



**Poverty, Corruption and Other Challenges to Protected Area
Management:
Voices from the Field in Bangladesh**

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Poverty, Corruption and Other Challenges to Protected Area Management: Voices from the Field in Bangladesh¹

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Abstract

Bangladesh's challenges in ensuring conservation of protected areas are unique to the world. Its land allocated to protected areas is among the lowest in the world; while its population density and its levels of poverty are among the highest. In such circumstances, people, and especially the poor, are inextricably woven into the protected area management challenge. Bangladesh's new Nishorgo Program for protected area management, an initiative of the Forest Department, is designed to develop a model for collaborative management of protected areas. In developing the approach, Nishorgo team members undertook a variety of information collection methods, one of which was Focus Group Discussions with key stakeholders in and around the five pilot protected areas. During these Discussions, transcriptions were made of many statements made by these stakeholders. The voices of these people, it has been found, have spoken louder in many ways than the more formal analyses undertaken. This paper presents a selection of these "Voices from the Field" and identifies how these perspectives have had an impact on re-orienting planning of the co-management effort.

(175 words)

Background

Conceiving of protected areas without people in and around them is difficult in Bangladesh. The country is notable for three characteristics that make PA management particularly challenging: its allocation of protected area land is the lowest in the world on a per capita basis, and, at 0.5% of surface area, the second lowest. With an average of 893 people per square kilometer and high levels of both "absolutely poor" (49 percent of the population) and "extremely poor" (24 percent of the population), it simply is not conceivable to think of protected areas without poor people living around and in them, and deriving benefits from them.

While the challenges to a successful protected area program are considerable, the Forest Department has recognized that no protected area management improvements will succeed without formal participation of local stakeholders. To the end of developing functional pilot PA co-management examples, therefore, the Forest Department has embarked, with the financial assistance of USAID, on a PA co-management effort entitled the Nishorgo Support Project. "Nishorgo" is a Bangla word connoting idyllic

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nature. The Project team works closely with the Forest Department to put in place PA co-management at an initial five National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in the country. The Project's efforts are meant to support the new Nishorgo Program for PA Management of the Forest Department. (More information can be found at www.nishorgo.org about this Project and the Department's overall Nishorgo Program.)

Process and Purpose of Interviewing and Recording Local Stakeholders

In the process of planning for the co-management pilots at these five sites, information was collected from a variety of sources, including secondary data report summaries, RRA, PRA, spatial data collection and others. Subsequent to these studies a final series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held at all sites, where the Groups were composed of different stakeholders. FGD's were held in October and November of 2004. The primary purpose of the FGD's was to complement earlier information with a direct perspective from key identified stakeholder groups. In short, the purpose was to hear directly from the stakeholders in their own words, without any filtering from appraisal teams. At least one FGD at each site was composed of Forest Department local staff members, meaning those Range Officers, Beat Officers and Forest Guards whose responsibility it is to protect the designated areas. Apart from this Group, other Groups were set in an attempt to bring together people from similar stakeholder groups and of similar places of residence and class. These steps were taken so as to provide a context for unrestrained expression by participants. The FGD's were facilitated by two persons from Nishorgo. Names of all persons quoted have been withheld.

Purpose and Structure of this Article

The outcome of these Focus Group Discussions -- conveyed in the transcribed voices of the people of these areas -- provides a compelling optic through which to observe the day-to-day lives of protected area stakeholders in a country context as difficult as Bangladesh. These "Voices from the Field" have proven to be an effective means of conveying the complexity of field challenges, particularly concerning the Forest Department's problems with corruption, to senior policy makers. This brief article is prepared with two purposes: to communicate the content of these "voices" to readers from other countries and to highlight how such direct and candid observations from field level stakeholders have had an impact on the PA co-management approach being adopted by the Nishorgo Program.

The structure of this article is simple. We present the voices of Forest Department staff members first, and then highlight implications of these observations on the co-management pilot being undertaken. We then turn to the voices of villagers from the same areas, and follow that with implications of such perspectives for the co-management pilots. We close with a few observations on the role that such local perspectives can play in forming a PA co-management approach.

Statements by Members of the Local Forest Department

We begin with the perspectives of eight Foresters from the pilot protected areas. The Forest Department is responsible for management of Bangladesh's protected areas:

“To tell you frankly, systems within the Forest Department are responsible for making staff corrupt. New entrants usually start their service career with a positive attitude and commitment. However, their mind set changes quickly and commitment diminishes as they are blamed of inefficiency and subjected to intense harassment by the Department for continued illegal felling. Their sincerity and dedication are questioned. Their hard work is seldom recognized and rewarded. Soon they realize that colluding with illegal fellers is more rewarding -- extra income, which they can use to please their higher ups to secure their job. We do not have any provision for reward for good work or punishment for negligence and corruption. So staff-members are not motivated to take additional but necessary steps to protect the forest. Frankly speaking, our staff members are now totally demoralized...”

