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Community-based conservation in Madagascar, the 'cure-all' solution?

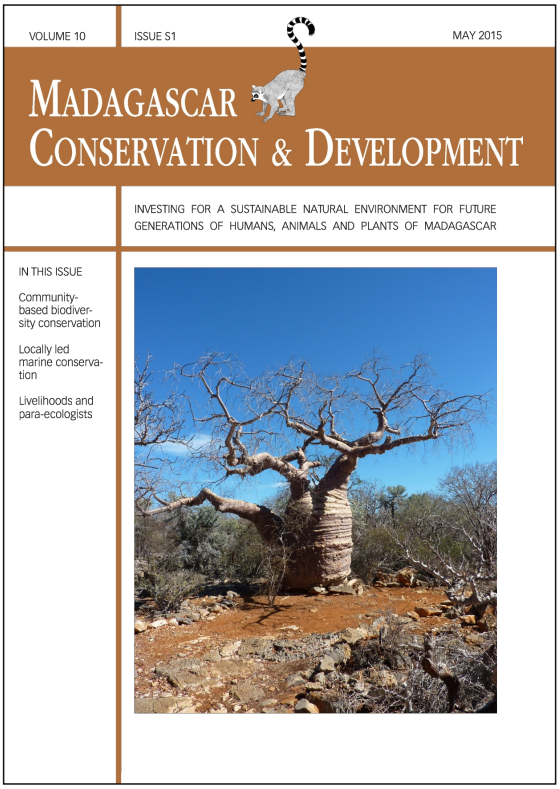
As one of the poorest countries worldwide, Madagascar suffers from severe environmental degradation and an ongoing loss of its unique biodiversity. To promote conservation efforts on the island, lemurs are used as a flagship species to draw attention and funding for conservation. Lemur-based research has indeed helped to draw international and national attention to Madagascar's wildlife and the conservation importance of several sites; the country has received a lot of international conservation and development assistance for several decades (Horning 2008). As most lemurs need large areas of relatively undisturbed forest, lemur conservation means preserving forest ecosystems – with all the species within, as well as the ecosystem functions. However, while new lemur species are still being discovered, these mammals face ever-increasing threats. Today, an alarming 91% of lemur species are considered threatened with extinction, i.e., classified on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as either Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), or Vulnerable (VU) (Schwitzer et al. 2013).

In 2013, some 200 researchers from 21 different countries gathered in Madagascar for the International Prosimian Congress (IPC) to exchange on "How science and policy can pull prosimians back from the brink of extinction". A considerable number of presentations dealt in some way with community-based conservation (CBC) projects. The collection of papers presented in this Special Issue provides a snap-shot of the diverse ways rural communities across Madagascar are engaging in locally-managed conservation efforts, describing advantages, but also problems of the CBC approach.

Community-based conservation is often regarded as a panacea for achieving today's conservation goals. It is assumed to provide win-win solutions, i.e., promote development or livelihood security while assuring conservation at the same time. But is this really the case? CBC is the result of different conservation approaches from the past. Until the 1970s, conservation was preservation-oriented with centralized control and exclusion of local people by denying or restricting their subsistence forest-based activities without due compensation (Mehta and Kellert 1998). The resulting park-people conflicts have weakened long-term biodiversity conservation efforts, but helped to develop the understanding that local stakeholders need to be involved in planning and implementing policies and programs to conserve biodiversity. Today, it is widely acknowledged that conservation initiatives cannot succeed without the support of local populations and without considering their livelihood concerns (Sunderland et al. 2008). CBC became popular in the 1980s, and currently promotes biodiversity management by, for, and with local communities.

However, after two decades of implementation, various criticisms arise on CBC initiatives and projects. Murphree's (2000) overview summarizes some of them and can, together with Scales (2014), provide helpful insights for practitioners of CBC. Fifteen years ago, Murphree already warned not to overvalue community-based conservation, i.e., not to see it as a 'solves-all-problems' approach. Today, community-based conservation is at risk to become a paradigm without much meaning as many institutions and organizations claim to do community-based conservation, either to be 'en vogue' or to secure funding. As mentioned in the beginning, CBC is one concept amongst others and has evolved to support other approaches that were not convincingly successful, but not as a 'stand-alone'-approach. Or to put it in the words of Murphree (2000: 3–4): "CBC was never designed as a substitute for protected area approaches; it was designed to be part of a suite of conservation approaches within national conservation strategies, for particular contexts and circumstances". This adaptation process will certainly not end, as our social, natural, political and economic environments are constantly changing, thus demanding continuously adapted or even new approaches, also depending on the respective contexts and settings. Understanding and accepting this will help us to avoid unrealistic expectations (Scales 2014). CBC has been projected as the most practical approach to stem biodiversity loss in developing countries (Mehta and Kellert 1998), but it is not an approach that is easily accomplished. Considerable time investment and clear policy require highly professional practitioners. At the same time, as it has been repeatedly addressed over the past 15 years, we need to abandon the imposition of ideas from external groups in favor of a real conversation and negotiation in conservation with local sources (Richard and Dewar 2001, Gezon 2014). This would imply to respect and even to address non-conservation priorities. Scales (2014) describes external initiation and imposition and indirect re-establishment of state or elite control as fundamental barriers to the success of the concept. It does not help to (re)invent participatory approaches if the respective institutions in charge are not ready to implement them. This illustrates that CBC is not necessarily always a win-win solution, but the transfer of power, resources and rights may also generate losers (Murphree 2000, Gezon 2014). Additionally, the much-quoted terms 'social justice', 'participation', 'sustainability', 'ethics', 'resilience', and 'trust' are all meaningful words and we are running the risk of forgetting their real deep meaning, leaving just empty shells.

