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Using PRA for conflict resolution in national parks: lessons from a Venezuelan experience in Canaima National Park

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• Introduction

This article describes the experiences of a Venezuelan NGO, EcoNatura, in carrying out a conflict resolution project in Canaima National Park, Venezuela. PRA was the main methodological tool for research, education and action. It was the first time in Venezuela that PRA had been used for conflict resolution in a national park context. Hence, The first two years of this project have been a learning process for all those involved in its design and implementation. We share a few of the many lessons learned in this paper.

Project context

Canaima National Park is located in south-east Venezuela. The Park was established by the National Parks Institute (INPARQUES) in 1962 and covered an area of 10,000 km². Its size was increased to 30,000 km² in 1975 in order to safeguard the watershed functions of its river basins. The best known features of Canaima National Park are its flat-topped mountain formations known as 'tepui'.

The National Park is home to the Pemón indigenous people. Their entire population approaches 20,000, with more than half of the Pemón living within the Park. The traditional subsistence activities of the Pemón are swidden agriculture, hunting, fishing and gathering, although there is increasing work to be found in mining and tourism.

Many years of repression and the prohibition of the Pemón traditional subsistence activities followed the establishment of the Park. But since 1990, the Pemón have started to show

open resistance towards management policies. This is expressed, in the most extreme cases, in the form of death threats to Park personnel, the expulsion of park guards from certain communities, the destruction of a park guard post and the burning of several thousand hectares of forest. Conflicts usually remain latent and manifest themselves only when management policies come into direct contact with the interests of the Pemón¹. The Pemón increasingly demand to be involved in decision making, for example in the granting of tourism permits or for development projects that do not arise from local initiatives².

Project description

The 'Conflict Resolution in National Parks Project' was established in 1995 in order to assess INPARQUES' response to the persistent and increasing conflicts with the local inhabitants of the Canaima National Park. The Nature Conservancy-US suggested that EcoNatura should facilitate the process. The Nature Conservancy-US had been funding

¹ At present, the construction of a power line represents perhaps the strongest source of conflict between the state and the Pemón. The Pemón have rejected the power line because they fear it will bring large scale mining into the Park.

² The Pemón have to apply to INPARQUES for permits to construct new tourism infrastructure. Permits are authorised at INPARQUES' office in Caracas, a lengthy and bureaucratic process. Once the permits are granted, the park superintendent monitors the construction to ensure it complies with the conditions established in the permit. Tourism regulations have created a clash between Pemón and INPARQUES' interests because there had been no attempt to allow Pemón participation in the definition of tourism regulation in the park.

park infrastructure in Canaima for a number of years and was in search of interventions that would address the social conflicts in the area. As the main objective of the project was to influence changes in the management of the park, the planning and implementation of the project activities were carried out in collaboration with INPARQUES.

The project was carried out in two stages. The first stage (October 1995 - September 1996) was devoted to evaluating the main resource use problems and conflicts in the Park. Three different types of PRA workshops (see Table 1) were carried out in this first stage in order to:

- assess the main management problems of the park;
- initiate a communication process between the main parties involved in the conflict; and,
- start to define, in a participatory manner, possible solutions to existing management problems and conflicts.

In the second stage of the project (October 1996 - September 1997) activities were directed to building INPARQUES' capacity to work in a more collaborative way with the Pemón. One of the priorities identified during the first stage of the project was the development of a positive relationship between INPARQUES and the Pemón, with a key aspect being the development of a proactive park management approach to local productive activities, rather than a simple reaction to their effects. In the first phase, tourism was identified as an economic activity which presented serious management problems both to the Pemón and the park administration. It was thus selected as an activity which would allow those involved to start building a more positive proactive relationship.

Hence, during this second stage of the project a special effort was made to strengthen the capacity of the Pemón in tourism management. PRA was used in this case for the assessment of community tourism management problems as well as for problem solving and planning (see Table 1)³.

³ Based on the results of the evaluation of community tourism management in Liwo-Riwo and

At present, an extension of the project for a further three years is being negotiated directly with INPARQUES as part of a national programme for strengthening the National Parks System.

PRA methods

A variety of participatory methods were used in the different workshops: matrices, transect walks, brainstorming, group interviews, group drawings and role play. Brainstorming and matrices were the main methods used in workshops held in local communities to focus on peoples' perceptions of the National Park and of INPARQUES as the management authority (workshops 'b' and 'c'; see Table 1). Group interviews and matrices were the main methods used in the workshop for the definition of conflict resolution strategies (workshop 'd').

