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Engaging youth and communities: Protecting the Mali elephants from war

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Summary

Among the devastating features of the recent conflict in Mali was the ease with which armed groups recruited the local young men to join their cause, and enabled them to occupy and control the north part of the country. Youth unemployment was a key contributing factor. Post-conflict, many of these young men are unable to return to their communities for fear of reprisals and risk radicalization. Having nowhere to go increases the likelihood that they turn to membership of armed groups and are forced to adopt their beliefs and aspirations. This article describes how recruiting youth in elephant and natural resource protection provided an alternative to recruitment by the armed groups in the Gourma region of Mali. Despite being paid only in food, none of the young men recruited joined the armed groups because this was regarded as a more "noble" occupation and they gained pride and self-esteem in being able to provide food for their families and benefit the community. As part of a community response, these "vigilance networks" were an essential element in protecting the elephant population despite total lawlessness and the proliferation of fire-arms and banditry, at a time when Africa is losing thousands of elephants to fund warfare by rebel groups. The success of this intervention is rooted in a project that began in 2002 with a focus on elephant conservation. Activities developed into a landscape approach which has, over the past four years, expanded to include community natural resource management that not only protects elephant habitats but also increases the quantity of resources available for local livelihoods. The longer term aims include increased ecosystem resilience through habitat restoration.

Introduction

One of the devastating features of the recent conflict in Mali was the ease with which armed groups recruited the local young men to join their cause, and enabled them to effectively occupy and control the north part of the country. Their success in recruitment was not surprising given the incentives offered and the lack of alternative employment (IRIN, 2013), but experience in the Gourma region of Mali suggests that one option to counter such recruitment is to employ these young men in natural resource protection and management that improves local livelihoods and achieves conservation objectives. It also has a role to play in post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction (Ganame & Canney, 2013).

The Mali Elephant Project strategy

The Mali Elephant Project began working in the Gourma region in 2003 with a three year scientific study of the elephant population and its migration route. The approximately 550 Mali elephants are an internationally important population representing 12% of the West African elephants. They are the northernmost African elephants and make a unique migration that covers over 32,000km2, the largest range recorded for the species. The Mali Elephant Project is an initiative of The WILD Foundation and the International Conservation Fund of Canada[3] working in close partnership with the Malian government's Direction des Eaux et Forets. The aim of the project was to help understand how these elephants had managed to survive when all others on similar latitudes had disappeared, to clarify the threats to their continued existence, and to identify priorities for their conservation (Canney et al., 2007). It was clear that a conventional protected area approach was impossible given the lack of resources and an area that was roughly the size of Switzerland. Therefore, a different approach was developed: a landscape approach that emphasizes stakeholder involvement, multiple objectives and adaptive management (Sayer et al., 2013), one that

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viewed the elephants as part of the whole socio-ecological system.

The first step was to engage all stakeholders at local and national levels to create a shared vision for the future of the elephants. Over the next three years, meetings and workshops were held with stakeholders to understand their perspectives and concerns. This information enabled the design of outreach and information materials relevant for each stakeholder, and ultimately helped design incentives that would recruit them to the cause of elephant conservation.

Action on the ground was based on in-depth socio-economic studies of the local population to understand their livelihoods and attitudes, and to collect data that could be used as a basis for discussion to create a common perception of the problems. Key findings were that much of the local negative environmental impacts from human activities originated from outsiders, and that while each ethnicity had their traditional systems of resource management, they were reluctant to respect those of another ethnicity. The result was a resource which was considered free-for-all, and a *tragedy of the commons* that enabled, for example, the over-exploitation of local resources driven by distant commercial interests and the needs of urban populations (Ganame et al., 2009).

Establishing a common perception of the problems fostered a sense of unity between the diverse clans and ethnicities in the region, and enabled them to embark on discussions to find solutions. The discussions focused on the creation of representative community structures that, supported by national decentralisation legislation, would enable local communities to take control of their natural resources and manage them sustainably.

