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Commentary

Conservation through community: An attempt to untangle a tangled word.

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Conservation is not something that can be thrust upon a community, and neither can it be labelled as a measure to take away a people's rights and nor can it be used as a force to make others adhere to rules and laws from outside; by outside I mean you and me and your or my Government.

I am not writing to highlight that conservation should not happen with the community but I do believe that older community bonds are broken or they have started to brake and the ways implied earlier no longer hold in the field. Most of us are still hanging on to older approaches to community conservation but the younger generation in a community has moved beyond, now it is rare to see a community come together for the sake of collective benefits and also when conservation measures take longer to deliver the fruits and the sustained release of impacts over a period of time it makes people forget the changes made to the immediate environment, except for a few visible ones. This too is forgotten with time until the cycle of destruction repeats itself.

Previously, the community used to look at water, forests and other natural resources as common resources and they used to protect them, but the present generation does not understand common resources. In their terms it has to be yours or mine or else it is the Government's. There is no fourth dimension, i.e. the common resource which used to be a main dimension of conservation. The vanishing concept of the common resource has brought about the biggest destruction ever.

New ways of conservation have to be found as older traditional ways of conservation may still work in some places but they will be not adhered to by the majority. I am not saying this because community led work isn't good enough, but because the community system was previously woven into social fabric and there was mutual dependence. However, the social fabric has changed a lot over recent years and so has traditional community bonding. The west lost it a long time ago but other regions are catching up very quickly; community bonds are getting weaker and weaker and other ways of social bonding are taking over and we all are still struggling to solve problems through our narrow prism of community. We need to broaden it. I don't mean that community shouldn't be involved, it is the only way, but we need to understand the psyche of the community and try new ways to involve it.

I hope I have not confused you and that you will continue reading.

For everyone the mantra of conservation is through community and almost all conservation activities revolve around one particular community.

However, I feel there is a problem with the way it is projected and the percentage success rate is very low. In other words, in a world where two brothers do not have the same level of thinking and the same approach to a single issue, how can we expect a community to work together on a single focused agenda and hold on to it for a long period at a time when people have started to weigh everything on a scale of personal gain. Also, since conservation is a time-consuming process it is quite likely that the efforts of a community and its initial enthusiasm will fade over time. On this point a lot of people will try to pounce on me and try to prove me wrong with data and by showcasing successful community level projects. I do not deny that there are lots of success stories but are we getting the percentage of results that should have been achieved by now with so many NGOs, aid agencies and government efforts coming together? What is the success rate of these projects? An officer from the forest department once told me that in the last 30 years in India so many plantations have been made through community that no space would be available for plantations if all the work had borne results. He may have exaggerated or he may be referring to poor implementation but there might still be some truth to his word. Also, I do expect the same kind of results around the world with some variations, since so much money has been spent through reforestation, community forestry. There seems to be a huge difference in conservation through community available on paper records and the reality on the ground, meaning that no matter how much money is spent, conservation has a low success rate and we are still persisting with ideas that have a very low percentage of success.

In a community project a lot of management committees are formed, a forest committee, a watershed committee, a management committee; people participate and committees are formed but most of the committees become defunct over a period of time or they remain but are inactive.

What are the reasons behind this? Maybe there is very little personal stake or low interest due to the high probability of getting bad reputation in the eyes of people if a community member tries to ensure that the system is adhered to. As the needs of people are unlimited and resources are limited a conflict of interest is bound to arise. I agree that other factors such as local politics etc. are also responsible, and I also agree that we need to persist in conservation through community as any other option will be suicidal.

Some will try to argue that for any project the work to be undertaken is decided by the community and even the priority of work is decided by the community, at each step the community is involved from initiation to completion. But how many of us see sustained community support and adherence from initiation to completion and beyond. As we know from the human tendency most times we humans get involved keenly only when we see direct benefits, and not through indirect benefits or co-benefits. Thus, in order to make everyone get involved each person has to see some kind of a personal stake in the project, otherwise only a few will persist and others will not.

We as conservationists think that it is the duty of a community to protect itself. Conservation will not be successful because we think that the community should protect itself. Even within a community there are different views and they will come together but will only disintegrate with time.

To see how well a project will work I believe that we first need to analyse how much the members of the community are dependent on each other, how much the community is woven into the social fabric and its bonds, how much the community is not affected by my political factionalism. And if the community lacks in the above then we have to change the way conservation is conducted.

Community approaches like collective thinking but direct individual benefits need to be incorporated more into the programmes so that better results can be achieved, by direct benefit I don't mean monetary benefit but giving every individual a sense of belief that whatever conservation effort he has done at his level is his own, it is his creation and he is the master of his destiny.

I also trust that we are witnessing new social bonding's which are independent of regional background, politics, colour, rich and poor differentiation, taking shape and blooming as social media groups, they have a power to evolve a new thinking, bring change and develop a new form of common resource concept which can take conservation of globalised community to a new platform.

These are not the only ways but surely other ways of uniting a community need to be found in order to generate a truly participatory approach.