

The Role of Cultural Values in the Management and Conservation of Rwenzori and Lake Mburo National Parks in Uganda

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PROTECTED AREAS COVER 12 PERCENT OF THE PLANET AND PLAY VITAL ROLES IN CONSERVING biodiversity. However, many are threatened by anthropogenic impacts. Their failure to deliver promised economic benefits to local communities, and erosion of values associated with the natural world generally, contribute to a lack of popular and political support for protected areas, resulting in inadequate protection in many developing countries. Yet protected areas need support, especially local support, to survive. Different approaches to build constituencies for conservation have attempted to address this challenge, most notably integrated conservation and development initiatives, and education and awareness raising programs. Nevertheless, the attitudes of local communities often remain ambivalent at best, hostile at worst.

This paper shares experiences of a cultural values approach to building support for protected areas. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has piloted the integration of local cultural values into the design and management of two national parks to demonstrate how integrating values of local importance, rather than emphasizing economic and scientific values, can reduce conflicts and increase interest in and support for parks. By re-examining the ideas that underpin contemporary conservation approaches, the project has helped park managers recognize the importance of local values, and helped managers develop activities to integrate local values into protected areas, building local support, and improving management effectiveness.

Introduction

The steady increase in the number and size of protected areas in Africa highlights the role they play in the conservation of biodiversity. But setting aside land to conserve biodiversity requires that other land-uses are sidelined, and other values excluded (Johannessen 2007). Conservation strategies are not fixed, however, and have responded to the growing pressures facing natural resources (Adams et al. 2004). The challenges of growing human populations, increasing habitat conversion, and declining biodiversity strengthened justifications for exclusive protected areas

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that separated people from nature (Adams 2004). This approach, however, has been only partially successful and conservationists, social scientists, policy makers, and the public continue to debate how demands for conservation, economic development, and human rights can be reconciled. How to reconcile scientific and economic perspectives on conservation with culturally determined connections with nature is a growing part of this discussion (UNESCO 2002).

Africa's protected areas have been strongly influenced by the so-called 'Yellowstone Model' of parks as wilderness areas (Adams and Hulme 2001). Though the model has proved effective in reducing species extinction (Hutton et al. 2005), local people living around protected areas have little interest in them, are negative towards them, and, on occasion, actively resist them (Infield 2001; Tumusiime 2006). This is not sustainable, and there is growing local opposition to protected areas (Hutton et al. 2005; Wells and McShane 2004).

Attempts to address this situation have resulted in approaches that emphasize the need to satisfy local economic needs, or at least provide material benefits (Hulme and Murphree 2001). Protected areas are increasingly managed to respond to the socio-economic goals of local communities. However, though community conservation approaches have received significant funding for decades, they have neither met communities' expectations nor adequately addressed questions about the relationships between people and nature. Despite numerous initiatives to integrate conservation and development, share benefits, give access to resources, provide education and awareness, and share decision making, parks continue to attract animosity from local communities.

These community approaches have failed to build local interest in protected areas because they emphasize 'absolute' scientific and economic values at the expense of locally meaningful values (Infield 2002). However, managing protected areas for their local cultural values will build local interest and support for them. Fauna and Flora International (FFI) in partnership with the UWA developed the Culture, Values and Conservation Project to integrate the cultural values of local communities into the management of two national parks (Figure 1).

The Rwenzori Mountains—a sacred landscape

Rwenzori National Park and World Heritage site is rich in biodiversity and endemic species, and an area of great beauty. The mountains are home to the Bakonjo and Baamba peoples, who have occupied these foothills for centuries.

Cultural analysis revealed that the mountains are sacred to these peoples. Sacred sites receive their power from Kitathamba, the God of creation, who lives at the highest level amongst the snow and glaciers, and from his wives, who live in the moorland level below. Mountain ridge communities headed by Ridge Leaders are the basic level of social and ritual organization. The highest level is the King or Omusinga, who receives his authority directly from Kitathamba.

Prayers and sacrifices are made at the sacred sites to maintain harmony between people and the gods, guaranteeing good harvests, ensuring the forests are productive, and avoiding diseases and natural calamities (Stacey 1996).

Use of resources was controlled by Ridge Leaders, the King, and the gods. Violations of established norms would attract serious penalties, even death at the hands of the gods (Biira, Muumuza, and Mugisha 2009). For example, permission to collect medicinal barks in the high montane forest was required from Ridge Leaders, as these forests were within the domain of the gods, and respectful behavior was essential. The collector was required to approach the tree from a single direction, never walk around the tree, and retrace their steps exactly without looking back. Failure to observe these rules would mean treatment using the bark would fail. Other punishment by the gods might follow.

