

Engaging Local Communities in World Heritage Sites: Experience from the Community Management for Protected Areas Program

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Introduction

FOR THE PAST DECADE, THE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED AREAS CONSERVATION Project (COMPACT) has been testing an innovative model for engaging communities in conservation. An initiative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)/Global Environmental Facility (GEF) Small Grants Program, COMPACT is working with communities near current and proposed UNESCO world heritage sites in nine developing countries. Through extensive on-the-ground experience and a participatory methodology that takes a common systematic approach to all of the participating sites, COMPACT is demonstrating that community-based initiatives can significantly increase the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation in globally significant protected areas while helping to improve the livelihoods of local people. This paper presents the experience of COMPACT globally and in two countries: Tanzania and Mexico.

The COMPACT model at the global level

COMPACT is a joint initiative of the Small Grants Program (SGP), the United Nations Foundation, and other founding partners, including the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Since its creation after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the SGP now operates in over 120 countries around the world providing small grants averaging \$25,000 to a wide range of civil society organizations (non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, as well as directly with

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indigenous peoples). Over almost a twenty year period, the SGP has approved 13,500 small grants for biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, combating land degradation, protecting international waters, and eliminating persistent organic pollutants, totaling approximately \$400 million from the Global Environmental Facility, leveraging \$500 million more in third party cash and in-kind co-financing.

COMPACT was launched as an integral element of the SGP in 2000 with a fifteen-year vision of supporting community empowerment and sustainability for selected natural UNESCO world heritage sites, and overlapping biosphere reserves, recognized for their outstanding universal value. With an emphasis on “complementing and adding value to existing conservation programs,” COMPACT has replicated the successful national model of the SGP by providing small grants to support clusters of community-based activities aiming to strengthen biodiversity conservation in and around the target protected areas. Now in its second phase of work, COMPACT focuses on eight globally significant protected areas (including one trans-boundary site), all of which are either current or proposed world heritage sites. These COMPACT sites are the following:

- Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, Belize
- Morne Trois Pitons National Park, Dominica
- Mount Kenya National Park, Kenya
- Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, Mexico
- Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, Philippines
- Mount Kilimanjaro National Park, Tanzania
- The Djoudj-Djawaling Transboundary Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site, Senegal and Mauritania
- A cluster of five protected areas in South-West Madagascar anticipating World Heritage listing between 2010 and 2012

Working across sometimes quite large geographic areas, COMPACT takes a landscape approach—one based on supporting local communities in their stewardship of protected areas and the broader landscape/seascape (Brown, Mitchell, and Beresford 2005). Refined over a decade of work, COMPACT’s methodology is designed to pilot the landscape approach in a wide range of ecological and socio-economic situations. Rooted in a common systematic approach, this methodology is also highly participatory in nature, seeking to engage local people and other stakeholders in consultation throughout the process (Brown, Currea, and Hay-Edie 2010).

The COMPACT methodology relies on three closely linked elements: a *baseline assessment*, which serves as the foundation for the COMPACT *conceptual model* and *site strategy* in that particular COMPACT country. This approach was designed to provide flexibility to local decision-makers while ensuring rigor, so the overall goals of the conservation of globally significant biodiversity remain clearly in focus. This first stage of the process guides the grant-giving program in the landscape surrounding the world heritage site, while providing the basis for future *monitoring* and *evaluation* (SGP 2004).

The case of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania

Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania is a UNESCO World Heritage Site designated in 1987. At 5,895 m, Mt. Kilimanjaro is the highest mountain in Africa, and quite often referred to as the “*roof of Africa*.” It is also the world’s largest single standing mountain, and home to a number of rare and endemic flora and fauna species. Despite its location near the equator, its summit is ice-capped, making it a famous tourist destination.

The rich biodiversity on the mountain slopes includes 2,500 plant, 179 bird, and 140 mammal species, and the largest known population of globally threatened Abbot's duiker. The mountain is also a water tower for the surrounding landscape; hydrological flows from the mountain forest provide water for domestic use, irrigation, and livestock. It is also a source of major rivers in Tanzania and Kenya. In Tanzania, one of the main rivers flowing from Mt. Kilimanjaro is a key source of hydro-power.

During the 20 years prior to 2000, conservation of Mt. Kilimanjaro had been based on a formal "policing approach" led by the government. In an attempt to include participatory elements, methods like joint forest management (JFM) and community-based forest management (CBFM) had been tried, with mixed results.

