

Community Outreach: Preventing and Resolving Conflict in Nam Et -- Phou Louey, National Protected Area

Training Guidelines

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Community Outreach

Why do it?

If there were no people then we would not have to manage natural resources and biodiversity. It would manage its self. Anyone interested in working with natural resource management at any level must consider all the people involved with the resource or set of resources being considered.

In our case, the management of the Nam Et Phou Louey (NEPL) National Protected Area as a functioning NPA requires that we work with all humans that are part of this protected area. This includes everyone from local people living inside and around the protected area all the up to the district governors, provincial and national officials. Too often people assume that we can work with only the people that are responsible for the resources, such as forestry officials or district officials. This approach misses 1If we do this we will be missing important participants in the overall management of the NEPL NPA. Who are the people that really have affects, influence or control over the NEPL NPA?

Hopefully your list of participants included the local communities in and around the NPA. Working with local communities as part of the NPA management is critical to the ongoing success of a functioning NPA. How many staff work for the NPA? Now divide 4,200 square kilometers by this number. You will see how many square kilometers each person is responsible for managing. It is impossible to do it alone! You must have the support of the local communities and government officials.

Managing any natural resources or “doing conservation” requires three main works: public education and participation; ecological research and monitoring; and legislation and enforcement (Figure 1).

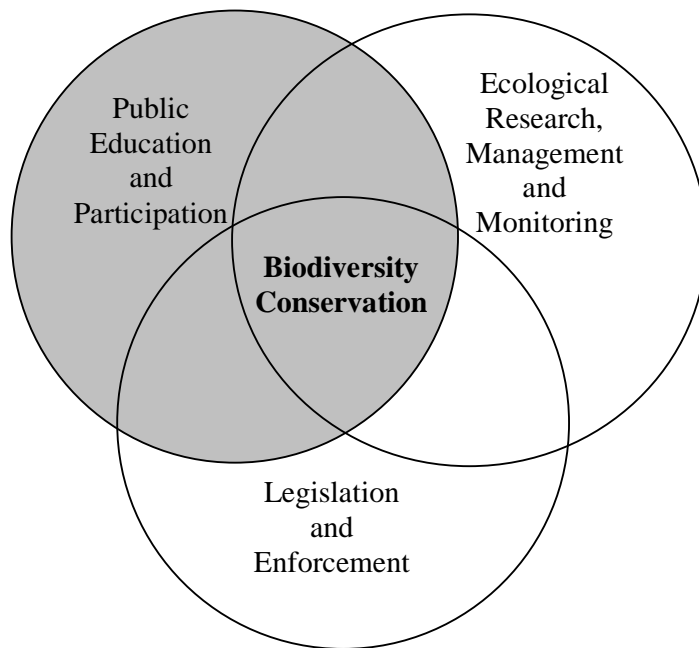


Figure 1. Effective biodiversity conservation programs rely on 1) public education and participation 2) ecological research, management, and monitoring, and 3) a legal framework that enforcement is based (modified from Jacobson 1995).

What is Conservation Education and Community Outreach?

The goal of conservation education and community outreach is to build relationship through a common understanding about the natural resources that is in the best interest of both the government and the local communities.

This sounds easy. So why is it often so difficult?

The Lao government has a particular mandate to manage, protect or conserve natural resources. Some of these are in national protected areas, such as NEPL NPA. The national government has given the provincial and district governments a set of guidelines in the form of laws, decrees and orders on how best to manage the NEPL NPA. At the same time the provincial and district governments have their own mandates for managing the natural resources, which in some cases may be more restrictive than the national governments policy.

In addition to the government mandates for the NEPL NPA and surrounding lands, the local communities have very real needs and wants for the same natural resources both inside and around the NEPL NPA. These may be basic daily needs such as food, while others might be socio—economic, health, or spiritual requirements. Regardless there are real needs.