These sacred values and the institutions that mediated interactions between the people and the mountain landscape were not recognized by the park's policies and practices. The mountains



Figure 1. Project pilot sites, Rwenzori Mountains and Lake Mburo National Parks.

were represented as a water-catchment, a tourist destination, a place of rich biodiversity. Though important to conservationists or economists, these values were not meaningful to the resident peoples. The emphasis on economic benefits could not sustain local interest, as the financial incentives were small, and accessing them complex. Resentment of the park and its managers grew. Ironically, the Ridge Leaders, who could have helped manage these conflicts and values that resonated with the people, were undermined and weakened through exclusion.

Lake Mburo: The beautiful land of 'beautiful cows'

Lake Mburo National Park is located in south western Uganda, within the traditional rangelands of the Bahima pastoralists. They call the land Karo Karungi, the Beautiful Land. The Bahima valued the landscape for raising long-horned Ankole cows, their own unique breed. Any other uses, especially farming, were prevented (Infield 2002). The Lake Mburo area was of particular significance as the King, the Omugabe, kept specially selected herds of Enyembwa, or 'beautiful cows,' there (Mugisha and Infield 2009). Bahima have bred Ankole cows for centuries to mirror the beauty of the cows bequeathed to them by their mythical god-like ancestors (Figure 2, Table 1). Owning Ankole cows, which are not highly productive, and breeding them for beauty, is central to Bahima identity (Figure 3).

With the creation of the park, grazing was outlawed, causing conflict between pastoralists and park officials. The landscape became a meaningless wasteland to the Bahima, reserved for hyenas, the ugliest of animals, instead of beautiful cows. Though expressed in terms of conflict over resource access, it was conflicting cultural values that were largely responsible for Bahima forcing their cows into the park, in an effort to reinvest the landscape with meaning (Infield 2002).

Social, economic, and land use changes that began when British imperialist agents demanded Bahima produce surplus milk and ghee to sell, and which speeded up when government poli-



Figure 2. Bahima select cows to retain the horn shape and color of the cows of their ancestors considered to be of great beauty.

Type of characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Appearance	558	79.7
Production	106	15.1
Behaviour	6	0.9
Other	30	4.3
Totals	700	100.0

Table 1. Bahima selection of characteristics during selective breeding of Ankole cows (from Infield 2002).



Figure 3. A young Muhima boy plays with representations of beautiful cows, stripped twigs representing the long white horns and selected beans representing the favored color of beautiful cows.

cies encouraged settlement and intensive farming, have changed the landscape dramatically. Open rangeland now remains only within the park, and breeding cows for beauty has given way to breeding for economic production, and the beautiful cows have almost vanished.

Evaluating project impacts

Following cultural analysis, the project selected key values that linked people to place and nature, and which were important in defining the identity of the different ethnic groups. In Rwenzori National Park sacred values were integrated into the day-to-day management of the park, and access to the sites for rituals and ceremonies agreed upon. In Lake Mbuoro National Park the project focused on the cultural values of the Ankole cow, and the conflict over the meaning of the landscape; a herd of ‘beautiful cows’ was formed and grazed within the park. In both cases the intention was to remove or reduce conflicts between local communities and the parks resulting from conflicting cultural values, and build interest, engagement, and support for the parks by integrating key cultural values into their day-to-day management.

After four years of implementation, people’s knowledge, attitudes and practices towards the parks were investigated to assess project impacts. The review also examined changes in the perceptions, of the communities and their values, amongst park staff. The evaluation used guided discussions with key informants amongst the communities and park staff. Standard questions were generated from indicators designed to evaluate the project (Biira, Muhumuza, and Mugisha 2009).

Community members overwhelmingly reported that recognition of their values and institutions by the park authorities had increased their interest in and support for the parks. They believed that the interactions the communities and park staff now had, that recognized community values, were reducing conflicts and reducing illegal activities inside and outside the parks. Similarly, park managers thought that positive interactions with communities had increased, and were important in helping them understand communities’ behavior, and address illegal activities.