In 2000, in the first phase of COMPACT, local communities participated in a baseline assessment of the socio-economic conditions and conservation status of the world heritage site. During the process, they explained that the policing approach had generally fueled enmity between the communities and the National Park authorities, while threats continued to degrade the mountain resources. During the consultative baseline assessment the communities accurately listed and described the main threats to the mountain ecosystem including forest fires, encroachment for farming, grazing, and human settlements and poaching.

In 2001, the SGP in Tanzania initiated COMPACT in Mt Kilimanjaro, in the belief that conservation cannot be undertaken without the involvement of people closest to the resources. In this regard, COMPACT was an approach that embraced the central role of local communities as stewards of the landscape. In addition, COMPACT focused on establishing new partnerships linking local communities, park management, local authorities, and other stakeholders in stewardship and sustainability.

Since its launch in Tanzania in 1997, the SGP has succeeded in engaging local communities to contribute to the conservation of protected areas in different parts of the country, including the Eastern Arc (one of 25 global biodiversity hotspots), the Rufiji Forest reserve and the Selous Game reserve (which is also a World Heritage Site). In adopting the COMPACT model for Mt. Kilimanjaro, SGP built on its experience with protected areas and its history of work with indigenous peoples, such as the Maasai and Hadzabe.

COMPACT's work in Mt. Kilimanjaro is undertaken by a local coordinator, assisted closely by a multi-stakeholder local consultative board with a non-governmental majority. As in each of the COMPACT sites world-wide, COMPACT Kilimanjaro completed three critical steps during its establishment: a baseline assessment, which provides a snapshot of the site; a conceptual model, which is a diagrammatic tool documenting site level processes, threats, and opportunities; and a site strategy that highlights major threats, opportunities, and priority actions. The site strategy was also used to select viable community-based conservation projects for catalytic support. Following that phase, COMPACT HAS awarded grants of up to \$50,000 to local projects, based on review by the local consultative board, and approval by SGP's multi-stakeholder National Steering Committee.

After a decade of COMPACT work around the Mt. Kilimanjaro World Heritage Site, there has been a significant reduction of human-induced threats such as forest fires and poaching. Another achievement is participating local communities' improved livelihoods, according to a recent study that documented the role of COMPACT-supported activities in poverty reduction through increased food and income (University of Dar es Salaam 2009). Other notable results at Mt. Kilimanjaro through the COMPACT project include the following:

- Local communities are more aware of the importance of conserving the world heritage site on behalf of the global community.
- The landscape approach, linking people's needs and biodiversity conservation, is now

mainstreamed into local-level development planning processes.

- Cultural methods of biodiversity conservation are being revived and strengthened.
- There are improved relations between park authorities and local communities.
- Income-generating activities, agro-forestry, and improved irrigation infrastructure are contributing to the well-being of local communities through provision of environmental services.
- Local community organizations have improved their capacity, and become stronger and more confident.

COMPACT's work in Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, Mexico

Mirroring the experience of the Mt. Kilimanjaro over the last 10 years, COMPACT-Mexico has financed approximately 91 small grants projects in and around the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site within thematic work areas related to the coast, the forest, and the preservation of Mayan culture.

One area of intervention is sustainable fisheries, through a series of inter-linked projects. Based on the successful experience of a fisherman's association in Punta Allen, the *Vigia Chico* Cooperative, lobster fishing sustainable practices (e.g., the use of shades instead of traps, and protection of nursery areas) have been extended to other fishing cooperatives, such as Maria Elena, and Azcorra in nearby Punta Herrero. The experience of the Integrated Association of Lobster Fishermen, CHAKAY, has been extended to three more cooperatives (Banco Chinchorro), linking two biosphere reserves. To help these groups with joint lobster marketing, COMPACT worked with the World Heritage-LEEP program to provide small grants to support lobster selection and packaging, including developing an origin label. In its first year, the cooperatives reached their target of jointly marketing 10 percent of their production.

In a key marine conservation initiative of regional importance, COMPACT worked over the past decade with three fishing cooperatives to protect fish aggregation and spawning zones within the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. In the second stage of the project, these partners are analyzing the potential to create marine protected areas, likely to take the form of fishing "no-take" zones (lasting at least five years), a proposal that is supported by key local fishing cooperatives.

Another thematic area is coastal tourism; Punta Allen is the principal point of attraction for tourism along the coast of Sian Ka'an. Through 10 years of COMPACT project support, four Punta Allen tourism organizations formed the Punta Allen Alliance, in collaboration with protected area authorities and international organizations, such as RARE. This was very important toward avoiding conflicts, and maintaining consistent prices for local tourism services and products (see www.puntaallianza.com/). In the next stage, COMPACT will work with the Punta Allen Alliance to organize a tour guide course for women.