To ensure sustainability, all members of the community needed to support the proposed systems, and for this needed to be transparent in their views and equitable in benefit sharing, while committee members needed to be accountable for their actions. Elected management committees of elders determined the rules of resource use. These included charging outsiders for access to local resources, protecting elephant habitats, and keeping the elephant migration route free of human occupation. Action was supported by "brigades" of young men who patrolled regularly by camel to detect infringements, and engaged in resource protection activities such as the construction of fire-breaks. These brigades developed, over time, by trial and error, into community-forester patrols; government foresters helped the brigades with enforcement, while the brigade members were trained to detect infringements of forestry law and formally acknowledged as auxiliary foresters, thus extending the capacity of the foresters. When adjacent communities witnessed the positive impacts of these activities, they wanted help by establishing similar systems. The programme worked well until the conflict of 2012.

Strategy adopted during the conflict

Following the initiation of the conflict, Government retreated, firearms proliferated and the area became lawless. Project personnel feared for the elephants in the face of animal massacres by rebel groups to fund their military campaigns in other parts of Africa.

In April 2012, the project convened a four-day community meeting to discuss the situation and allow the community to voice their concerns. They noted that they were unable to procure food grain as all supply vehicles were hijacked by the armed groups, and they were very concerned about the recruitment of the young men by these armed groups. Project brigades were also feeling vulnerable in carrying out their work to protect the elephants, and requested armed back-up.

The project was able to distribute grain by donkey cart to avoid hijack, while community leaders agreed to convey the message throughout the population, including to the leaders of the armed groups, that killing elephants was stealing from the local population. At the same time the project employed 520 young men to support the community leaders and the brigades by creating "vigilance networks" across the elephant range. Their tasks were:

- Gathering information about any elephant killings, including the perpetrators and the instigators.
- Undertaking habitat protection activities such as fire-break construction and forest protection meant that many more resources - of pasture, wood, wild foods - were available over a wider area. This reduced the concentration of humans and elephants in a few areas and potential conflict.
- Supporting the community elders in spreading the message, throughout the community and to the armed groups, that killing elephants means stealing from the local people.

- Extending the understanding of the human –elephant relationship and activities to resolve conflict across the elephant range.

This provided an alternative to the recruitment by *Al-Qaeda* militants of young men to join their cause and impose islamist rule, who were lured by money ($30-50/day) and the status of "having an occupation". None of the young men that were recruited by the project joined the armed groups despite being paid only in food. They regarded working for the project as more 'noble', there was a sense of pride in being able to provide food for themselves and their families, and benefit the community. Working for the project was also perceived as less risky, as joining an armed group might mean ending up on the losing side, pursued by the army and/or having to find ways to reintegrate into their communities when returning home.

Analysis of current situation

The project strategy has so far proved successful with only seven out of the approximately 550 elephants killed: six by a local militia commander for "blood ivory" (Christy, 2012), and one for food by an itinerant herder from Mauritania. The strategy has worked so far because community leaders established the social norm stating that killing elephants was morally reprehensible. Tuareg rebels were culturally constrained from disobeying their leaders, and jihadi groups were constrained by needing to maintain the good will of the local people, on whom they depended for food and water. The existence of vigilance networks and brigades meant that anyone who did kill an elephant would not get away with it: their identity would be known. The threat to the elephants continues. Now that the area is no longer under the control of armed groups, the vigilance networks can work together with a newly constituted anti-poaching unit composed of Mali's best foresters. The young men who worked for the project are central to these initiatives. Mounted on camels they can act as "the eyes and ears" for the landscape, while the foresters can take action based on information provided by them, thus ensuring enforcement.

Conclusion and recommendation

The mobilisation of the community to protect the elephants in this way was possible because of the firm foundation provided by tangible results and trust that had developed between the project and the local people, the government and other relevant stakeholders over the previous years. It was also because the projects structure and philosophy allowed it to adapt its activities to the needs of the situation.

From the beginning it adopted a landscape approach or system approach, consistent with the ten principles described in Sayer *et al.* (2013). This meant that the area of intervention was defined by the elephant range plus its socio-ecological context i.e. those areas and domains containing actors who create an impact on the elephant range for at least a part of the year. In addition to the ten principles, key features of the project's firm foundation included the assumption of long-term engagement, focusing on linking existing assets into a mutually reinforcing network that would tip or nudge the system into a new state that supported elephant conservation. Any one component might appear relatively impotent, but by supporting and connecting them, the project aimed to create the conditions under which elephant conservation might emerge.