Relationship between PA staff and communities

The communities in and around the NPA have been established well before the PA staff have been working with the NPA. Therefore many of these communities have had past experiences with government staff from both the DAFO and the PAFO. We may not know these experiences and relationships. In some cases the experiences may be very good and in some cases they may be very poor. Regardless we must realize that the people living in these communities do have existing impressions about the NPA and its staff.

The communities have pre-existing values regarding the NPA and staff, building the trust and respect of local communities takes dedication, patience and time. Without the trust and respect of the local people you will not get any support from the communities. Trust and respect comes from an honest relationship. Once this relationship is established the communities will begin to share their beliefs and ideas with you, while becoming more open to the ideals of the NPA staff. If the relationship is spoiled or doesn't exist at all, the project is doomed to failure. Villagers are very good at saying, "Yea Yea Yea" in the face of government or staff visitors regardless of what their mind is thinking or their heart is feeling. However with a healthy trustworthy relationship the villagers will likely mean it when they say, "Yea Yea Yea." These relationships take time and lots of face to face discussions. We should not expect these relationships to just happen. They are a process that evolves over time. As the relationship between NPA staff and community strengthens the unity, cooperativeness, common views and interactions will increase over time.

Communication skills

Understanding each others points of view comes with "good communication"--without good communication the people of concern can't understand each other and conflict often arises. Good communication requires that both parties actively listen to the one another. In Lao, the government has established rules and regulations that are established for the local people to manage the natural resources. At the same time the local people have immediate needs to fulfill. It is very important that both sides effectively communicate. In many instances neither party effectively communicates their issues and conflicts arise.

Effective conservation education and outreach is founded on effective methods of communication. Only when you are able to communicate effectively with target audiences in diverse settings about conservation problems will you be able to begin solving the problems (Jacobson, 1999).

In natural resource management, communicating project objectives, gaining public support and educating people about the importance of sustainable use of resources is called conservation education and outreach. All of these forms of communication have one thing in common; there is transfer of information or beliefs between one person or a group of people and another person or group of people with a desired outcome or change in behavior (Figure 2) (Stewart, 1999).

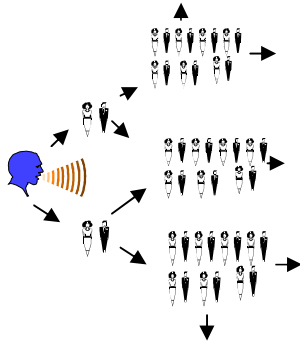


Figure 2. Information is transferred from one person or a group of people to another person or group of people.

How does communication actually happen?

It is important to realize what makes good communication happen. Have you ever been to a very exciting presentation? Have you ever been to a boring presentation? What was the difference between the two presentations? What made them exciting or boring?

Every experience in our daily lives is a series of small communications. Humans engage in the following process while communicating all the time (Figure 3):

1. You use your senses to see, hear, taste, smell or touch something presented to you.
2. Following sensation you interpret what you have sensed
3. Then you form feelings both positive and negative.
4. You develop intentions as to how you plan to act upon your feelings.
5. Intentions result in action.

