Guest editorial

Partnerships for conservation and poverty reduction

Most of us probably think of Chad as somewhere dry and dusty in the heart of the Sahara, and it may be a surprise to discover that it has just designated the world's third largest RAMSAR wetland site. The floodplains of the Aouk and Salamat rivers, covering 50,000 km in southern Chad, are the breeding grounds for several migratory water birds and numerous large mammals, including the largest remaining elephant population in the Sahel.

This area is not far from the conflict-ridden Darfur region of Sudan, and violence and refugees frequently spill over the border. As Chad also tops Transparency International's list of the world's most corrupt governments, and is fourth from bottom of the UN's Human Poverty Index, the prospects for conservation, and for people, may seem bleak. But Chad has discovered oil, and World Bank funding has been tied to government commitments to spend oil revenues on health, education and rural development (but not the environment). Inevitably the government is backtracking, and the World Bank suspended funding in January. Nevertheless, in the UN *Year of Deserts and Desertification* (Fisher, 2006) it is a development worth watching.

It also prompts a question. Whilst most responsible governments are expected to invest their resources in raising people out of poverty, to what extent does this responsibility extend to big business or, for that matter, to conservationists? Although this was debated extensively in *Oryx* in 2004 (38: 119–120, 137–147), the answer remains elusive.

As with oil companies, international conservation organizations have been criticized over their record on poverty and human rights. Protectionist conservation strategies can impose disproportionate costs on people. Where conservation conflicts with local interests, so the argument goes, local interests lose out, and with them goes any local support for conservation. This is bad for everyone, and there are both ethical and strategic reasons for ensuring that the costs of conservation, whatever they may be, do not fall disproportionately on the poor.

Of particular relevance, and highlighted in this issue, is human-wildlife conflict mitigation. Threatened large mammals are rarely loved by the people living with them. Global conservation flagships can be local pests, and if livestock predation and crop raiding are not addressed, such species are persecuted (Altrichter *et al.*, 2006). Fortunately a great deal of conservation science and practice is being brought to bear to find solutions to offset the costs borne by poor rural communities. Two papers in this issue of Oryx focus on crop raiding African elephants, one testing the effects of farm-based crop protection methods (Sitati & Walpole, 2006) and the other exploring the viability of alternative cash crops that are less palatable to wildlife (Parker & Osborn, 2006). Both suggest that local solutions can be found.

Tackling the costs of conservation for the poor is one thing, but whether conservation organizations should be involved in poverty reduction remains hotly contested. Every conservation organization is keen to demonstrate how biodiversity conquers poverty, to keep the door to development funding unlocked and ensure that the environment is not the forgotten Millennium Development Goal. Yet for some, pledging to improve lives and livelihoods is straying beyond the conservation mandate into areas where we are ill-equipped to deliver. How far should we go, and under what circumstances is it legitimate to do so?

It is clear that poverty and conservation are often interlinked. Two papers in the previous issue of *Oryx* revealed the importance to poorer rural households in Madagascar of harvesting bats (Goodman, 2006) and crayfish (Jones *et al.*, 2006). A study of turtle harvesting in China in this issue points to the financial benefits of illegal trade in otherwise low-income villages as a powerful incentive to continue the practice (Shiping *et al.*, 2006).

It is less clear whether conservation can offer people a genuine route out of poverty, or whether poverty reduction efforts will bring conservation gains. We know that simplistic models that predict benefits for both conservation and poverty reduction are generally unrealistic and unattainable. In some cases conservation efforts can bring benefits to the poor but there are inevitably trade-offs that can shift the balance considerably in the wrong direction. At the same time a dogged adherence to livelihoods-focused initiatives may reduce poverty and increase wellbeing in ways that are counterproductive to conservation if increased affluence and opportunity simply fuel increased resource degradation. Poverty is rarely the only, or even the most urgent, threat to biodiversity.

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Does this mean that we shouldn't bother, that attempts by conservationists to address poverty are misguided? There is no doubt that if we are blinkered to the practical challenges and the naivety of some of the assumptions then we risk undermining the ultimate goals of conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. But there are good reasons why we should bother, and why in some cases we have little alternative.

In the poverty-stricken places where we work there is often no one else: no development agency, no government support programme, no opportunity. Can we justify ignoring the issue? Conservation needs a local constituency of support, and poverty reduction acts as an entry point and mechanism to engender that support at grass roots levels.

Where there are full scale poverty reduction and development programmes being implemented by the 'experts', are we prepared to let them take the usual, short cut route to development that sidelines environmental concerns in the face of humanitarian expediency? Many high biodiversity areas are also sites of humanitarian emergency, such as Cambodia, Liberia, Congo and Indonesia. If it is not the aftermath of civil conflict then it is a natural disaster, with the unluckiest, like Aceh, suffering both. These areas witness a flood of development assistance from an army of humanitarian organizations, but how often is any consideration given to longer term concerns for biodiversity and environmental sustainability when short term needs for food and shelter and means to make a living appear so much more pressing? Conservation organizations will have a much louder voice if they engage with recovery and reconstruction efforts, if they take human needs seriously and act to address them in a way that demonstrates to humanitarian agencies that it can be done with due consideration for biodiversity, the environment and the longer term, than if they sit on the sidelines lamenting the destruction of the forests for the rebuilding of houses.

Ultimately, of course, we cannot and should not try to fulfill the role of governments, development agencies or even the private sector when it comes to disaster relief, poverty reduction and the provision of livelihood opportunities for the poor. But if we want to put the environment and biodiversity back at the heart of sustainable development we are going to have to do two things. Firstly, we must become much more sophisticated in how we assess our impacts on people, and a lot clearer about which aspects of biodiversity really contribute to the well-being of the poor and which aspects require alternative rationales for their conservation. Secondly, and here I echo Sanderson & Redford's Editorial (2003), we must work harder to develop meaningful cross-sectoral partnerships with those who do development. Harnessing development in the name of conservation, and ensuring conservation is not marginalized by development, requires both sides to work together and understand each other more emphatically than has been the case to date.

To help achieve these two things, Fauna & Flora International has established a Livelihoods Programme that is enabling us to reflect on how and why we are addressing human needs, improving our monitoring and impact analysis across a range of projects worldwide, and providing tools and guidelines to ensure that we achieve our mission effectively. A major component of the programme is evaluating and enhancing cross-sectoral partnerships for conservation and human well-being in the wake of natural disasters and civil conflict. The challenge is finding the right partners and making the partnerships work. Learning from our experiences to date will be the first step in meeting that challenge.

Matt Walpole
Programme Coordinator for Biodiversity and Human Needs
Fauna & Flora International, Great Eastern House
Tenison Road, Cambridge, CB1 2TT, UK
E-mail matt.walpole@fauna-flora.org

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