



Exploring motivations for volunteers in nature conservation to inform local policies

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Abstract

Nature conservation at a local level is characterised by high involvement from volunteers. Meanwhile, the recognition of their potential and capability to use local knowledge to inform nature conservation policies and actions is lacking. In this paper we explore their motivations for participation in nature conservation activities and compare these against the goals of policy initiatives that support local projects. Using four case studies, we apply a neo-endogenous development framework and the principles of sustainable development (SD) to demonstrate the capabilities for local communities to manage their natural resources. The study suggests that a better understanding of the motivations of volunteers in nature conservation and the creation of opportunities for them to participate in local policy making would positively influence local planning policies.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND POLICY MAKING

Not until recent decades have biodiversity and nature conservation as well as the sustainable use of natural resources been a major concern globally. This has been prompted by overwhelming evidence of biodiversity loss (Biodiversity 2020, 2011, p4). Meanwhile, planning and management of natural resources has been largely dominated by a top-down approach, which is mainly driven by expert knowledge and is autocratic (Brown, 2003). This has seen local knowledge about nature conservation being undervalued in policy making, yet local communities have a potential to bring about local knowledge on ecosystems and management practices that can be utilised to inform nature conservation policies and actions (Brown, 2003; Campbell, 2003; Gadgil *et al.*, 2003; Berkes, 2007; Kass *et al.*, 2011 and Fetene *et al.*, 2012).

A paradigm shift is therefore required to 'unlock' the potential of community-led nature conservation to inform nature conservation policies. Involving local communities in decision making on nature conservation has therefore become a *condition* for environmental management to be effective (Mendez-Contreras *et al.*, 2008).

Using cases of best practice in nature conservation, this study is aimed at understanding community-led voluntary nature conservation projects in Lincolnshire as well as motivations for the volunteers to participate in these projects. The aim is to investigate how these voluntary community-led nature conservation activities can be utilised to inform nature conservation policies and actions locally, and in the United Kingdom.

This study draws from the neo-endogenous theory of rural development and the sustainable development concept. One of the sources that the neo-endogenous theory draws from is the argument about rural sustainability which is perceived to be people-centred, initiated and driven by local people (Lowe *et al.*, 1995, p91)

whilst recognising and utilising extra-local factors to the advantage of the local community (Ray, 2006). It characterises the concept of sustainable development as one that aims at bringing together economic development and environmental conservation. Sustainable development also advocates for viable localities and communities that can maintain the environmental and economic activities.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

Nature conservation policy documents at local, national and regional level were evaluated in relation to sustainability and some weaknesses were identified in addressing the themes of sustainable development. These included failure of the Habitat Directive and the Birds Directive to explicitly address the theme on intra and inter-generational equity to natural resources.

Four best practices in community-led voluntary nature conservation cases were then studied in the Lincolnshire. These were Stamford Community Orchard group, Nettleham Woodland Trust (NWT), Friends of Bourne Wood and Green Synergy. A total 24 interviews (one-on-one and semi-structured) were conducted with the nature conservation groups, followed by two participant observation exercises which were conducted for each case study to gain an in-depth understanding of the group activities, their relevance to the goals of sustainable development and the participants' motivations for taking part in nature conservation. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data collected.

This was followed by conducting semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with five local planning policy practitioners and three key stakeholders for local planning policy to establish their views on the extent to which the concept of sustainable development is utilised in local policy making. The findings on a local approach to nature conservation and sustainable development as well as motivations for volunteering to take part in nature conservation by local communities were shared with them and they were asked to comment on the implications of the findings to local policy making.

FINDINGS

The figure below gives a summary of the findings on motivations of local communities to participate in community-led voluntary nature conservation projects.

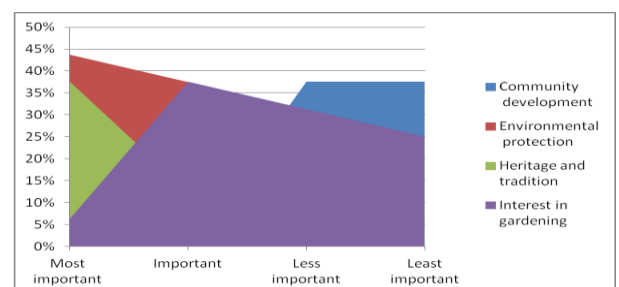


Figure 1: Motivation for participating in voluntary nature conservation

From the figure, it can be observed that, interest in the environment scored highest in the most important

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category, followed by heritage and tradition, interest in gardening and community development respectively. The results suggest that interest in environmental protection is the main motivation to participate in voluntary nature conservation, as confirmed by the following examples of quotes obtained during the interviews;

'I put interest in environmental protection first as I believe that unless we protect the wider environment then we risk losing everything, everything has a place in the world and we have done so much to destroy it over the years we now need to put something back' (**Volunteer 3, NWT**)

'I think the environment is very important, we have all these wild animals, they need somewhere to hibernate and we need to get wildlife, like butterflies, bees and wasps and all of the insects to come, just to get them to pollinate things and to make this planet worth living on and better' (**Volunteer 2, Green Synergy**)

Also established by the study is that, the motivations of the volunteers change over time, for example one of the interviewees said; *'Almost ten years ago my motivation was that the village needs more trees. I suppose that back then it was simply the idea of wanting to add a few trees around the village of Nettleham.....,ten years on, we have had four significant projects. So why put environmental protection at the top of the list? Now our main priority is to protect the woodlands so that the present and the future generations can enjoy them'* (**Volunteer 1: NWT**)

Moreover, the study also suggests that, using a *local* approach to sustainable development, through nature conservation activities, the voluntary groups are addressing themes of sustainable development, with key themes such as, prudent use, intra and inter-generational equity, long term view, integration of the social, environmental and economic pillar and quality of life being adequately addressed through their activities.

Meanwhile, the interviews with the policy practitioners and the key stakeholders confirm that the themes of sustainable development have not been adequately addressed in local policy making. They focus mainly on the integration of SD pillars which policy-makers perceive to be inadequately addressed and feel that the environment is given very little attention compared to the economic and social pillars. *The environment has been considered as a constraint. Therefore a more balanced overall view is required, as the environment needs to be better recognised in plan making* (**Stakeholder 1, Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership, GLNP**)

Moreover, there is a consensus that; if a policy makers understood local people's motivations, *they would incorporate local knowledge* (Stakeholder1, GLNP) and *local views* (Stakeholder 2, Natural England) in the local plans and the plans *will be more accepted by the people if they take part in developing them* (Stakeholder1, GLNP) and (Stakeholder 2, Natural England).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The study reveals that, most volunteers were not aware of any policy goals, however they expressed willingness to participate in local policy making. This call for effective dialogue between local communities and the policy practitioners, as well as the creation of opportunities for local communities to participate more fully in policy making. As

revealed by this study, the NWT case study is actively involved in making the neighbourhood plans for the Nettleham village, providing evidence on environmental issues to inform the neighbourhood plans, which will feed into the Central Lincolnshire Local Plan (CLLP). Their involvement was through networking and building relations with the Parish councillors. However, this study has not established whether the provisions of Neighbourhood Plans are effectively incorporated into the CLLP.

We therefore concludes that the involvement of voluntary nature groups in local plan making would see their local knowledge on nature conservation and the lessons learnt from their local approach to sustainable development being utilised to inform local policies, thereby complementing expert knowledge. This will result in effective policies that can translate into local action.

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