COMPACT also supports four organizations linked to financing the transition from conventional to organic honey production; several organizations supported by COMPACT have successfully obtained organic certification. Currently COMPACT is working with *Flor de Tajonal*, which is leading landscape-level cooperation with various communities in the Mayan region. The next step will be to set up an *apiculture school* to involve young people, especially from local communities, to study the theory and practice of organic beekeeping. At the same time, a process of reforestation will be initiated with native honey plants to boost productivity.

In 2007, COMPACT initiated a carbon capture project in the *Ejido de Felipe Carrillo Puerto* focusing on a 1230 ha area. Called MUCH' KANAN K'AAX, the project has grown and become a pilot project for the entire region. In the next stage, COMPACT will finance bond certification (through the *Plan Vivo* foundation) and will support local REDD+ training and capacity building (see <http://muchkanankaax.com/>).

Since 2008, with the support of the United Nations Foundation and COMPACT, a partnership involving two NGOs and representatives of eight community groups is jointly marketing handicrafts, including items made from wood, seeds, and rattan, as well as embroidery and hammocks, under a common indigenous trademark. All participating groups come from Mayan communities with existing handicraft traditions. Collectively they are marketing their handicrafts under the *Ak Kuxtal* label (see www.kuxtalsiankaan.com/ak-kuxtal.php).

As an “integrating element” across all of the biophysical interventions, COMPACT has also targeted support for an “Academy of Mayan Language and Culture,” assisting in the production of bi-lingual publications, traditional medicines, and other projects.

Discussion

With a decade of experience in diverse settings, COMPACT demonstrates that community-based initiatives and improved livelihoods can produce direct benefits for biodiversity conservation in globally significant protected areas. Elements that make the COMPACT model effective follow:

- *COMPACT takes a landscape approach*, finding constructive ways to work with a diverse range of communities and stakeholders living in and caring for protected areas and the broader landscape. Conservation that links nature, culture, and communities can be most effective in addressing community-induced threats.
- *COMPACT uses a method that is rooted in science*, while being highly participatory, engaging local people and other stakeholders at every stage. COMPACT’s experience with communities in Tanzania and Mexico has shown the value of this approach, and that communities will become actively involved in moving conservation forward, provided they see clear benefits.
- *COMPACT harnesses the power of synergy*, supporting a cluster of activities, including the provision of small grants, capacity-building activities, networking, and marketing support. Each COMPACT program employs a strategic approach to “finding the niche for community-based interventions in the landscape,” and creating synergies among grantees/partners.
- *COMPACT builds on the strengths the GEF Small Grants Program—at the scale of an internationally significant protected area*. It builds on the experience of SGP, and its established track record, sustaining environmental benefits over time through local ownership, accountability, and the crucial role of social capital. A relatively small amount of funding can make a substantial difference in conservation impacts and local livelihoods.
- *COMPACT’s institutional structures are based on principles of sharing power*, recognizing that supporting community-led initiatives requires trust, flexibility, and patience. Transparent processes and broad public participation are key to ensuring community engagement. Good governance is essential to the successful implementation of conservation initiatives.
- *COMPACT’s scalability offers tremendous potential for future initiatives*. In the current target sites, COMPACT’s approach of “keeping your lessons close to the Protected Area,” makes it possible to track progress over time, and build outward from the protected area to local, national, and regional levels. Importantly, this scalability and COMPACT’s experience provides valuable lessons for more effectively engaging communities and protecting landscapes, such as REDD+ planning processes, connectivity corridors, and trans-boundary situations.

Looking ahead

The COMPACT experience is a compelling model within the GEF Small Grants Programme for

how its country operations worldwide can maximize their impact of targeted small grants by using the landscape approach and strategic clustering of activities around in a particular landscape. During the 5th Operational Phase of the SGP (2011-2014), the COMPACT model can help the SGP meet its goals related to conservation of globally significant biodiversity, and ensure expected outcomes, such as *improved sustainability of protected areas and indigenous and community conservation areas through community-based actions*.

COMPACT offers valuable examples of involving communities in world heritage site, and other globally significant protected landscape, preservation. It is also applies to co-management and governance of other kinds of protected areas, as well as Indigenous and Community-Conserved Areas (ICCAs). The COMPACT approach has much to offer the CBD Program of Work on Protected Areas, particularly in community engagement, benefit-sharing, and governance. The experience of COMPACT can help guide new strategies for engaging with and supporting community stewardship of protected areas.

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