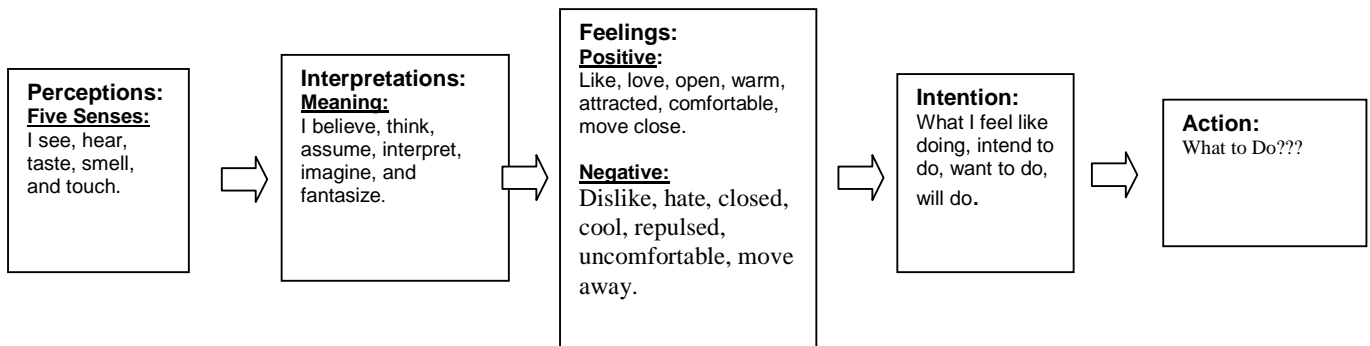


Figure 3. Communication Model.

Village visits

Visiting the villages is the only way in which NPA staff will begin to understand the local community while building a trustworthy relationship. Through these visits staff will begin to understand the issues facing local communities. It is through this understanding that both sides begin to reach solutions to difficult issues facing both sides.

Behavior in villages

NPA staff must respect local people. Remember that “people are people the world around.” Even if some of us have very different culture and tradition we are fundamentally all the same. “We all have red blood-- we are all the same.” Fundamentally everyone likes to be liked and likes to be loved. Conversely, people repel when they are not liked or not loved. People don’t like to be looked down on in any situation. When visiting the villages in the village or in the forest staff must remember to respect local community members while doing their job.

Does and Don’ts

- Always have clear objects for visiting the villages. Even if the visit is to explore local activities in the village you should have an objective for visiting.
- Respect the village authorities including the elders and influential people in the village. Even when we disagree we need to respect people’s points of views and perceived needs.
- Show your generosity by bringing snacks or beverages to the meetings. In some cases cigarettes are appropriate. Are your relationships real or just your job?
- Don’t make promises to local communities that can not be met. Always follow through with the plans that have been made between the villagers and the NPA.
- Don’t waste the local people’s time. The time they spend meeting with government officials is time they could be investing in their own activities.
- Avoid paying people to do their own work. If the village is benefiting from locally managed natural resources, why should the NPA be paying them to participate?
- Working in local communities should not be seen as “project” work. It is a collaborative work between the national, province, district, and village. If it is seen as a project there will be some short term gains but no long term benefits.

Conflict Resolution

Preventing conflict before it needs to be resolved

Villagers rely on 50-70% of their non-rice food coming directly from the forest. Many families’ daily requirements are dependent on the forest. Often the values of these resources are overlooked by local people and local governments. This oversight comes from the cash calculations of goods and services from the forest disregarding the dollar value of goods received from the forest without any cash cost. Hence most government policy has been established to create alternative livelihoods for the local people reducing their reliance on the forest to a village based source of cash that can meet the daily villager needs.

There are many lessons learned regarding replacing or substituting for resource use versus adding to existing natural resource use. Unfortunately, many SE Asian countries have tried integrated conservation and development programs as a way of replacing or substituting the villager's needs from the forest which most have failed (Wells, 1999). In almost every case interventions designed to replace the resources extraction from the forest became additive measure instead of replacing the resource use from nature. The villagers became better off because they receive a new source of income to "add" to the existing natural resource base. However, these interventions are seen as a failure, because the natural resource rarely received any additional management or protection to ensure sustainable use.

In many places the relationship between local families and the natural resources creates a source of conflict. Villagers want resources and government and non-government agencies want to manage and protect the resources. Tension builds between the different groups creating conflict of interests and ultimately ending in disagreement.

There are many conditions and steps to mediating and negotiating potential conflicts that may arise between the NPA and local communities when local community members are denied access to the natural resources within the core zone of the protected area near their homes. Conflict can be prevented by creating agreements before problems arise (Anonymous, 2003; Stone *et. al.*, 1999). However, in many cases local communities and the government have pre-existing conflicts building that creates unpleasant feelings between the two groups.

Minimizing conflict comes with "good communication"-- without good communication the people of concern can't understand each others point of view. Good communication requires that both parties actively listen to the one another. The government established rules and regulations are imposed upon the populous to manage the natural resources. At the same time the local people have immediate needs to fulfill. In most instances neither party effectively communicates their true needs and issues.