Park staff demonstrated appreciation of local values and traditions, and were able to explain how they contributed to effective management of the parks. Staff at Rwenzori National Park believed that the cultural values approach was strengthening conservation efforts, and that mobilizing the community through Ridge Leaders was increasing support for the park. Interventions to open spiritual sites were improving relationships with communities, enhancing community interest in the park, and creating new tourism opportunities that would benefit both the park and the communities. Allowing access to cultural resources in an organized manner was also expected to increase reverence for the sites, leading to more sustainable resource use and strengthened protection.

Staff at Lake Mburo were more ambivalent about the contribution of the cultural values approach to conservation of the park. They recognized that Ankole cows were unique and important to conserve. They also recognized that Bahima attached great value to them, and that helping to conserve livestock would improve relations with the Bahima. However, they remained concerned about the implications of having livestock within a protected area. Despite these concerns, it was recognized that, if well managed and marketed, the Ankole cow could become a flagship for the park, increasing local and tourism interest. Park guides revealed that the often-cited fear that Ankole cows in the park negatively affected tourism was not substantiated. The reaction of tourists was affected by information provided by the guides. Interestingly, local visitors were more likely to be concerned about the cows in the park, while international visitors are excited by the cows, and keen to take photos and learn about them. In the words of the head guide, “This project will be great for the park. It will give tourists an extra choice. Ankole cows will be another tourism product. Many tourists express interest in cultural tourism, but we do not implement it.”

Lessons learned

People are excited by values they can relate to. For example, talking about the beauty of Ankole cows to Bahima ignites interests which can be related to, and used to support nature conservation. A beautiful cow needs good pastures and waters; Ankole cows create a sense of peace, tranquility, and connection to the environment. Integrating beautiful cows into the park would create fundamental changes to the relationships between the park, the Bahima, and their values.

Discussing cultural values promotes genuine two-way engagement. The interest shown the project in their culture increased confidence amongst communities to discuss how their values can contribute towards conservation. In Rwenzori National Park, discussing sacred sites and their management empowered Ridge Leaders to support conservation goals. The positive attitudes created translate into pro-conservation behavior and practices.

New ideas take time to become established. People and institutions resist change when it counters established organizational norms and cultures. The proposal to integrate Ankole cows into Lake Mburo, for example, was not reviewed and discussed in terms of conservation outcomes, but in relation to UWA and park norms, history, and institutional culture. To side-step this problem, the project focused on the general idea of integrating cultural values rather than the particular idea of having cows in the park.

Building capacity and awareness is a slow process. Training workshops, study visits, mentoring, and exposure to examples and precedents to build understanding and capacity, and result in changes in thinking, take time, within both communities and institutions. Champions of innovation are important. Study tours were found to be most effective at developing new understandings and perspectives. A visit to a conservancy in neighboring Kenya to observe cattle being managed alongside large carnivores, for example, helped challenge the accepted wisdom that livestock and predators could not co-exist. Similarly, community leaders and park staff were inspired by their visit to community-managed sacred forests in Kenya.

Investment is critical. Implementing a cultural values approach is not easy, quick, or cheap. Significant resources and time must be invested to achieve success: it takes time to identify values that underpin people-environment relationships; it takes time to gain the confidence of local people, especially as communities may be highly guarded about cultural issues; it takes time to build understanding, interest, and capacity.

Understanding local culture is important for effective conservation. Not all local values are compatible with conservation. For example, chimpanzee body parts are used by the Bakonjo to cure fractures. Discussions with cultural leaders revealed this, but also revealed that members of one clan has healed fractures without chimpanzee medicine, while members of another clan are

bound to protect chimpanzees, since chimpanzees are their totem. The cultural values approach identified ways to mitigate the impact of local values that conflict with conservation objectives through other cultural values.

Conclusion

Both biological diversity and cultural diversity are essential to human well being, and their loss increases vulnerability to change, locally and globally. Both types of diversity face common threats, including globalization, homogenization, land use change, technological innovation, and the growing separation between people and nature. Efforts to conserve both culture and nature will be strengthened by integration.

Local values are understood and appreciated locally, while scientific, economic, and other foreign or imposed values are not so easily engaged with, especially amongst relatively isolated or traditional communities. Continuing to use the economic worth of nature and biodiversity as the primary justification for protected areas isolates them from values, institutions, and local perceptions of reality that continue to be important in how people define themselves and their relationships to the natural world. Integrating these local values into conservation initiatives helps build the local support and interest that is essential for sustainable conservation, and should be an integral part of the design, planning, and management of protected areas.

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