The first step was developing a shared vision. This established limits which then directed action towards finding more efficient ways of using resources and incentivising resource husbandry. It meant that subsequent action on the ground could be implemented rapidly. In return for protecting the elephant migration route and its habitats, the community are helped to overcome their problems and challenges. These might vary in detail from place to place but on the whole it involves protecting water, pasture, forests, wildlife and wild foods and using these resources sustainably so that more are available over a greater area. Most importantly, it also gives them control over the land and its resources, empowering them to prevent others (particularly commercial interests from towns hundreds of kilometres away) from over-exploitation and causing environmental degradation. They can also prevent incomers from clearing forest for cultivation, and thereby protect a source of wild foods, fuel, game, and services such as water retention and soil stabilisation as well as key elephant habitat; and they receive revenue from charging for access to water. These activities provide an occupation for the young men that has status within the community, an idea that might be replicated wherever there is environmental degradation.

Do they need elephants to do this? Maybe not, but the local people know that elephants attract the

attention of the wider community - national and international - and are proud of that. They view elephants as an indicator of a healthy ecosystem and that their livelihoods depend on a healthy ecosystem. They also know from direct experience that elephants are important as seed dispersers and in forest regeneration. Elephants knock down otherwise inaccessible fruits and seeds from high branches that are gathered by the women for food and sometimes sale. Fruits and leaves are also eaten by livestock. Dung is valued to help conjunctivitis, a widespread problem in these environments. They are in awe of witnessing elephants' social interactions, their care for their young, and reported behaviours include covering their dead with soil and branches and standing vigil, or in constructing a causeway of branches to help rescue another elephant stuck in mud. They also feel that every species has a right to exist and that it contributes something to the ecosystem that is unique to it, a notion that was described as being encapsulated in the word *baraka*. Each species has its own *baraka*, and if a species is lost, the ecosystem is irretrievably diminished. Once peace is restored there is the additional possibility of revenue from tourism, as pre-conflict they have witnessed tourists paying to be guided to see the elephants. Together these 'elephant plus points' are linked to produce an overall benefit that is greater than the sum of the parts.

The facilitation process brings the clans and ethnic groups together through helping them reach a common perception of the problem (providing relevant data where necessary); helping them work through a solution that all agree too; and then helping with implementation. The quality of the process is key to enable the community to feel that they are in charge and responsible. Introducing or mimicking actions, without them emerging from the community process, (as, for example, if a team of people was brought in from elsewhere to construct fire-breaks) would not produce the same result, nor would it be sustainable. There are also benefits at the national level. Committed individuals within the government were identified, and involved in the project as true partners so that they could share in project achievements. By supporting these individuals in their work, morale was boosted, and political will soared within the Direction des Eaux et Forets and the Ministry of the Environment.

The ultimate aim is for the resource management and elephant protection systems to be operating autonomously over the elephant range, and this is a work in progress. Although the conceptual phase aimed to consider the elephant range as a whole in its full context, and establish a shared vision, action on the ground began in one place, the top priority. The model was initially developed and refined over a relatively small geographic area, and is now being extended piecemeal to communities across the elephant range as resources allow. The Brigades are initially supported with incentive payments while they are learning to implement the new procedures, and during the time it takes for the community to witness the benefits for themselves. When they have demonstrated that they are proficient in resource management the incentive payments stop and the project leases camels to allow them to operate autonomously. A camel procurement committee is formed to determine the arrangements for the purchase, care and monitoring of the camels, and the community can keep them so long as they are used for resource management. The first set of communities are now functioning autonomously although will be continually monitored to refine and adapt the approach.

The project is an attempt to engage with the complexity that underlies most conservation problems and it suggests that much can be done with few resources through the "soft technology" of community engagement. More specifically, it suggests what can be achieved in areas suffering a combination of degraded ecosystems and youth unemployment, and in particular where youth are vulnerable to radicalisation by extremist groups.

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Community-forester patrol (photo credit: Nomba Ganame ©The WILD Foundation)