

Culturally correct sustainable initiatives

April 5 2013, by Martin Ince

Scientists studying way of protecting the environment while encouraging economic growth have mapped cultural and spiritual vulnerabilities for the first time, thus giving new a dimension to the notion of sustainability.

We are used to the idea of vulnerable environments and species. We are also familiar with cultural vulnerability. For example when traditional peoples meet seductive modern ways of life. Or when western languages displace long-established ones with fewer speakers. The [Livediverse](#) project examined all these forms of vulnerability together for the first time. It worked in four regions in Asia, Africa and [Latin America](#). Geoffrey Gooch is professor of water and environmental policy at the University of Dundee in Scotland, UK. As coordinator of this EU funded project, he tells youris.com about how it is possible to integrate cultural and spiritual values into sustainable economic development.

Could you provide examples of cultural and spiritual vulnerabilities in these various regions?

In India, we found that holy groves of trees have a big spiritual function but are often at risk of being cut down completely or reduced in size due to development pressure. In South Africa, we looked at a beautiful lake which is holy, and which is out of bounds to visitors. It is a natural area for [ecotourism](#), but local people were opposed to such development. They disliked the idea of anyone going there apart from the local inhabitants.

We also worked in Costa Rica, with a tribe who make hand-woven cloth.

They go to the coast to collect a particular [shellfish](#) that produces a distinctive blue dye. Tourists want this cloth, made with the authentic dye, not an artificial one. So there is a risk of taking too many shellfish. Demand is already becoming unsustainable. Finally we did research in Vietnam. Here we looked at traditional wise men and women who give advice on where new houses should go. As their influence has waned, village planning is becoming chaotic.

What sort of findings and recommendations does this approach lead to?

Our focus is on sustainable economic development. An example is in Vietnam, where people collect shoots, herbs and other plant material of medicinal value. They are not allowed to sell these products, for fear that they will be overused. We developed a plan for a nursery which can supply the same plants commercially, and which can also be used to restock the forest.

A more socially-based case is in India, at the Chandoli National Park. It's a tiger reserve. About ten villages have been displaced to make room for it. The minority people who used to live there are now spread across a wide area. This makes it hard for them to find a husband or wife from the same group and endangers its long-term existence.

Is it possible for endangered communities to survive major change?

Sometimes. In Costa Rica, we looked at the issue of the flooding of valleys for a major hydro-electric plant. So the question is one of compensation. Because the farmers used to farm the valleys, we could show that just moving the village to high ground would not solve the problem. A similar case arose in Vietnam, this time with a more cultural

aspect. The people of the Central Highlands feel a very close cultural link to their lands and bury their ancestors there. So the hydroelectric works would flood their spiritual roots, not just their livelihood.

What common themes emerge from these cases?

These communities want economic development and prosperity. We want to help them towards options such as natural tourism and ecotourism that allow them to do that without threatening their environment or their values. Sometimes that means legislation, but in other cases there are things the local community can do itself to defend its interests.

Does your research suggest that these communities can stay intact under modern influences?

In India, the forests where we were working produce trees and shrubs that contain natural anti-cancer medicines. Naturally these attract interest from foreign companies. This sort of interest often does little for the local population. But if the right legislation is passed, this change can bring benefits to them.

Provided by Youris.com

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