



By Bruce Rich

Aid, Poverty, and Global Biodiversity

International efforts to conserve biodiversity in developing countries are recognizing the need to provide alternative livelihoods. Simply establishing protected areas will fail without redirecting the economic pressures pushing local people to degrade biodiversity-rich habitats. Bilateral and multilateral aid to conserve biodiversity totals between \$8 to \$12 billion annually, and much of this goes to projects that claim to alleviate the poverty of local populations while protecting biodiversity.

An article last year by four UK researchers in *Animal Conservation* concludes that despite long-standing strategies that purport to achieve biodiversity protection and poverty alleviation, actual empirical evidence is often lacking about the success of such projects. The authors link this lack to vague and poorly defined conceptions of both poverty and biodiversity in project design, coupled with a chronic lack of monitoring of results. After decades of purportedly “pro-poor conservation,” the authors conclude, such efforts today still risk being based on unsubstantiated beliefs, leading to repeating the same mistakes and not understanding the reasons for success (or failure) when it occurs.

These problems in turn are directly a consequence of misplaced priorities in the aid agencies. Aid projects typically have a relatively short time frame of five to eight years at most, whereas efforts to

alleviate poverty and protect biodiversity are long-term processes. Pressures to move money out the door and move on to the next project are great; for new proposals, optimistic goals can be touted, while there are strong bureaucratic incentives against overly critical evaluations of ongoing or past failures. What monitoring does occur is often not independent, being conducted by the funding agencies themselves or by contractors that are economically dependent on them for future business.

Already in the 1980s, aid donors and conservation organizations alike enthusiastically promoted “integrated conservation and development projects” that tried to combine environmental goals with development efforts. ICDPs appeared to be a new, hopeful approach that would gain the support of the rural poor. Unfortunately, the *Animal Conservation* article only reiterated more fully what has been reported for more than a decade. Twelve years earlier, a review of 134 ICDP projects funded by various bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, including the Global Environment Facility, showed that most were failures. The study noted that the rush by aid agencies to move projects in a relatively short time span did not allow staff to develop an adequate understanding of local communities.

An illuminating case was an ambitious effort funded by the GEF and the World Bank to protect the Kerinci Seblat National Park in Sumatra. The park is home to the Sumatran tiger, rhinoceros, and 142 other mammal species. Unfortunately, the project was based on mistaken premises. It emphasized economic development of local villages, assuming that poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods were driving deforestation. In fact, the villages were some of the wealthiest communities in Sumatra. They saw the ICDP’s development grants as supplements rather than alternatives to high-earning crops such as cinnamon.

Moreover, much of the logging and forest clearing for cash crops was instigated by rich individuals who often lived far from the park. The area suffered from a chronic breakdown of law and order, and the responsible government ministries, all the while receiving economic support from the project and other aid donors, had no interest in controlling illegal logging and poaching. Under these conditions, unenforceable conservation agreements with local villages proved almost useless.

In some cases, the whole model of alternative livelihood projects may be a product of wishful thinking, attempting to reconcile what are erroneously defined as local development needs and local habitat conservation, while having no impact on much more powerful forces threatening biodiversity coming from the external political economy.

Newer efforts to link habitat protection with climate finance as a means to compensate local communities, such as the UN’s Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation pro-

gram, will repeat past failures unless the lessons of the failures of alternative-livelihood projects are finally learned. These lessons include the need for a clearer conceptualiza-

tion of poverty and how it is linked to pressures to degrade habitats, as well as a better understanding of external market forces like agricultural commodity prices and of political factors such as the influence of regional and national economic oligarchies.

Last but not least, there needs to be a much greater focus on monitoring and analysis of outcomes, as well as financial and institutional commitments to poverty alleviation and biodiversity protection that are longer term than the short time horizon of conventional project finance.

Bruce Rich, an ELI Visiting Scholar, is an attorney and author who has served as senior counsel for major environmental organizations. His email is brucemrich@gmail.com.

In some cases, the whole model of alternative livelihood projects may be wishful thinking