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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN CONSERVATION
THROUGH STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

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There is growing confirmation worldwide that detailed knowledge of the people whose lives are affected by the creation and management of parks is as important as that of the plant and animal species to be conserved (Stycos and Duarte, 1995). However, many local organizations, both public and private, are still wrestling with the difficulties of finding appropriate and manageable methods that will allow them to learn about these people and to be able to include them in the conservation of protected areas.

One tool that is being used with considerable success in a number of locations is Stakeholder Analysis. Defined as the analysis of the relationships and interactions among the actors and organizations who have a “stake” or “interest” in a specific problem or action to be taken, the actual application of the tool can vary greatly and indeed should be adapted carefully to the needs and abilities of conservation researchers and managers operating in a given area.

Stakeholder analysis was one of a series of participatory socio-environmental field tools used in the applied research of the “Participacion Local en el Manejo de Areas Protegidas” (Local Participation in Protected Area Management) or PALOMAP Study in Ecuador. The PALOMAP Study (1996-1997) focused on the assessment and analysis of the effectiveness of local community participation in the conservation and management of the Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve (RECA Y) located to the immediate northeast of the capital, Quito. Though different applications of stakeholder analysis were applied in various sites selected for the study, it was a particularly useful tool in one community called Papallacta, located in Napo Province, on the Eastern flank of the Andean Cordillera.

Papallacta (or “place of potatoes” in Quichua) is located in the high (3000masl and above), humid “páramo” region of the RECAY and existed as a small potato producing indigenous community several hundred years prior to the establishment of the RECAY.

It occupies a narrow, mountainous strip of land between the RECAY and another ecological reserve, Antisana (REA). The principal road connecting Quito with the northern region of the Amazon passes through the middle of Papallacta.

The population of Papallacta is quite small. According to the 1990 census, the total population was 512 inhabitants. At the time of the field research, we estimated the population at approximately 750 inhabitants or about 125 families. It is the seat of the local parish, the smallest political division in Ecuador. The municipal or cantonal seat is located an hour east by car down the dirt highway, and the provincial seat is in the city of Tena, in the Napo Province of Ecuador’s amazon region, some 4 hours further down the road.

In the mid-eighties, Papallacta was the construction site for Quito’s first major project to extract and transport water for the capital’s urban population from the paramos of the REA and RECAY, and the massive pipes, pools and pumps that now transport the precious liquid to water scarce Quito are a distinctive part of the Papallacta landscape. A second project to augment the existing water flow capacity by adding new source was just getting underway as the PALOMAP study began. Not only is the area transected by water pipes, but the massive pipeline that transports petroleum from the Amazon, cuts through Papallacta as it proceeds to the refineries on the Ecuadorian coast. Just above the town of Papallacta is Termas de Papallacta, a privately owned and operated ecotourism facility focused on the famous thermal water baths which attract as many as 3,000 visitors on weekend days.

For most people, Papallacta is simply just a small town on the way to somewhere else.....the Amazon, the thermal baths, the oil pipeline or the waterworks. Tourists, travelers to Amazon towns further down the road, truckers, business people and development workers pass through Papallacta on the highway, rarely stopping and few people know very much about the town despite its proximity to Quito. The windshield impression is of a quiet place without much going on.

When the PALOMAP team began its work, there was very little secondary information available about Papallacta. We knew that there had been some interaction between conservation entities and community leaders in the past, and that these had generated some conflicts, but we had little else on which to base our work. Our goal was to diagnose the relationships between the community and the natural resources surrounding it, especially those protected by the RECAY. Lacking secondary sources, we decided to approach the task by combining two methods: community mapping and stakeholder analysis. We intentionally combined the two methods because we were interested in a specific geographic space, the area of the RECAY, and we wanted to know not only what organizations exist in the community but where they were located and what geographic relationships they have with the reserve. The major threats to this section of the RECAY

are the advancing pressures of cattle grazing and the interests of public and private entities in the extraction of vital resources (especially water). We felt that understanding these pressures and interests from a social and geographic perspective would be useful in determining the effectiveness of community participation in conservation.

We began our work by mapping the community from the vantage point of a hill above the area. This was done on large sheets of poster paper, using the hood of our vehicle as a table. We engaged community residents passing by in helping us identify the structures we could see below as well as above us. It soon became apparent that there were many more structures representing institutions within the small community than we had imagined. While we continued to add institutions, organizations, or groups to the map, we began a series of interviews with leaders or representatives of each one in order to learn what they do, who participates, and what actions or positions and points of view they hold concerning the reserve and the conservation initiatives underway in the area. This procedure led us to initially identify some 25 different “actors” in the community, which could be divided into those originating from within, such as the local commune which originally legalized the lands conforming the community in 1906 and a local, grassroots conservation organization created by younger residents with support from an international conservation organization; regional public entities such as the schools, municipal entities such as the swimming complex in the middle of town; and provincial representatives such as the *tenente político* who is the legal authority in the community. In addition, we identified those residents conforming local committees for the church, the parish council, clubs, and parents groups for the schools. We learned that there was a distinct separation in the community from “old residents” descended from the founders of the community, and “new” residents who had come into the community during the past 40 years as a result of the different infrastructure projects dealing with electricity (a hydroelectric plant established and operated by a Quito-based missionary organization), oil or water. We began to discern locally observed “social rules” which though unwritten, effectively excluded the “new” residents from involvement in the critical decision-making entities in the community, especially the parish council and the commune leadership. The commune, the key structure representing the “old” residents, effectively controlled the parish council elections and for many years the same individuals have led both in rotations. In addition to these groups residing in the community, we began to identify all of the government and non-governmental (NGO) organizations that were somehow related to the community or activities in the immediate area, but whose agents do not live in the community.