There was an attempt to organise a workshop which would bring all the stakeholders (Pemón and local and regional institutions) together to discuss different perceptions of the Park's conflicts and management problems. However, this strategy was aborted due to the unfavourable context: the views about the park and its management were too polarised among the stakeholders. Hence, a more low-profile strategy, using group interviews, was adopted to allow INPARQUES to listen to different stakeholders' perceptions of the Park and its present management.

It proved easier to use more informal and creative PRA methods such as transect walks, drawings and role playing in workshops where the main focus of the workshop was *not* the discussion of conflicts or management problems. Where games were introduced to 'break the ice' in workshops that were intended to give the community space to express their views of the Park and of INPARQUES, participants felt insulted and 'treated as children'. Games, role playing, transect walks and drawings proved useful only when working with park guards

Peraitepuy, a series of training and capacity building activities were developed to strengthen the capacity of the Pemón to manage tourism. These included training for local guides, a first aid course, English classes and producing sign posts to aid tourism management.

(workshop type 'a'). or when working on community tourism management (workshops 'f' and 'g').

Workshop organisation

Most of the objectives of the workshops were defined by EcoNatura together with INPARQUES. There was very little

participation from the Pemón in the workshop design. The 'tools' and techniques were suggested mostly by EcoNatura. but the final content was decided together with INPARQUES personnel. primarily from the regional and local level.

Table 1: Type of workshops held in first stage of the Conflict Resolution Project in the Canaima National Park⁴.

Workshop	Participants
First stage (October 1996-September 1997):	
a) Assessment of conflicts and threats	10 Park guards and superintendent
b) Evaluation of local perceptions of the National Park	12 Pemón leaders and teachers from Kamarata
c) Evaluation of local perceptions of the National Park	24 Pemón leaders and teachers of Kavanayen and Liwo-Riwo 5 INPARQUES personnel (local. regional. national headquarters)
d) Definition of conflict resolution strategies	7 INPARQUES personnel (local. regional. national headquarters)
Workshop	Participants
Second stage (October 1996-September 1997):	
e) Evaluation of tourism impacts from a Pemón perspective	31 Pemón leaders from 9 different communities
f) Evaluation of community tourism management problems	29 Community members of Paraitepuy and INPARQUES local level
g) Evaluation of community tourism management problems	28 Community members of Liwo-Riwo and INPARQUES local level.

⁴ There were always at least two people from EcoNatura participating as facilitators in the workshops; in some cases. there were as many as four.

The organisation of the workshops carried out in Pemón communities differed in the first and second stages. In the first stage, workshops were planned primarily with the community 'captains' (chiefs). Informal conversations were held between EcoNatura and the local leaders to discuss the idea of a possible workshop that would allow the Pemón to express their views about the Park. A date was fixed and the captains were left in charge of all the necessary local arrangements.

In the second stage of the project, the initial discussions were held through community meetings. Open meetings were organised to discuss the interest in, and need for, an assessment of community tourism management. Prior to these meetings some community problems in tourism management had already become evident, and an assessment had been sought from INPARQUES.

In all the community workshops, the selection of participants was an internal process carried out either by the captains or by the entire community through community meetings. A total of 9 visits were made by EcoNatura to the Park to carry out the activities. Each workshop lasted an average of 3 days, although arrival in the communities generally took place two days ahead of time to allow for planning and organisation. Most of the workshops were facilitated both by EcoNatura and INPARQUES, although there were several occasions in which EcoNatura facilitated alone to provide a more neutral ground for communication.

• Achievements

A space for organising ideas: the PRA methodology used in the project was well received by those who participated in the workshops. It has allowed the development of a thorough, joint analysis of the existing problems of the Park, organising ideas, perceptions and opinions, and, at the same

time, raising critical awareness of the roots of the existing conflicts.

Bridging a communication gap: PRA has proved useful in bringing together, for the first time in the 30-year existence of the Park, local communities and INPARQUES personnel to discuss the Pemón's views of the park and to start developing agreements on necessary policy changes in the Park management. Some of the deep-rooted apprehensions of the Pemón towards the Park and INPARQUES are shown in Table 2 together with their suggestions for how these can be addressed (Table 3).

