

Local views key to unlocking ways to fairer and more successful nature conservation

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New research led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) shows how a policy aimed at ensuring the world's protected areas are "equitably managed" has potential to improve nature conservation and outcomes for local people, although current practices that treat it as a 'check box' exercise put the global goal at risk.

Governments that are signed up to the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity have committed to 'equitably' managed protected areas by 2020—known as Aichi Target 11. Equity is considered important for ethical reasons, because conservation can have negative impacts on local populations. It also has a practical side: when local people view conservation management favourably, they are more likely to contribute to its long-term effectiveness.

The researchers argue that the way equity is defined and put into practice will have a huge influence on whether this target moves conservation forward or simply supports 'business as usual'. It comes at a time when protected areas are spreading and will soon cover 17 per cent of the world's land surface and 11 per cent of its oceans.

The findings, published in the journal *Conservation Letters*, provide examples from communities living next to conserved forests in Laos to reveal how an approach to pursuing equity that is open to local communities' perspectives of what is fair, could bring better outcomes for habitats and wildlife as well as some of the world's poorest people.

However, the policy is currently being interpreted as a reporting exercise dominated by the views of park managers, using simple indicators, and the study illustrates how such limited interpretations of equity may result in responses that sustain local perceptions of injustice and miss opportunities to improve [nature conservation](#).

Lead researcher Dr Neil Dawson, of UEA's School of International Development, said: "Some wildlife parks restrict local people's access to land and resources, which has negative impacts on cultural practices and livelihoods. In some cases, evictions have led to [human rights violations](#). There is increasing acknowledgement that when local people perceive that conservation is being carried out fairly, it leads to better conservation outcomes, such as reduced deforestation. We don't simply need to relabel indicators used in measuring policy impacts, the practice of conservation and associated development needs to change."

To understand what equity means, the study explored the perspectives of those living next to protected areas: what costs and benefits do they experience and consider fair; what types of decision making procedures do they consider appropriate; and what rights, cultural values and practices do they demand respect for.

The study, which was supported by the UK Government through the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) research programme, focused on a remote area of northern Laos. Researchers spent a year getting to know the key issues affecting people in three villages adjacent Nam Et-Phou Louey National Protected Area. Established in the 1990s the forested landscape is home to tigers, clouded leopards, white-cheeked gibbons and other endangered species.

Life for those living alongside the protected area has changed profoundly in the space of a generation, from hunter-gathering and rice farming deep within the forests to living in modern villages, growing

cash crops to supply international markets. But the forest and wildlife have not fared well in recent years - for example, the tiger population has declined from around 15 to as few as two.

The researchers found that the park boundaries, enforced in the mid-2000s, affected villages differently. Although incomes from farming had increased in all villages, land was much more restricted in one village near the centre of the conserved area, meaning field sizes and incomes were lower on average, and with yields decreasing as fields could not be left fallow. Park authorities noticed this, and decided to release land from the protected area as compensation for this unfair distribution of costs. However, that land did not fall into the hands of those who needed it most.

Dr Dawson explained: "While this may seem a fair solution, it directly compromises conservation, trading wildlife territory for people's welfare. This is exactly the scenario that many in conservation fear when fairness to people becomes a goal of conservation.

"In contrast, through listening to the views of local people and understanding their practices and perspectives, we found equity issues to be much more complex, and uncovered potential solutions to their problems to be much more compatible with [conservation](#). These solutions included more transparent and consistent rule enforcement to prevent land being concentrated in the hands of wealthier villagers.

"Although indicators can provide useful understanding and comparison between sites," added Dr Dawson, "equity can most practically be considered a management goal to continually adapt towards, informed by ongoing efforts to build mutual understanding and trust to gain the meaningful involvement of local people.

More information: Neil Dawson et al, Assessing Equity in Protected

Area Governance: Approaches to Promote Just and Effective Conservation, *Conservation Letters* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/conl.12388](https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12388)

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