Through the interviews, we learned about the varying perceptions and positions of the resident and non-resident actors, and learned that the conflicts between the “old” and the “new” were deep and complicated, and seemed to preclude the establishment of pathways towards effective participation in conservation activities, especially since these were being channelled to a large extent through the local grassroots NGO, which had run afoul of the commune leadership in the past, resulting in a deep rift that did not allow even communication. New actors, such as those setting up the second phase of the water project were in fact deepening these social divides by negotiating compensations to the

community for the anticipated impacts of the project separately with the individual factions, rather than negotiating openly with the community.

In order to enhance our understanding of these social relations and to see if the residents themselves had ideas for bridging the existing rifts, we organized a community meeting one evening to explain our work and its initial results, and to engage the community in two participatory activities focused on understanding local problems and social relationships. The meeting was attended by some 30 adults and a number of children. Unfortunately, since the local conservation NGO was visibly present, the leadership of the commune did not attend, but other members did, along with a good showing of representatives from the key groups of local and outside actors.

For the first activity, we had transferred the paper map to a large bedsheet and we had placed the various entities operating in the community on the map on small cards of paper. We invited the community to gather around and add new entities we had not identified, and to talk about the relationships of each to the reserve. Having the groups physically and visually located on the sheet helped the community to visualize the situation and several other groups and positions were identified. They then proceeded to identify the critical problems and conflicts of the community by placing round paper circles with red stars on different locations. The discussion and analysis surrounding the activity confirmed and deepened our understanding of the local actors and their relationships to each other and how these in turn are affecting the current and potential relationships with the reserve.

Based on the first activity, which effectively completed our listing of the actors who could be potential “stakeholders” in a specific situation, we proceeded to create such a situation, in order to see how these actors would play out and define their particular “stake”, interest or position. Rather than dealing directly with the current and sensitive problem of the reserve, the water extraction from the reserve and the hostilities between the commune and the NGO, we engaged the group in a role play concerning the fictitious arrival of a representative of a five-star hotel complex wanting to establish an expensive eco-tourism facility in the middle of the town. Rather than having the participants play out their own positions, we assigned them roles, giving each an identity with a stakeholder group that in real life, they did not primarily represent. Playing out a community meeting with the tourism agency provoked the participants to express their perceptions of the positions that the different stakeholders would have on such a proposal. Assigning certain men to play women’s roles added a great deal of humor to the process, and likely contributed to easing tensions and helped the participants to speak openly about the conflicts within the community that such an project would engender. These were directly similar to the current divisions and conflicts being created by the water project and the conservation activities relating to the reserve. Through the exercise, the group identifies a total of 35 actors who could potentially have a stake in any conservation action involving the community.

Subsequent to the community meeting in Papallacta, we placed all of the identified “actors”, both local and external, on circles of paper all the same size, and have used this in conjunction with the sheet map to both present and explore further these relationships and their implications. We have also used it in workshops with conservation organizations to “play out” or conduct an ex-ante analysis of what would be the potential responses of the community to a specific intervention. The understanding of the importance of the social relationships within the community and the conflicts between actors has been articulated into the process of developing the Management Plan for the reserve, and lead to identifying this as the key conservation issue to be resolved in the Papallacta area. As the Management Plan is just now being officially approved, it remains to be seen how this problem will be addressed and what impact it may generate.

For the PALOMAP study team, the experience of working in Papallacta taught us several important lessons.

- The apparent “small size” of a community can hide a larger than anticipated social structure of organizations and actors, all of whom need to be understood in the context of community-based conservation initiatives.
- Doing a stakeholder analysis can provide a conservation organization with an understanding of existing local dynamics, power structures, and social conflicts. Knowing about these can help the conservation organization to identify who to work with, how to avoid unintended biases, how not to aggravate existing conflicts, and in general, how to avoid being “blind-sided” by unanticipated adverse reactions.
- Conducting participatory activities, such as the community meeting described, can create expectations on the part of local actors that the organizers will also be committed to resolving the problems identified. Organizers must be prepared in advance to respond and deal with this appropriately. If possible, responsibility for follow-up action should be identified prior to such activities.
- Finding appropriate mechanisms to deal or manage effectively the kinds of conflicts found in Papallacta is likely beyond the expertise of local conservation organizations and requires new alliances between conservation organizations and conflict management specialists.
- Stakeholder analysis in conservation research can be greatly enhanced by combining it with community mapping and participatory activities such as role plays which promote a greater understanding of the underlying social reasons that create potentially conflictive positions among community stakeholders.