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PRA for people and parks: the case of Mole National Park, Ghana

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• Introduction

In 1993 we used Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to assess people's perceptions of the benefits and difficulties of their life near Mole National Park¹. The assessment was meant to initiate a planning process involving local people in the on-going management of the park. The output of the work is being incorporated in the overall park management plan.

This article is written to encourage others working in wildlife issues to consider PRA approaches in all aspects of 'peoples and parks' research. At times it is difficult to convince scientifically oriented individuals of the validity of a PRA approach, but the authors found PRA useful and frequently the only approach acceptable to villagers, biased by years of mistrust and conflict with the Ghanaian Department of Game and Wildlife (GWD).

• Study context

The study area consisted of 27 villages surrounding Mole National Park in the Northern Region of Ghana. The villages are remote, with vehicle access limited to dry season paths only. There are few services available in the villages and high levels of poverty and malnutrition persist. The major activities in the area are subsistence agriculture, hunting and gathering.

We found a situation of mistrust, resentment, and in certain villages outright antagonism toward GWD. Six villages were evicted from the park in 1964 and resettled in the surrounding area. The eviction, together with the general loss of access to traditional hunting, gathering, farming areas and religious sites, were expressed as the main sources of these feelings. Our challenge was to build new bridges between the communities and GWD. PRA was the most appropriate approach offering opportunities of restoring a level of trust, dignity and respect.

• Methods

We made a minimum of three visits to each of the 27 villages: a preliminary introductory visit; a major assessment visit; and a follow-up/feedback visit averaging three days in each village. We held village meetings to conduct open discussions on issues identified by the villagers as being crucial to their cooperation with GWD. Meetings were held separately with both women and men.

The following methods were used: local histories, resource and social mapping exercises, time lines on agriculture and water and food availability, non-formal livelihoods, and transect walks of village water and land resources. Initially we also attempted to use a semi-structured questionnaire but this was soon abandoned as it generated high levels of suspicion among the villagers whose previous experience with questionnaires was in connection with the forced evacuation of six villages from the park in 1964.

¹ As part of an IUCN (World Conservation Union)/Department of Game and Wildlife (GWD) park management planning team.

• Problems encountered

We encountered a number of difficulties in our work but the most significant was the suspicion of and antagonism towards GWD by the villagers (see Box 1). Our experience with PRA shows that such barriers can be overcome with patience and the open honesty necessary for the approach. Two other problems encountered during the exercise were time constraints and language barriers. Given the time period within which the management plan for the park was to be produced, not enough time was available for an exhaustive interaction with each village. Since each village had its own history of

relations with the park, progress was not equal everywhere. At least four to five full days' residence in each village would have been preferable to overcome extreme levels of distrust and conduct a fuller interaction.

Working in 27 villages with nine different languages and little understanding of major Ghanaian languages or English presented communication problems in some of the communities. In such cases there was the tendency for dominance by a few individuals or complete deference to the village chief. We worked most successfully with interpreters resident in each of the villages rather than taking interpreters along. Notwithstanding the limits of these constraints, we received a greater level of cooperation and information from the villagers than might have been expected.

BOX 1

THE CASE OF MURUGU

Murugu is a Hanga village on the southeast border of the park in which the PRA was carried out. Although unique, Murugu typifies many of the other communities around the park. The people lost significant farm lands during the formation of the reserve. In 1957 and again in 1969 the boundary line was moved to enclose larger portions of their land. Unlike the six evacuated communities, their village has never been moved. Their assumption, following our initial visit, was that GWD was coming to assess what would be required to move the village so the park could be further expanded.

Thus on our second visit we found ourselves in a difficult situation. Working against us was not only the historical animosity toward GWD but an additional suspicion of the true purpose of our presence in the village. Pent-up frustrations toward the park were thrust at us in two hours of bitter recounting of past relations.

We were able to move beyond the frustrations by asking the village elders to narrate the history of the village and the history of relations with the department through the creation of the reserve and its ongoing management. During this narration the key issues from the village's perspective were identified and we were then able to develop interest in addressing them. By showing interest in the historical account of the formation of the village and its ongoing relations with the conservation area we encouraged broader participation in the discussion and people began to freely share their views.

