the plan was then drafted in a second workshop, based on these discussions and on additional input from the participants. This draft text was then reviewed by all the offices, agencies and NGOs involved. A final workshop provided an opportunity for additional discussions between the participants and for additional revisions. Finally, the plan was formally distributed to various government agencies for comment and approval.

## **Training**

Throughout the project, training was organized in a range of subjects including biodiversity issues and conservation, practical management for people responsible for local PAs and rangeland management and effects of grazing for local herders. Training on conservation project management, including project planning and financial management, was supplied to the UYO and other local NGOs.

Materials were prepared on the biodiversity, habitat and methodology appropriate for the project area and translated into Chinese. Field and classroom training sessions were organized during the November 2001 (7 trainees) and the 2002 summer field expeditions (5 trainees). Formal and informal training sessions on a range of topics were organised for the field survey team, members of UYO, Suojia EPC, and local herdsmen. More than 40 people received some basic training in general topics in this way, including an introduction to biodiversity conservation, observational skills and note-taking, basic ecology of focal species, field identification of species occurring in the Project Area, use of telescope and Global Positioning System (GPS), and rangeland ecology. More in-depth sessions covered sign surveys and identification of tracks, basic survey and census techniques, habitat assessment and plant identification, and management of local protected areas. Workshops in the Snow Leopard LPA (Local Protected Area) demonstrated snow leopard sign survey methodology, standard Snow Leopard Information Management System (SLIMS) transects, and methods of distinguishing wolf and snow leopard kills. A second workshop extended this training to herder associations established to protect snow leopard in other areas of the project. A formal classroom session was organised in the Black-Necked Crane LPA for five local herdsmen and members of the EPC with responsibility for monitoring the cranes, and two members of UYO. This covered the ecology of black-necked cranes, census and monitoring, use of telescope, and advice on management.

Much of the training delivered by the project was based on participation in workshops, with practical learning by doing between them. These included:

- Project Planning Workshop, March 2002
- Workshop on Progress Research and Survey Topics: June 2002
- Field Trip and Training Workshop: July-September 2002.
- Workshop for Stakeholder and Problem Analysis: January 2003
- Workshop to Compile Co-Management Plan: March 2003
- Workshop to evaluate and revise the Co-management Plan February 2004

A final training was provided to 24 trainees comprising members of UYO and three other local grass-roots NGOs through a five day training course on Conservation Project Management for NGOs, delivered by three FFI staff and an additional foreign expert, in Jiegu, Yushu, in February 2004. Topics included analysis of ecological monitoring data; problem analysis and selection of objectives; design of implementation plans and log frame analysis; budgeting; and donor relations.

## **RESULTS**

### **Impacts on Community Attitudes and Actions**

Through the actions of the community NGO, UYO, many new conservation initiatives were begun. A major achievement has been the creation of five Local Protected Areas (LPA), for Snow Leopard, Tibetan Antelope, Tibetan Wild Ass, Black-necked Crane, and an important wetland respectively. UYO introduced the concept of Local Protected Areas to the region as early as 1998, following interactions with a Canadian NGO, Plateau Perspectives (Foggin, 2000). With the help of this project, boundaries were marked at the main intersections and regular monitoring work was begun. Local communities also founded local patrolling groups for each Local Protected Area and began regular monitoring of wildlife, combined with their daily activities such as tending grazing herds. Some of these groups received specific training on wildlife monitoring, such as use of SLIMS. Basic monitoring information is now regularly collected by patrolling groups at three of the Local Protected Areas.

Through the process of implementation of projects, awareness of the local people was also improved, and conservation now receives a good response from both herders and the broader community of local herders. Around the Snow Leopard LPA, local people now believe that the reason why Snow Leopards attacked livestock is that herders had invaded the animal's original habitat and that herders should leave more space for wildlife. To compensate for the loss of grazing lands, local people are making handcrafts, which are beginning to be sold in larger cities such as Shanghai. An NGO from Shanghai is helping a local herder organization with this activity, and with an education program. Other achievements include adoption of local village-level regulations and local contracts for biodiversity conservation. Environmental education has begun at Moqu Primary School, which is adjacent to Snow Leopard habitat. Local communities set up an annual Day for Black-necked Crane on 15 April, for Snow Leopard on 15 June and for Wild Ass on 15 August. On the first ever Snow Leopard festival,

held in conjunction with the large annual Children's Day festival, local children performed songs, dances and an opera about Snow Leopard conservation. The event gave the children a chance to educate their parents about the importance of not shooting the leopards even if they attack livestock, and of not hunting the leopards' prey.