Negotiations

The government has a set of rules and regulations or laws that limit certain activities within a particular location for particular groups of species. On the other hand the government has put in place a structure of rights for the local communities living near these natural resources. The government has authority in place while the villager is trying to fulfill its needs for natural resources. In nearly all situations this will fail. In many cases, the government's policy and laws are in place but the implementing agencies lack the ability to enforce the rules and regulations governing the natural resources. Villagers respond by sneaking around rather than using their legal rights to the resources as stipulated in the government's laws. Often conflict arises between the different stakeholders from this scenario. Perceived conflict can hide the real interests by creating a sense of survival and winning rather than examining the real interests of both sides (Anonymous, 2003). Under these circumstances, the logical method to mediate and negotiate conflict is to investigate each party's needs, wants, and interests. Bringing the local community's needs and the government's rules and regulations to the table each party will see common ground between both parties, thus creating a "win-win" situation (Appendix 1).

Preventing or resolving conflict

Before interests can be reconciled between the two parties there must be dialog and active listening between the local communities and the government. This must be done in such a way that local people feel heard and not just talked down too. No one side may dominate the process or the other side will feel outplayed from the onset. Mediating between these two entities will take time and require multiple meetings. Preliminary meetings should be held between government representation and local communities separately. This will prevent government from intimidating the local community leaders and provide a comfortable platform to begin resolution. At each of these preliminary meetings the groups will define the problem or issue as they view it. Following the preliminary meetings, a representative that both parties trust will summarize the problems as described by the local community and government representatives. If desired, written copies of the preliminary meeting will be distributed to both parties for confirmation.

Following the preliminary meetings, the mediator holds a three way meeting with both the villagers and the government. This meeting must be held at the village so that local people are not intimidated by the government buildings and the threat of saying something wrong. The setting of this meeting should be friendly and centered around food. It should be nice to have the meeting late in the day so it can gradually slip into a social gathering later in the evening. Throughout the meeting it will be the mediator's job to keep both parties focused on the defined issues. People attending the meeting must respect each others opinions and feelings. The mediator must be aware of any deviations from the core issues at hand. The mediator should be looking for conciliatory gestures. These are the gestures that allude to an understanding by one side regarding the other sides position. The third party should watch carefully and be prepared to enhance these gestures when they arise. At the same time the third party must maintain silence allowing for the process to continue uninterrupted. As the two groups reach a "break though" the facilitator should begin to seize the opportunity balancing out the concessions and steer it towards an agreement. As the two parties begin to list concrete actions for resolution the mediator should write them down on a flip chart. After the two sides exhaust all the options for agreement the mediator reviews the lists and discusses each point for clarity. The meeting closes with the understanding that a minute is written and both sides will sign the minutes.

Following this meeting a second three-way meeting must be scheduled to discuss the terms of the agreement. Each side should bring corresponding documentation such as: legislation, land agreements, village use permits, or concessionary agreements to help establish the agreement. More than likely there will be some negotiating by each side to establish a draft representative agreement. There should be specific actions spelled out in the agreement. For example certain benefits may cease to exist if the local communities break the agreement. These penalties are designed to deter distrust in the agreement. . This will make it clear what the consequences are if the agreement is not followed by both sides of the agreement.

After both parties are satisfied with the agreements copies of the agreement will be taken back to representatives of all stakeholders covered by the agreement. Both parties have a specific amount of time to review the agreement and make comments. Representatives from both parties will come back together for an official agreement signing ceremony, and the agreement will be sent to the district governs office for approval. The governor's office will sign the documents making them legal. There are more detailed steps in negotiation which are beyond the scope of this paper.

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Appendix 1

Excerpts from :

Hansel, T., S. Saypanya, and S. Sengthavidet. 2007. Workshop for planning conservation education 20-21/2/2007; Village outreach visits in five key villages in Viengthong and Viengkham Districts 24/2 -- 5/3/2007. Wildlife Conservation Society, Vientiane.