The village was most upset about the park because the majority of their gods had been left inside the reserve and they were not given access to perform regular sacrifices. They felt the park had not only taken away their best farm land, restricted their hunting activities and disturbed their subsistence gathering sites, but had also stopped them from going to perform regular sacrifices to their gods. The villagers stated that their inability to "*satisfy their gods make their matter no correct*" (failure to sacrifice adversely affects their living conditions).

Following that visit Murugu became the most open and trusting of the park villages. We attribute the dramatic change to the trust building capacity inherent in the PRA approach.

• Lessons learned

We learned important lessons during this process. The first was that PRA is a useful approach for building trust in latent antagonistic situations. When the conservation traditions of people are recognised, acknowledged and appreciated, people are often more likely to trust the 'foreign' element among them.

The importance of making no promises or raising any hopes in our conversations was crucial. Since we were attempting to understand better the difficulties and benefits of living in the area around the park we did not encourage any particular issues. This confused the villagers because most people who had previously come to talk to them were only interested in one issue: water supply, health, roads or education. Thus they wanted to know what GWD was going to bring them so they could tell us what we wanted to know. When told that we were not bringing anything but were in their villages to learn from them about their lives, they were confused. When we assured them that we would be reporting exactly what they told and showed us, they were very anxious to narrate and demonstrate their everyday conditions. Thus we felt an honesty which may have been missed if an agenda had been obvious.

It was particularly important that PRA provided opportunities for the elderly in each village to pass on local histories and traditions to young people. We frequently realised the successful transition from RRA into PRA when our presence no longer mattered; the elders were teaching the young and we had taken the role of members of an audience. Our visits were thus making genuine contributions to the natural processes of information transmission within the village societies; a process which is increasingly threatened through the breakdown of these traditional societies.

PRA also allowed the villagers to reflect on their daily lives and to appreciate things normally taken for granted, such as picking *dawa-dawa*, shea nuts, raffia, thatch, medicinal herbs and the continued existence of animals to hunt. Initially villagers did not consider these items as benefits of living in the area.

Usually the first person to mention such items would be rebuked by others. But as we encouraged them to speak about anything, the villagers would begin to consider daily products and benefits which they normally thought too trivial to mention and took for granted. It was also an opportunity for them to assess the usefulness of some of the wild resources available to them and a challenge to use them to better their living conditions.

While it is important not to assess people for whom there is no intention of assisting or empowering, it is equally important to allow villages to prioritise their own needs without the bias of what any given organisation attempts to address.

We also realised that the growing pressure to institutionalise the PRA approach would limit its applicability. Using the approach in 27 different villages, we had to remember that each community was unique and may need to be approached in a different manner from previous villages. So while our goals in each community remained consistent, discussions were held to suit the village rather than what was convenient for us. PRA must remain extremely flexible if it is to evolve and adapt to the ever growing number of situations to which it may be applied. Despite the obvious benefits of having a very structured approach in gaining increased legitimacy within scientific realms, too much structure may bring PRA more toward science than it will bring science toward PRA. If PRA remains flexible and adaptable, then science will not be able to ignore it for too long.

Furthermore, while not underestimating the value of structured or semi-structured questionnaires in PRA, it is important to assess the past experience of people with such survey instruments and their probable reaction to them before using them. Our experience shows that in an area of distrust and suspicion, documentation (including note taking) must be approached rather carefully, and always with the permission of the people.

- **Conclusion**

The communities around Mole National Park have been made, over the years, to feel that they only have a negative impact on conservation and do not have much to offer GWD. But PRA builds confidence and self-appreciation. The villagers around Mole National Park have already begun to request input into the management of the area. This bodes well for the future of the park. The current trend toward involving local people in protected area management can only work when peoples' confidence is strengthened and they are empowered. We found PRA to be a better approach to building such confidence and empowerment than any other previously applied. If obtaining community participation is crucial to ensuring the sustainability of protected areas then PRA must be viewed as an important component of any conservation approach.

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NOTE

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