Importance of perception studies and consequences of bypassing it

Humans are social animals, we share the natural world with all other life forms. Although it is highly interdependent relationship, but it is greatly unequal. We exploit nature in a way no other species does. Thus, in order to conserve, we need to understand how people see, perceive, process, and infer the ecosystem, environment, and species they live with. It becomes immensely important to know how they use the services provided by these natural ecosystems and what role human behavior plays in exploitation or conservation of natural resources. As part of our session during the Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation, learning the importance of understanding stakeholder perception in conservation, we got in to conversations of different situation where this study is needed and where not. The following article gives examples of different conservation scenarios, analyses whether perception study is needed, and tries to debate what would happen if the same was not done.

Situation 1—Starting an Ecotourism Project to support wildlife conservation.

Whenever starting an ecotourism project mapping different stakeholders like resident community, gram panchayat, regional tourism department, and other NGOs working in the region is the first step. It is followed by the second step of understanding how all of these people perceive their ecosystem, what does tourism or ecotourism mean to them, and how they could contribute to conserving them. If the perception studies are not done for such a project it might lead to negative situations like lack of support from the local community. Also, we would miss on the local traditional and historical knowledge that could help the project grow better and potentially gain new roots and acceptance from the community. If not collaborated or included, the communities might feel left out, exploited, confused and thus not cooperating later. The project could lose out on an opportunity to employ locals who are familiar with the landscape and can be excellent for hospitality/ as nature guides. The project could also contribute to the empowerment of the local community and make the conservation efforts sturdier. Skipping this baseline might put us into issues like non-cooperation and hostility and eventually project failure.

Situation 2—Conducting a Camera Trap Study to understand wildlife movement in an area.

While designing a camera trap survey, engaging with the local community before setting up camera traps is a foundational step for successful research. It's an opportunity to build trust by understanding local knowledge, correcting fears of being spied on, and addressing genuine privacy concerns, like being filmed while hunting. This dialogue transforms a project from an intrusion into a partnership, as communities share invaluable insights on land use and regional wildlife that led to better science.

Ignoring this groundwork is unsafe and risky. Without community support, expensive equipment often gets stolen or damaged, fostering a hostile environment where researchers are met with suspicion. This could lead to unreliable data, compromised research goals, and wasted resources. Ultimately, skipping the conversation with local people doesn't just risk the project but can poison the well for future conservation efforts, proving that this (community) human-centered approach is not just beneficial, but essential.

Situation 3—Planning a restoration project in a degraded landscape

If we are starting a restoration project studying perception becomes crucial from the point of view of the collection of historical data and understanding the biogeography of the place through the eyes of communities that have been residing in the space

for generations. This helps us understand and evaluate the history of a given place, the livelihoods opportunity, their dependence on the trees and plant species around for the timber and NTFP produce. This also help us understand ethnobotanical significance of the forest in their lives, any reference sites or sacred groves if they have, any myths and beliefs around any particular species. Thus, it's crucial in designing the restoration project, to help us select the native species that we want to include in the nursery, identify motivated people from the community, and eventually empower them to take the ownership and responsibility of the work. This way the project has a well set exit strategy. When it comes to the restoration of the pasture lands it is extremely important to understand the seasons, grazing & harvesting patterns, and paths of the herding communities as there could be some unsustainable practices that might hinder in the conservation impact. If the restoration plan is implemented without doing the perception studies, it could create conflict between local people, researchers or the implementation agencies.

Situation 4—Declaring a parcel of Forest as a Protected Area

Declaration of the protected area is a significant event in a locality especially for the forest dwelling local communities and other stakeholders like zoologist, ecologist, anthropologists, governmental, and non-governmental bodies working for the community welfare in order to understand the ecological, economic, and social dependency and potential impact. If these studies are ignored or not given enough weightage at the beginning, it could start friction between the community and forest department that could potentially turn harmful for wildlife. It could also lead to the amplification of human wildlife negative interaction like poisoning and retaliatory killing of the animals. It also becomes crucial to understand the boundaries and demarcation of the forest land, encroached land, and private/agricultural land, its usage by the community, if they are using that land for harvesting wood and NTFP, agriculture or some other purpose. It gives us an understanding of potential impact it can have on the community to tweak our interventions.

Situation 5—Planning a compensation-based human-wildlife coexistence model

For mitigation of human wildlife interactions through compensation drives, perception studies are essential. The need is to understand the interaction first in order to mitigate it. So, what are peoples' perceptions about the wildlife that is around them, what are the myths or beliefs that are threats for wildlife or the community perceives as threats to themselves from the wildlife, and their socio-economic status becomes essential to know. Different stakeholders in this process that are needed to be understood are the local communities NGOs, FD, government administration, local village authorities, funders, scientists/ecologist, industries, visitors, and tourism people. It is crucial for an organization to do it to build trust with the community, and to design robust and ecologically sound solutions. It also helps evaluate the loss for just compensation, build efficient and sturdy mitigation plan with cooperation from all the stakeholders that perception study can facilitate. If we bypass the perception studies and directly jump to the mitigation plan we might face non-cooperation from the community, leading to an inefficient mitigation plan that could collapse midway. It is greatly unsustainable in terms of its rooting mechanism and the worst of all could be misjudgement of the value of the damage.

All these different scenarios give us a peek into the nitty-gritties of the community perceptions. Hence for successful implementation of any conservation project, it becomes crucial to do the perception studies and develop the project based. This will ensure a lasting impact and contribute to better conservation efforts.

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