“You see, we are always blamed by people for being corrupt. Our public image is very poor. Unfortunately, nobody knows that many of us are forced to get involved in illegal activities to raise money to meet unexpected and inconceivable demands of top level decision-makers....FD officials at different levels involved in this illegal process also make money...it is expected...and why not if the top makes money through such unfair means...?”

“Very powerful people having connections with the political elite and the administrative machinery are involved in plundering forest resources. Some corrupt officials of the Forest Department also assist them in the process and take a share.... ”

“Most field staff keep their families in urban centers to provide better education to their children. Demand for extra money to maintain two establishments, one at the work place and another in the urban center, forces many of the officials to get involved in corrupt practices...”

“Well, the banks keep adequate armed guards and sophisticated technologies to protect your money. Yet, your money is taken sometimes by robbers and sometimes misappropriated by bank officials, who forge documents... Now, think of our forest, we have lacs and lacs [thousands of dollars] worth of timber trees remaining unprotected in remote forest areas ... Why should they stay when people can easily chop them down and fetch easy money?”

“You talk about protection. We do not have enough people; even our arms are obsolete and can hardly match with the sophisticated arms used by illegal feller gangs...Many of us now strongly feel that it is not possible to protect such a huge area with only a few Beat Officers, Guards and

gardeners. Even well-armed, increased manpower is also not going to improve the situation when the pressure on the forest is so intense; we need to involve the community to protect the forest more in the line of participatory forestry... ”

“As a matter of fact, the check posts are the primary centers of corruption. Those officials at the check posts are suppose to check illegal timbers being transported but they make deals with timber pirates and allow them safe passage. If the people in the check posts were honest, 90 percent of illegal felling would stop... ”

“Timber felling is one problem but the real problem is gradual encroachment of the forest land by a section of the community, sometimes innocuously and sometimes forcibly...Despite their willingness Forest Department can not take harsh actions against them because of political interference. Once settled, they can hardly be evicted due to humanitarian and other considerations... ”

A number of issues emerge from these candid observations of Forest Department staff. The major issues can be summarized as follows:

- Foresters themselves recognize and admit their own corruption, but also identify the context that leads to that corruption, which often includes political and institutional pressure, not to mention family pressure, which pushes them to be corrupt. They also highlight that new staff members are systematically "broken" so that they start being corrupt, after which it is difficult to change.
- Foresters recognize that illegal sale of wood products is significant, but that the more menacing threat to PA management is the silent and gradual encroachment of PA lands, usually supported by powerful local interests.
- Foresters work in a context of armed and powerful criminals in which the Forest Department is at a fundamental disadvantage. They have little mobility, few opportunities for communication, and their weapons are not as powerful as those used by the illegal loggers. The co-management effort, therefore, must take account of the organized nature of the opposition to conservation.
- Finally, it merits noting that only a single Forester interviewed referred with any conviction to the potential role that collaboration with local populations might make in protecting the forests. The Forest Department is pervaded by a deep training under which they are expected to have absolute authority and to directly manage the forests. Although Bangladesh's Forest Department has in fact made great progress in social forestry, field level Foresters continue often to think they must act on their own. It will take considerable training and orientation of local Foresters to reverse this.

Statements by Village-level Stakeholders

Following is a series of observations by community members from around the PAs.

“The Forest Department is primarily responsible for deforestation. If you control the Beat Officers and the Range Officers, the forest will remain intact. Sir, let me tell you something, if the Forest Department really becomes serious about forest protection, no one will be able to take out a bunch of sun grass from the forest, let alone trees.”

“Timber is not something which you can carry in your pocket. It has no value in the forest, but value addition takes place only when you take it out and market it. Its removal involves felling, taking out of the forest and then trucking out to an appropriate place. All these activities involve number of people and cannot be done without being noticed by the Forest Department staff. The fact is those fellers before getting involved in the act get approval from the local Forest Department officials through under-hand deals....That’s how they make money.”

“...You are concerned about outside people being involved in timber felling and other resource extraction. Don't bother about that. No one will enter the forest if they do not get tacit or explicit approval from the Forest Department. Sir, nothing will work unless you control the local Forest Department officials. There is a saying: you give fence to protect the chilies, if the fence starts eating up the chilies, who can help?”

“Two groups of people are instrumental in forest depletion, one the 'mahalders' [businessmen] and the other the forest villagers who work as unofficial forest guards. You go to any beat office or range office you will find 'mahalders' . These mahaldars bid in auctions that Forest Department holds periodically....”