UYO succeeded in an application for funds from IUCN-Netherlands to protect the Banyong Wetland (also known as Lirin Tsobjia). Many species of birds use this Wetland LPA, including the globally Vulnerable Black-necked Crane. Local herders have agreed to prohibit dogs from entering the bird's breeding areas. More stakeholders have become involved in this project, such as Gongsa Monastery, the largest monastery within Zhiduo County, and the Suojia Township government. UYO decided to construct a watchtower to assist with monitoring at the site. In the end, the watch tower was designed in the form of a modified Tibetan sacred white stupa and came to be the official UYO-Suojia Township Government-Gongsa Monastery-Bangyong Wetland Monitoring Group Co-Protection Station. Around the Banyong Wetland, local communities choose eco-tourism as an alternative income source to compensate for the loss of grazing lands. Two groups of tourists had already visited this area by the end of 2005.

The dedication and work of the UYO and the communities grew from Tibetan traditional conservation beliefs, such as those based in religion, and their interest in helping to create community-based conservation groups, that work closely with different stakeholders, such as government agencies and local monasteries. Although project funding has finished, conservation activities are still going on with support raised by the UYO from new donors. Even without support from outside, local communities continue their tradition-based conservation activities.

### **Impacts on Relationships with Government Agencies**

At the launch of the project, FFI and UYO cooperated directly with the Qinghai Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau (QEPB) and its sister NGO, the Qinghai River Source and Environmental Protection Organization. QEPB had previous experience in coordinating among different government agencies. During the project, QEPB helped the multiple stakeholders become aware of this project and arranged for their participation, organizing training courses and workshops. QEPB, however, also expressed the opinion that Suojia Township was too remote to reach and the conditions there too difficult for rapid progress. For this reason, FFI came to work more directly with the local NGO, UYO, during the course of the three years of the project and after.

Qinghai Provincial Forestry Bureau (QFPD) participated in the project from the beginning because of its responsibility for wildlife conservation, and gave their support. As a first step, QFPD attended project workshops as one of many stakeholders, actively participating in a stakeholder analysis workshop and the Suojia co-management plan evaluation workshop. QFPD later came to be a key stakeholder after Sanjingyuan National Nature Reserve was set up (see below).

Local village and township government had a much closer relationship with communities than provincial agencies, and they knew the situation there well. Some government officials were also UYO members, which greatly facilitated local progress.

The strong religious traditions of the Suojia people also gave a stable foundation and positive attitude towards nature and biodiversity that the project came to rely on. The Suojia co-management plan was consistent with Buddhist teachings, so the project quickly got the support from local monasteries and monks.

After the project was begun, plans for establishment of the huge Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve were announced. Government planning for the reserve coincided with the latter half of the co-management process under the project. One of the main objectives of the new nature reserve was to alleviate environmental deterioration in the region.

On 2 February 2002, as the project was coming to a close, the State Forest Administration issued official document No 31 to the Qinghai government about considering establishment of Qinghai Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve. The nature reserve is located in southern part of Qinghai province with an area of 152,300 km<sup>2</sup>. It is the second largest nature reserve in China, as well as containing one of the highest altitude natural wetlands in the world. Sanjiangyuan means Three Great Rivers Source, referring to the origins of the Yellow, the Yangtze and the Mekong Rivers. The nature reserve is also a region with high biodiversity value, hosting globally significant populations of more than 70 kinds of threatened wildlife. The reserve was designed to protect the most sensitive ecosystems within the three river source area. Disruptions of ecosystem integrity in this area could cause problems for sustainable development downstream. The purpose of setting up Sanjiangyuan nature reserve was to protect and renew the natural ecosystem in the source area, to maintain and enhance the headwaters' ability for self-regulation, and to conserve biodiversity. The protected area was divided into 18 core zones with a total area of 31,218 km<sup>2</sup>, comprising 20.5% of the total protected area. The range of Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve included 69 townships, with a total population of 223,090, the majority of whom are Tibetan.