Village Visits

Methodology

Objectives for village visits in Viengthong and Viengkham Districts.

1. To give the tiger outreach team an opportunity to understand more details about the direct and indirect threats as outlined in Tony Lynam and Venevongphets workshop reports.
2. Allow the outreach team to build rapport with five key villages near the NEPL NPA core zones.
3. Listen to the villagers responses on how they think tiger and prey (wildlife) populations can be raised by 50% over the next ten years.
4. Solicit assistance from the villages near the core zone to help the NEPL NPA (government) raise tiger and prey populations by 50% over 10 years.

The outreach team planned to visit five villages: Buam Fat, Nam Neurn and Sakok of Viengthong district followed by Na Bueng and Don Nuern villages in Viengthong district. These villages were selected based on previous work done in 2005 and 2006 with the expectation of working in the future with these communities on sustainably managing wildlife within the village use area and protecting the NPA core zone. This visit is one of many visits planned for each of these communities in the near future.

The outreach team timed the visits to arrive in the village on the evening before we intended to have our “official” meeting. There are many benefits to meeting the village the evening before and sleeping in the village. It gives the outreach team an opportunity to make appointments with members of the village committee, and allows informal time to better understand each other. We informed the village head men that we would like to meet with the village committee for about three hours on the following day.

Our meetings opened with an introduction from one district staff, comments from Santi about the objectives of the visit, followed by addition comments from Troy Hansel on the government and international views regarding the importance of natural resources in the village use area and the core zone of the NPA. The opening was designed to set the tone for discussing the issues surrounding the general decline of wildlife in the village use area and the core zone of the NEPL NPA. Our team reiterated, “We came to listen more than to talk.” This discussion generated a list of potential problems towards the natural resources at all levels. In some instances the conversations diverged from the central theme of increasing wildlife populations to perceived needs by the villagers.

Our team listened and noted perceived needs for further discussion as related to the management of existing resources provided freely by the forest near their village.

Our team followed by asking direct questions about the perceived needs while bringing the discussion back to the benefits the community receives from the forests both in the village use area and the core zone of the NPA. This was done to show the economic benefits that are often overlooked by the local communities and government officials. We then asked the committee to describe the wildlife populations in the past when the oldest man present was a boy, and when the youngest man present was a boy. Then we directed the conversation to the present and future. What will the wildlife population be like for the children of your village when they grow up? Do you want more wildlife in your village use area? What do we (the village and the NPA) need to do to increase wildlife in these areas? Our team then made lists of the most important and limiting factors that are causing wildlife populations to decrease or preventing wildlife populations from increasing.

We then asked the committee the value of NTFPs and wildlife the village gets from the forests. This conversation lead to the perceived needs community members described earlier as the limiting factors for cooperatively raising wildlife populations in the NPA and the village use area. We discussed the limited ability of the government to implement classical development in all 90+ villages in and around the NPA in the near future. We then opened the discussion again about the value of the “free” natural resources that villagers obtain from the forest without any cost. We posed the question, “What if these resources are gone”? What if these resources are gone and you receive no development assistance from the outside? The issue common to all villagers, outsiders using resources in the village use area and extracting natural resources from the NPA core zone was discussed further. Our team discussed the issue of wildlife reproduction and over harvest by outsiders with the local communities to instill a sense of ownership.

Following these general discussions we then turned our attention to drawing or using an existing village map. We discussed the boundary of the village area (the areas the government has given the village to manage) and the core zone. The areas supporting wildlife populations were discussed generally and sometimes marked on the map. General questions were asked about the current use of natural resources in the village use area (who, what, where, when, and how). These questions were not posed to get definitive answers but to stimulate thought focusing back on to the issues affecting the declines or preventing species populations from increasing.

Our meeting was then summarized, and both the communities and the outreach team reviewed the lists of issues threatening the natural resources in the village use area and the core zone of the NPA. In some cases there were suggested actions to be taken immediately.