Development of a positive working relationship between INPARQUES and the Pemón: PRA has been the basis for developing a positive working relationship between INPARQUES and the Pemón. Developing a practical and problem-solving conflict resolution approach has proved useful both for the analysis of local perceptions of INPARQUES and of the Park, and for the assessment of community development issues, mostly related to tourism management.

A different view of the National Park: the importance of the Park has focused on national level biodiversity and watershed protection, issues which are not perceived as significant by the Pemón. Some of the PRA methods used, such as the resource use matrix (see Table 4), allowed the Pemón to express their views of the Park, a perspective which focuses on their own valuation of natural resources, and puts them in the centre of the park and not outside it. Visualising how important the Park and its resources are for the Pemón created common ground with INPARQUES, and, to a certain extent, justified the existence of the Park to them.

Changes in policy making: the first two years of the project have created awareness within INPARQUES of the views of the Pemón and of the danger of not adapting policy making to the particular social and cultural characteristic of the Park.

Table 2. Benefits and limitations of the Park to the Pemón. Brainstorming exercise. Local perceptions of the national park workshop. carried out in Kavanayen. April 1996 together with Pemón leaders and teachers.

Benefits	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The park has limited the immigration of <i>Creoles</i> to our land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - INPARQUES is here to prohibit - INPARQUES is associated with something negative for us - There have been very negative experiences in the past: National Guard (a militarised police force) has taken people to prison for doing 'conucos' (slash-and burn agriculture) - INPARQUES is perceived as a tool for the extermination of the indigenous peoples - The communities are not taken into account. The plants and animals are more important to INPARQUES - INPARQUES has never explained to us the objective and aims of the park - There is a lack of communication between INPARQUES and other institutions of the river basin - By law the Pemón have priority for tourism management but in reality people from 'outside' are given priority. This limits our possibility to develop in tourism management - Now we are not free to built houses where ever we want. We have to ask permission from INPARQUES. From owners we have been converted into to slaves

Table 3. Necessary changes in INPARQUES from the point of view of the Pemón. Brainstorming exercise. Local Perceptions of the National Park Workshop. carried out in Kavanayen. April 1996 together with Pemón leaders and teachers.

Changes that the Pemón would like to see in the management of the Park	Ways in which the Pemón could contribute with these changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We would like to see the dialogue between the community and INPARQUES continue after this workshop. - Don't allow the National Guard to regulate in the park. - Explain to the National Guard why we, the indigenous people, act as we act, in order for the abuses disappear. - INPARQUES should stop being indifferent towards other government institutions in order to achieve more institutional co-ordination. - We would like the indigenous peoples' tourism and housing permits to be taken seriously and dealt with faster. - We would like to see INPARQUES assess us in relation to environmental conservation measures that also take into account the rights of the Pemón inside the park. - We would like to see INPARQUES respecting the law and really give priority to the Pemón in tourism management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Safeguarding and promoting the Pemón culture. - Receiving the people that come to exchange ideas with us in the same way that we have treated you. - Being in continuous contact with INPARQUES (in the good and bad moments). - Achieving a better community organisation that allows the integration of all the Pemón.

Table 4: Canaima National Park's natural resource importance, use and change according to the Pemón. Local perceptions of the National Park Workshop, carried out in Kavanayen, April 1996 together with Pemón leaders and teachers

Park Component	Importance	Changes	Causes	Consequences
Forests	-for water cycle -fauna habitat -materials for construction: houses, boats. -medicinal plants -protection of soils -for agriculture -attractive to tourists -wood, orchids, fruits	-less forests	-burning: savanna fires reach forest, difficult to control -deforestation	-the rivers will dry-out -lack of materials for construction -no more home for fauna -less humidity
Savanna	-place to build houses -home for rodents and birds -straw for ceilings -ants: protein -scenic beauty	-destruction of savanna -more savanna	-burning (in and out of season) -visitors-erosion -road construction	-will turn into desert -fauna will become extinct -more warm weather -no more refuge for rodents
Pemón	-first settlers -protectors of nature -natural and cultural patrimony -provide services to tourist	-clothing -tradition and culture -bigger communities -less sharing -food, housing, education, music, economy	-impact of 'western' society	-if the changes continue the Pemón will disappear -more immigration of Pemón to cities

Table 4 explanatory note: This is only a small sample of the final matrix. The real matrix also includes other park components such as rivers, water falls, tepuis, animals, fish, minerals, tourists. The park components are those that the workshop participants considered relevant to include. This matrix was first worked in small groups and later completed by all the workshop participants. The final matrix was approximately 3m x 2m in size and took a day to complete. Due to the fact that a considerable number of the participants only speak Pemón, the park components were drawn by some of the workshop participants in the first column of the matrix.