To balance conservation with development remains a challenging task due to the complex nature of the subject. We will probably not find the 'cure-all' solution, but need to consider and deal with the respective contexts. Each case involves a multitude of stakeholders, often with contrasting and conflicting priorities. Berkes (2007: 15192–3) advises to no longer ignore the "multilevel nature of linkages and multiple partners required for any biodiversity conservation project to be successful" and insists on the necessary recognition of "vertical and horizontal institutional interplay". As biodiversity conservation nowadays is as much about people as it is about endangered species or ecosystems (Mace 2014), the dimensions of complex socio-ecological issues cannot be revealed by one single perspective and require consideration of multiple knowledge systems with multiple, sometimes contrasting, objectives. Ferguson and Gardner (2010: 76) propose that "Madagascar could consider drawing on experience from the participatory policy planning processes developed in other developing countries through FAO National Forest Programmes (FAO 2006)" in order to find ways how to



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implement an inclusive policy, i.e., how to involve a multitude of national and international stakeholders in the necessary policy processes. We should withdraw from the idea of 'Eden-like' nature in Madagascar and rather than trying to preserve the past and to halt human actions, we need to focus on how to manage change and negotiate our impact during the transition from past to future (Adams 2003). In this process, we should avoid creating the impression amongst locals that conservationists care more about lemurs or the forest than they do about people.

CBC is a concept suitable for some circumstances, but not applicable or efficient in others. On our search for effective and holistic ways of future management forms we might discover more such approaches, some of which we will improve and use, others of which we will need to abandon due to their high costs or low efficiency. Scales (2014) cites Bill Adams' (2003: 209) statement that, "There is no right way to do conservation. There are only choices." and adds that "To help make these choices, research and policy in Madagascar desperately need more conversations – between biologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, economists, environmental historians and geographers; between researchers and practitioners; and between 'experts' and the individuals, households and communities directly dependent on the island's natural resources for their livelihoods". Exchange is crucial for effective learning and to avoid making the same mistakes again and again. Ganzhorn (2010) calls for (better) evaluation and accessibility of experiences from various projects and suggests a central database that will enable us to learn from former successes and failures, and that can be the basis for the development of future programs. Additionally, publications in open-access journals such as Madagascar Conservation & Development, and discussions in forums or networks such as the Madagascar Environmental Justice Network, or the recently established Lemur Conservation Network, offer additional opportunities for the much needed exchange.

The demand for evidence-based conservation approaches from scientists, practitioners, policy-makers and donors is growing. This Special Issue on 'Community based biodiversity for conservation' aims to provide the needed fuel for vivid discussions and exchanges on how to improve and adapt some current activities or even mindsets. The five contributions describe CBC approaches in different regions of Madagascar, partly based on lemur conservation aims.

Robson and Rakotozafy (2015) present Blue Ventures' successful multifaceted approach that includes sustainable management of marine resources and access to public health services, strengthened by community education and strong cross-sector partnerships. Colquhoun (2015) describes struggles to establish a community-managed protected area near Ankarana National Park; he advices to conduct a needs assessment before project initiation. Mitsinjo's positive experiences with handing over responsibilities to local communities, including tourism, education and reforestation are illustrated by Dolch et al. (2015). Ravaloharimanitra et al. (2015) describe The Aspinall Foundation's previous and current activities to realize management transfer contracts; a long-term conservation strategy is to be developed. Madagascar Wildlife Conservation's work for the conservation of Hapalemur alaotrensis is reflected by Rendigs et al. (2015). They call for further cooperation between institutions, but also with the community, to have a greater impact.

For conservation to be successful in the long-term it is important to gain the support and involvement of local people and this is why community-based conservation is crucial. We hope that this collection of case studies will inform researchers and practitioners who are aiming to engage in community-based conservation projects.

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