“Sir, there are villages at the periphery of the forest, which are inhabited by Bengali migrants. Local Forest Department officials hire these people unofficially as forest guards to work with them. Since they cannot pay money for their services, they ask them to take away timber as payments. Initially, they took small quantities, but now what they take is huge. Sir, they were thieves previously, but now they have become full-fledged bandits. The Forest Department is behind them, they take money and issue pass for unhindered passage of the timber to a safe place....They also have connection with the local police. The police give them 'tokens' to have free transit. How can you stop them?”

“...I did not ever cut a piece of wood from the forest. One day I saw a few villagers, so called forest guards, openly carrying loads of valuable timber. I challenged them and verbally abused them. The next day, to my utter surprise, I got arrested by the police for stealing timber....Sir, I have 35 court cases against me [filed by the Forest Department], some even have 70 cases against them. Now

I extract timber from the forest and I will continue to do so to meet case expenses. Every time a case comes up for hearing I have to spend Taka 500; now calculate how much I have to pay for 35 cases. My family is poor; they will not be able to give such a huge amount every month. The Forest Department has made me a thief; I will steal from the forest as long as I have to attend to these cases....”

“Many people are now grabbing forest land. They would not dare to encroach if the Forest Department did not allow them to do so. You know, the Beat Officers and Range Officers are taking Taka 20,000 to 30,000 [~ USD300-500] and granting land to those encroachers. They do not get official papers from the FD staffs but then what does it matter, once settled no one can evict”.

"This is a poor area. People have no employment for most of the year. They have to survive and they do it through stealing timber from the forest. If you can provide some opportunities for income generation for these people they will not go to the forest taking risk of being shot at or getting arrested....”

These statements by local PA level citizens raise a number of central issues to be accounted for in the PA management effort. The major issues can be summarized as follows:

- Most notable from the discussions is the commonly held belief that if the Forest Department were honest, then the protected areas would be conserved. The community members recognition that the Forest Department is critical to conservation provides an important lesson for the co-management effort, which is often perceived as a process of rolling back state authority around protected areas. Learning from such voices, the Nishorgo Program will work to enhance the role of the Forest Department rather than suppressing it, but will focus on a power that comes from consensus and cooperation with local citizens rather than control over them.
- The comments made here, and others like them, highlight the ethnic conflict in protected areas. Such visceral issues as resentment between one community and another often do not emerge from more formal studies, but they are plainly evident in these voices. When the one person speaks of "forest villagers", it is shorthand for the ethnic Khasia, Garo and other peoples of non-Bengali ethnic groups brought to the forests in the early 1900s. Similar resentment emerges from forest villagers when referring to the "Bengali migrants" that are conniving to destroy the forest.
- The villagers, like the FD officials themselves, highlight the strong symbiosis of Forest Department officials and powerful local businessmen and elite. This cord of mutual self-interest and dependency must be broken if the co-management effort is to succeed. The Program will work to recruit new and young staff members (and has already done so) who have not invested in these relationships already. The Program will also need include issues of

responsible behavior in a "Code of Conduct" being developed for Forest Department staff members.

- The voices also make it clear that local stakeholders in Bangladesh live under a serious daily threat of violence, court cases, police action and other intimidation from powerful local actors. In asking communities to become more active in conservation of PAs, we are at the same time requesting them to put their security at risk, and this should not be taken lightly. One man spoke of having 35 court cases against him, and reiterated that he must keep taking wood from the forest to pay his fines, which are themselves levied by the Forest Department. The people heard from here are caught in extremely difficult circumstances that the co-management process must address.
- Finally, these local voices reiterate a fundamental assumption -- that the poor depend for their survival on products coming from these protected areas. The people here are on the margin of poverty, and require small amounts of fuel wood, medicinal plant products, fruits and wage labor income, all of which can be earned at present in the protected areas. Many people have nowhere else to go except to take produce from the forest. They must live, and their children must live, so they will continue going to the forest. As the co-management approach is refined, and management plans for the protected areas are finalized, we recognize this constant use of protected areas by the poor as an important opportunity. If illegal payments are removed and woody biomass extraction is focused in multiple use zones, these urgent needs of many community members can be met. As and when these basic needs are met through managed conservation, we expect local poor citizens to become more active partners in the conservation process.

Conclusions and Closing Observations

Direct transcription of the honest and forthright observations of local stakeholders has served the Nishorgo Program as a powerful means of both stimulating debate on the central challenges to protected area conservation and focusing attention on these key challenges. When the actual words of local stakeholders are captured and transcribed, their words allow perspectives to be raised that would be much more difficult to state in an analytical report. We believe that these transcribed "voices" are a powerful means of conveying the challenges for PA co-management not only to the Nishorgo Program here, but to those working at addressing poverty and conservation issues around the world.

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