Some experts had stated publicly that the entire area should be considered unsuitable for human habitation, and initial plans proposed moving the herders out of Suojia and resettling them in town, at great expense. Indeed, resettlement programs have already begun in nearby townships. As a result of this project, however, the residents of Suojia Township were able to bring to the attention of government experts their commitment to environmental protection and wildlife conservation. Through the planning process, UYO came to be recognized as an effective force for environmental conservation. Currently no obvious irresolvable conflict remains between management of the reserve and community goals. Although part of Suojia Township belongs to the core zone of the nature reserve, the Master Plan for the nature reserve does not call for relocation of the herders of Suojia. This is reportedly a direct result of the project activities, which introduced government experts to the collaborative management concept and the reality of community-managed Local Protected Areas.

Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve authorities expressed great interest in this project and took an active role in the planning process. Community co-management is being accepted as an effective conservation strategy by more and more nature reserves in China. In addition, Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve, being a new nature reserve, has few staff or resources to protect such a huge area. Since the ecological integrity of the Sanjiangyuan region is considered very important, the state pays close attention to the issue. From discussions with senior staff of the Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve, we knew that they were worried about how to protect this huge area effectively under the current condition of lack of staff and operational budget. They expressed the hope that the Suojia project could give them a good model for an effective approach. Community co-management is now accepted by Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve as one of the main management approaches. Reserve staff have asked FFI to introduce the Suojia model to neighboring townships.

## **DISCUSSION**

National, provincial and local government agencies, in line with central government policy, all recognize the significance of biodiversity protection, and are aware of the seriousness of the environmental issues that confront both their society and the rest of the world. Therefore the administrations and their departments generally have a positive attitude towards any aspect of environmental protection. However, there is often a great gap between government policy and on-the-ground implementation in China. How can goals for environmental protection, wildlife conservation and sustainable development be achieved in the context of a vast remote area inhabited by mobile herders who rely on natural resources for their livelihoods?

In the past, people and communities within or bordering nature reserves were considered a threat to biodiversity in China. Co-management had become a commonplace term in discussions of Chinese nature reserve management. The *Guidelines of Community-based Natural Resources Co-management in Nature Reserves* prepared by the Department of Wildlife Conservation, State Forestry Administration, defines co-management as “the process for sharing decision-making, implementation and evaluation of nature reserve management programs” (State Forestry Agency Department of Wildlife Conservation, 2002).

The factors influencing decision-making by local herders come from several directions. One is government policy, especially when it poses threats to their livelihoods. Numerous authorities make policies that have a direct socio-economic impacts on local herders, which in turn affects their actions and ultimately affects the local environment. Religion also has a strong impact on local herders. An incentive for conservation to local herders were their beliefs that rangeland was vital to their livelihood and Tibetan Buddhism religion against killing living beings.

Initially, the project designed and provided capacity building training for local herders, but they did not understand the value or accept much of this. Some herders expressed the view that foreigners were only interested in research. The Suojia co-management planning process

included activities to solve local herders' problems. It thus built up their trust. While local herders were sympathetic to wildlife conservation, they were also interested in improving their living standards, so discussions of conservation had to be coordinated with discussions of livelihoods development.

After the co-management planning, UYO also accepted capacity building activities much more easily and more effectively. They used the new concepts and knowledge in their work and soon made progress, especially in raising support for their own conservation projects and in the subsequent implementation.

The project has benefited the local herder community in Suojia in an entirely unexpected way. During the project period, the entire Township was placed in the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve, and a Master Plan was developed by the province for the region. The Master Plan calls for moving many nomadic herder communities out of remote areas now in the Core Zone of the new protected area, some into new urban centres, in line with a general government policy of "ecological migration" and depopulation of nature reserve core areas. We interviewed residents of neighboring Qumolai Township about the proposed move. While some young people reported that they look forward to relocation, many older residents expressed concern about their ability to adapt to an urban life-style. The abolishment of herder relocation in Suojia was the first output that herders received from co-management.

This project was conceived in part as an experiment to determine whether multi-stakeholder planning and community-based conservation provide an effective model for conservation on the Tibetan plateau. The work of UYO and the communities demonstrated that local communities can be a major conservation force rather than a negative influence. Future comparisons should be made with other areas of the plateau where baseline data has also been collected but where different approaches to conservation are being adopted. In this way we can get beyond the rhetoric and theoretical considerations to determine what is actually effective toward achieving sustainable on-the-ground results for conservation while retaining equity and justice in implementation.

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