Community-Based Forest Management: Beyond “Resources”

What are we talking about when we speak of “community-based forest management”?

First, there is the term “management”. According to the VOX dictionary, it refers to the “art or practice of training horses” and also “to conduct, control, take charge of.” The “forest management” which arose in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a corollary of the process of fencing in communal forests and, later, the application of state control over forests. Finally, the term became closely associated with the production of timber for commercial purposes.

Then there is the term “resources”, which so often goes together with “management”. This too is a very culturally specific word. Most communities who use and care for their local communal forests are not “managing” them as “resources”. Management implies control, unilateral exploitation and separation between the subject and the object (the “expert” and the forest to be “managed”). Knowledge becomes fragmented and specialized and techniques to address forests are applied more and more from outside. Integration among systems breaks down, and in the cracks, local knowledge and its ways of relating with the world are buried. Specialized techniques acquire the status of universal paradigms, excluding other practices. What Vandana Shiva calls a “monoculture of the mind” takes root, finding one expression in the separation of “scientific” agriculture and “scientific” forestry, which, in many local knowledge systems, are an ecological continuum.

“Natural resource management” should be recognized as a relatively recent, largely Western construction. “Resources” implies that the significance of whatever is to be exploited rests with an end “product”. It is a term belonging to industrial capitalism, going back to around 1800. Before then, no one spoke of “resources.” Even now, in many parts of the world, if not in most parts of the world, people do not look at trees, land, seeds or water as resources. Communal goods are not resources. They are used, they have a use value as food, housing, medicine, etc., but not in the way in which a resource is used, as a raw material for an industrial market. Furthermore, the term “natural” presupposes a specific industrial form, historically determined, of separating people (“not natural”) from nature.

Talking about our surroundings in terms of "natural resources management" encodes certain ways of valuing, preserving, and exploiting land, water and living things. These values and categories are not universal, and practical problems and conflicts result when this point is overlooked. Local people often have different ways of categorizing, valuing, and exploiting their natural surroundings. This means that the local population and outsiders arriving with a technical or “scientific” training to “manage natural resources” may not be “talking” about the same thing – even though they may be using the same language.

The vision according to which all stands of trees are “timber resources”, for example, is one root of the confusion between industrial monoculture tree plantations and forests that has constantly been denounced by WRM.

The local significance of practices regarding what experts call “natural resources” in a given

community will only be fully revealed when they are linked with other aspects forming part of the cognitive world of that community, such as its ways of getting food and shelter, of preserving and transmitting knowledge, of conceiving cycles, of relating to the environment, and of conducting spiritual, family and community life.

Should we then try to adapt the definition of “community-based forest management” to different livelihood practices? Or should we abandon the term altogether as having a dangerous practical bias? What models can link local practices, including local knowledge, to national and international efforts to preserve biodiversity?

To attempt to integrate the concept of “community-based forest management” with contrasting local practices would at least have the merit of forcing “outside” organizations to make implicit definitions explicit, transforming them into an object of debate. Otherwise, it could turn out that communities who are the victims of ideological, economic and historic exclusion – which are often made to appear, from an “expert” or “specialist” standpoint, as “lacks” – would become subject to yet another form of exclusion. People who work to identify, document and reconstruct local ways of forest use must in any case learn to listen in ways that have not yet been institutionalised -- that is, to break away from their “monoculture of the mind” to detect not what is known, but what is not perceived because of deafness.

In the great diversity of traditional practices and, in spite of the differences, it is possible to identify some characteristics that are common to many societies in their use of biodiversity:

*They tend to be based on principles of reciprocity and give and take;

* They tend to be holistic, not distinguishing what is material from what is spiritual, perceiving the forest in its complex weave of interacting ecological systems in which the community is yet another element, implying that the forest’s significance goes much beyond the confines of economy and maximization of individual profit;

* They generally have a close link with cultural identity and local self-determination. For some peoples, the characteristics of a landscape contain meanings (expressed both textually and orally through folklore, myths and songs) that are an integral part of the way in which they reproduce their culture. Forcibly changing the landscape (by environmental destruction or alteration), or forcibly separating people from their environment, can have devastating effects.

The modern concept of “community-based forest management” includes the idea of “participation”. However, “participation” may not be the same as consensus, democracy or self-determination. Attempts are sometimes made to plug this gap through formalities aimed at “prior informed consent”, but control may still remain in the hands of external agents (who may be “experts”, NGOs, state officials or all of these working together), who often become empowered by local knowledge but do not share their own local knowledge with the community. It must be ensured that this relationship – like relationships with ecosystems – is reciprocal. Genuine “participation” would involve a “dialogue of knowledges.”

To quote Vandana Shiva once again, “Alternatives exist, but are excluded. Their inclusion requires a context of diversity. Shifting to diversity as a mode of thought, a context of action, allows multiple choices to emerge.”

One way of starting to back away from noxious paths is to become aware of, and to shift, some of the

terms we use. In place of terms such as “natural resource management”, it can be stimulating to experiment with terms such as “community relationships with the forest” and similar terms that reflect the community ecological practices that now, more than ever, must be sustained and built on, not only for the welfare of forest communities, but to safeguard what is left of the biodiversity on which we all depend.

Article based on information from: “Integrating Culture into Natural Resource Management: A Thematic Essay,” Kenneth D. Croes, http://www.icimod.org/iym2002/culture/web/reference/integrating_culture/part1.htm ; “Monocultures of the Mind”, Vandana Shiva; and comments and ideas by Larry Lohmann, e-mail: larrylohmann@gn.apc.org