Forum

Recognizing differences and establishing clear-eyed partnerships: a response to Vermeulen & Sheil

John G. Robinson

Vermeulen & Sheil (2007) make a strong case that partnerships between conservationists and local people are desirable on both pragmatic and ethical grounds. My comment relates less to their conclusion and more to their understanding of the basis on which partnerships are defined and established. I will argue that the concept of partnerships must evolve away from notions of common goals and 'sharing decisions, rights, responsibilities and risks equitably', and towards specified outcomes linked to clearly understood expectations, commitments and roles among all the parties concerned.

The general concept of partnerships and the establishment of common goals between conservationists and local people are enshrined in conservation thinking. Statements from conservationists are replete with the language of partnership: '[CI] teamed with the indigenous communities of the Kakum National Park', and 'we shared 25% of our budget with partner organizations' (Seligmann *et al.*, 2005); '[WWF] articulate[s] and practice[s] a policy affirming the central importance of working as partners with indigenous peoples' (Roberts & Hails, 2005); and 'The Nature Conservancy has depended upon partnerships with local people to conserve some of the most biologically critical and threatened ecosystems on Earth' (McCormick, 2005). So simple calls for partnerships are unlikely to be considered revolutionary.

While partnerships are celebrated, there is less analysis of the basis on which the partnerships are established. Frequently the assumption is that the agendas of conservationists and local people are, can be, or should be the same. This idea derives from the broad policy dialogue in conservation that extends from the World Conservation Strategy (1980) and Caring for the Earth (1991) to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), which has sought to establish a causality between the conservation of biodiversity and ecological processes and human well-being. While the link is incontrovertible at a global scale, it is frequently not at a local scale. Nevertheless, Vermeulen & Sheil use commonality as the basis for partnership, arguing that local communities have positive conservation goals and preferences, that there is widespread 'biophilia' across human societies, and that local communities are not exclusively driven by economic motives. The search for commonality, which has recently surfaced elsewhere in the conservation literature, and the equating of the interests of conservation with those of poverty reduction, human rights and social justice (Kaimowitz & Sheil, 2007; Kareiva & Marvier, 2007) is attractive but short sighted. Trying simply to define away the tensions among the aspirations of conservation, economic development, cultural integrity and social justice, ignores hard realities (Robinson & Redford, 2004) and as a basis for establishing partnerships, it is a recipe for conflict and disappointment.

So what makes for an effective partnership? A necessary first step is recognizing differences: in agenda, internal processes for resolving issues, and desired outcomes. Partnerships require a recognition of:

Differences in perspectives and interests of the partners. For instance, conservation organizations have the goal of conservation, and their engagement with local communities is a means to achieve that goal, whilst seeking to avoid and mitigate costs and to maximize benefit to local people. Local communities, in contrast, have interests such as maintaining social and cultural integrity, and improving their well-being and quality of life. Those aspirations do not negate their respect for the natural world nor the difficulty in reconciling these different aspirations. Thus, in a partnership in Amazonian Brazil, the interest of the NGO Conservation International was to protect an area of exceptional biodiversity, whilst the primary interest of the indigenous Kayapó group was to protect their lands from intrusion (Chernela, 2005). In Bolivia, another NGO, the Wildlife Conservation Society, partnered with the Capatanía de Alto y Bajo Izozog (CABI), an organization representing the Isoceño people. The conservation interest was to create a strategy and capacity to manage the Gran Chaco, whilst CABI's interest was to create a mechanism to preserve the quality of life of the Isoceño people (Arambiza & Painter, 2006; Redford & Painter, 2006). The existence of the differences means that all partnerships require trade-offs and social mechanisms to allow that negotiation and decision making.

John G. Robinson Wildlife Conservation Society, 2300 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, New York 10460, USA. E-mail jrobinson@wcs.org

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What each partner brings to the relationship. Conservationists frequently bring technical and scientific capacity, and have access to funds. But their actions are constrained because they usually work in national contexts where conservation is not a priority and funds are frequently restricted by donors and agencies. Local people have access to other forms of knowledge, and they sometimes have political standing, legal and/or legitimate claims to resources and land. But their actions and options are constrained by other social and political actors, both locally and nationally. Partnerships must identify and recognize the respective capacities and capabilities of partners (Castillo *et al.*, 2006).

The complex nature of the relationships among institutional players. Partnerships are rarely simple dyadic relationships between conservationists and local communities. The very word 'partnership' is somewhat problematic, as it implies a relationship between two players. Conservation initiatives involve complex networks of different kinds of institutions. For instance, the organizational axis of the Mamirauá project in the flooded Amazonian forest of Brazil is a Brazilian conservation NGO (the Sociedade Civil Mamirauá) and *ribeirinho* communities in the reserve, but also involves agencies of the state and federal government, international development assistance agencies, international conservation NGOs, other national NGOs, various municipalities, logging companies and, significantly, the Catholic Church (Lima, 1999; Robinson & Queiroz, in press). The relationship is not a simple negotiation between two entities but a complex set of checks and balances in which participation and decision making does not rest with any single entity.

The different institutional niches of the organizations in the network of partnerships. Different organizations have different roles in conservation initiatives, and understanding those roles is critical to understanding the effectiveness of the partnerships. A confusion about the roles of international NGOs (Chapin, 2004; Bray & Anderson, 2005) and the roles of local NGOs (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2007) has contributed to recent critiques of the conservation process. There is a need to understand what contributes to the success or failure of partnerships but characterizing NGOs dismissively as 'powerful, external voices', does not forward that analysis.

Once the nature of a partnership is established, then mechanisms to maintain clear communication, and participatory processes to make decisions, are needed to sustain the relationships and deliver outcomes that benefit both conservation and local community goals. Idealism is to be encouraged but the heart of a good, clear-eyed relationship is recognizing differences and realistically appraising one's partners, rather than hoping that agendas can be the same and, in the process, unrealistically conflating the goals of different types of institutions.

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