EcoNatura is now commonly consulted in decisions related to the Park, so that decisions represent the needs and views of the Pemón. Although it would be ideal if the Pemón were consulted directly and through their own institutions, this change at least represents a shift in the traditional unilateral, autocratic decision-making process that has commonly characterised Venezuelan government institutions such as INPARQUES.

- **Problems encountered**
- *Mistrust and dependency on a paternalistic institutional approach.* The deeply rooted negative image of INPARQUES was a barrier to developing trust at the community level. Additionally, the conventional institutional approach to working with indigenous communities in Venezuela is paternalistic and based on agency-recipient relationships. The Pemón have become accustomed to this pattern when working with 'outside' institutions. Thus, developing a different working

relationship based on local participation. local perceptions and knowledge created confusion and resistance.

- *Language and cultural barriers:* Language sometimes proved a limitation to using PRA. The majority of the Pemón population speak Spanish but think and reason better in Pemón. There were always Pemón translators in the workshops and although everything said in Spanish was translated into Pemón, only a small fraction of what was said in Pemón was translated into Spanish. This is doubtless a community protection mechanism, whereby not all that is said and discussed in the community is shared with the 'outside'. However, it meant that in many cases there were communication barriers that did not allow for a fluid workshop dynamic. This could have been avoided if the 'facilitators' had spoken the local language, if there had been more involvement of the community in the planning of the activities and/or if Pemón people had participated in the project as facilitators.
- *Lack of immediate follow-up of PRA activities.* The headquarters of the project is in Caracas, which is two days (1,400 km) away from Canaima National Park. Visits to the Park were carried out every two months and lasted for 15 to 20 days. This meant that it was difficult to follow up PRA workshops in the days and weeks immediately after the activities were carried out. Community discussion usually followed the PRA workshops, especially those related to tourism management. After the workshops communities thought things over and made their own changes at their own pace. Being in the area during the time in which misinterpretations, doubts and confusions could arise would have been ideal but was logistically difficult.
- *Using PRA without enough prior understanding of the social and political community structure.* Only one series of interviews - in order to get a general picture of the management problems of the Park - was carried out before starting the PRA process. The project faced quite a serious setback in one of the communities because insufficient attention had been paid to power structures before initiating

the workshops at the community level. PRA can create unexpected results and expose social and political friction within a community. It would have been better to dedicate more time prior to the PRA workshops to understanding the power relations in the communities.

- *Resistance to change at the institutional level.* PRA proved useful for initiating the conflict resolution process, especially in promoting an understanding of the perceptions and interests of the Pemón in relation to the National Park. However, the PRA process, on its own, does not guarantee changes in policy making. Much effort is still needed to ensure that the results of PRA are used to influence decision making and to change the perceptions of government officials about local communities, especially about indigenous communities. It took one and a half years for INPARQUES (especially the headquarters) to start valuing and taking into account EcoNatura's work. Much more time and effort will be needed for the Pemón to become part of decision-making processes in the Park.

Conclusion

One of the main conclusions of the project is that resource-use conflicts are not necessarily wholly a product of incompatible or opposing interests. Indeed, they commonly arise from a lack of communication between the state and local communities. In this case, lack of communication is related to the traditional autocratic approach of environmental management in countries like Venezuela, where the state has the monopoly and control over resource management, and local knowledge is neither recognised as important nor taken into account in policy making.

In this respect PRA has been useful for initiating the communication process between INPARQUES and the Pemón, in order to understand how the Park and the management policies are viewed at the local level. It has been particularly useful in enabling National Park officials to experience first-hand, through workshops and interviews, the views of the Pemón, and other local stakeholders, about the park. They now understand why local people think changes should be made in the way the

Park is managed in order for conflicts to decrease.

However, there is a limit to the extent to which PRA methods can contribute to the resolution of the existing conflicts in the Park. The first two years of the Conflict Resolution Project in Canaima National Park have only been the beginning of a complex process which requires much effort to change power structures, ideologies and fixed patterns in policy making. The challenge in the future for institutions, like EcoNatura, and for the Pemón, is to influence policy making in order to address the underlying issues in existing conflicts, such as legal land rights and shared decision-making processes in the management of the Park. PRA methods alone will not be enough to influence these necessary changes.

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