

Oryx

It is time to talk honestly about empowerment in conservation

By Lauren Redmore, Aby Sene-Harper, Dhananjaya Katju & Mike Petriello, 27th November 2019

In the Anthropocene, conservation is no longer solely focused on wild species or wild places. Communities are now often central to conservation projects and many funding agencies mandate that communities are included in both project planning and implementation. With community engagement, scholars and project managers have mobilized popular concepts from the social sciences, including capacity building, co-creation, and—our personal favourite and the focus of this blog—empowerment. We are former conservation project managers and experienced conservation social scientists with global perspectives from Africa, Asia and the Americas. Through these experiences we have been exposed to first-hand accounts of genuine and of half-hearted attempts to develop and achieve meaningful engagement of communities in externally-driven biodiversity conservation projects. Some examples include the co-management of the Diawling National Park in Mauritania, where fishery management rights are shared between local fishery cooperatives and the park officials. In the USA, women-focused natural resource extension programmes that use a peer-to-peer learning approach have improved women's confidence in their abilities to achieve their management goals.



Left: Members of the Oregon State University Forestry Extension Women Owning Woodlands Network (WOWNet) examine a felled tree after practicing chainsaw safety. Photo: Tiffany Hopkins. Right: The Diawling National Park officials monitor the amount of fish captured by a local fisherman within the park boundaries during the low fishing season (June 2015). Fishing within the park boundaries is allowed and resource usage is monitored by local fishermen cooperatives in collaboration with park officials. Photo: Aby Sène-Harper

Although many projects have meaningfully engaged with empowerment to achieve conservation goals, we have also come across numerous instances of use of the word empowerment without any critical concern for genuine engagement with it as a concept. We wanted to answer three questions: (1) What is the history of the word empowerment in conservation? (2) How do scholars use the word empowerment in conservation literature? (3) How is empowerment measured in this field?

Starting in the 1970s, calls for integrated conservation and development began to dominate the conservation discourse. Following the rapid development in the years after World War II, scholars began to explore the concept that development is not a zero-sum game for conservation. This idea was a game-changer in conservation. For the past few decades, funding agencies, researchers and project managers have sought ways to meaningfully engage with communities that, under past models of conservation, would have likely been kept in the dark. Empowerment is one potentially important measure of success, and conservation practitioners who foster the conditions to empower community members are more likely to achieve win-win goals of conservation and development. However, empowerment as a concept is now so popular that it has become a ubiquitous part of the conservation landscape in its own right, including anything from simple revenue generation activities to the allocation of resource rights for local communities.



Left: WOWNet members teach each other the basics of chainsaw care, maintenance, and safety. Photo: Tiffany Hopkins. Right: The Diawling National Park Director (second from the right) discusses a livelihood project with the leader (first from the left) of West Ziré fishing cooperative. Photo: Aby Sène-Harper

Our keen interest in understanding how researchers and practitioners used empowerment in conservation motivated our first deep dive into this critical topic. The project led us to two important and telling findings. Firstly, many authors did not provide a definition for what they meant by empowerment. Secondly, when we carefully looked at 26 articles that used empowerment over 30 years, those authors defined empowerment in nearly 20 different ways! Our findings confirmed our expectations that the term is as widespread, ambiguous, and flexible. This is why we recommend that conservationists and communities work together to define, measure, and

achieve empowerment.

As advocates for communities and their resource rights, we hope this forum article provokes thought and engagement from within the conservation community. We believe that empowerment is not only transformative for people who are affected by global conservation efforts, but also for funders and project managers who seek to achieve those seemingly elusive win-win conservation and development outcomes. We have seen many instances of empowered community members driving the advancement of meaningful conservation outcomes. Empowerment, in these cases, is achieved by the staking claim of resource rights by activists and leaders, through genuine policy and legal change within government, and through the (often slow) breaking of historical barriers by brave individuals. Conversely, when empowerment as a term is leveraged by researchers and practitioners without any meaningful efforts to engage with the concept, it can undermine local involvement and capacity. In other words, it may bring about perverse social and/or ecological incentives and outcomes instead of moving a project in the intended direction.

The empowerment of communities in conservation is not a short-term objective, but a long-term process that warrants more investigation and engagement by researchers and practitioners alike. Not only is the future of our credibility with communities on the line, but so is our ability to achieve long-lasting conservation success.

The article [Terms of empowerment: of conservation or communities?](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.



Lauren Redmore, Aby Sene-Harper, Dhananjaya Katju & Mike Petriello

Lauren Redmore: Lauren is a PhD candidate at Texas A&M where she studies human–elephant interactions in Northern Botswana. She is a former community-based conservation project manager and is interested in governance, resource rights, and rural change.

Aby Sene-Harper: Aby is a postdoctoral researcher in park and conservation area management in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management at Clemson University. Her research in Sub-Saharan Africa focuses on rural livelihoods, resource governance and tourism in relation to parks and protected areas. Her broader interests seeks to examine ways to (re)connect historically marginalized communities to parks and protected areas both in the USA and in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Michael Petriello: Mike is a PhD candidate and conservation social scientist at Texas A&M University. He currently focuses on campesino hunting culture and local and traditional knowledge in Nicaragua. His broader interests center on integrating the unseen/misrepresented cultures of marginalized and misunderstood groups into

conservation across diverse ecosystems and regions.

Dhananjaya Katju: Dhananjaya is an interdisciplinary environmental scientist with a diverse background in wildlife science, tropical ecology, conservation biology, and political ecology. His doctoral research at Texas A&M University applied an integrative approach to assess the roles of socio-cultural identities, livelihoods, and environmental policy in the governance and management of the Manas Tiger Reserve in north-eastern India.