

**Integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge into Conservation Planning:
Adopting a “Full Integration, Always” Policy
With A Triple Bottom Line Return**

**A Policy Paper Written for Conservation International
*(as the hypothetical client)***

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Executive Summary

In the realm of natural resource management and biodiversity conservation, how these resources are allocated and managed can lead to conflict between government agencies and international conservation NGOs on one hand, and the rural and indigenous communities dependent on these resources on the other. The most common underlying cause of these issues is the degree to which governments and NGOs integrate - or don't integrate - members of the local communities, and the "traditional ecological knowledge" they have, into the natural resource management process. As a result, communities often feel disenfranchised from, and disempowered by, these conservation management processes. This often leads to community protests and disobedience toward the management plans, as well as the conservation NGOs being seen as "outsiders" who want to restrict access to and use of these "traditional lands."

In the case of Conservation International (CI), its mission includes a commitment to building a strong foundation of science, partnerships, empowering societies, and sustainable care for nature and humanity. That is way CI strives to integrate local communities and their knowledge into conservation planning and natural resource management. Yet, CI's present policy regarding working with local and indigenous communities is fairly non-committal. As such, it is subject to the whims of funding, expediency, opportunity and the like, giving it the optics of being a policy of convenience. This makes CI subject to criticism, which it has received. This, in turn, affects CI's ability to work with, and receive support from, governments, multilateral donor agencies and local communities. All of this leads to an environment that hinders CI in its ability to fulfill its mission.

I recommend CI makes a formal, public and binding commitment to *always* integrate local communities and their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) into the organization's conservation science, partnerships, and field demonstrations. Such a "full integration, always" commitment would provide CI, and the communities with which it works, a triple bottom line return (with environmental, economic and social benefits). CI would gain increased clout and leverage to affect local, national, international and multilateral policies, as well as increase its access to funding and other support. Local communities would experience more and better paying livelihoods, educational and skills training opportunities, an improved quality of life, and an increased sense of community value and pride. Ultimately, both environmental and cultural conservation would be enhanced.

Problems with Conservation International's Current Policy: A Lack of Commitment

In the realm of natural resource management and biodiversity conservation, how these resources are allocated and managed can lead to conflict between government agencies and the rural and indigenous communities dependent on these resources. These conflicts are exacerbated by the fact that government natural resource management plans are often promoted, co-developed, and partially funded by international NGOs (such as Conservation International - "CI"), "outsiders" who are often seen as promoting plans that restrict access to and use of these "traditional lands."

Adding insult to injury, in the past these plans didn't incorporate much, or any, of the local citizens' "traditional ecological knowledge." Instead, they were primarily driven by "empirical science" provided by ecologists from federal agencies and international conservation partners (such as CI).

As a result, local communities have felt disenfranchised from, and disempowered by, such conservation management processes. At best, this has led to a sense of resignation amongst local communities (and the associated social ills); at worst, community protests and disobedience toward the management plans. In many cases, the government's relationship with rural or indigenous communities has been seriously affected well beyond the realm of natural resource management. Meanwhile, NGO's like CI are often seen as foreign "elitists" who control the government and don't care about the local people.

This reputation gives the appearance CI is not truly committed to pertinent parts of its mission (building a strong foundation of science; partnerships; empowering societies; sustainable care for nature and humanity). Some have argued that NGOs like CI are only giving lip service to the idea of working with local people to achieve sustainability for natural and human communities alike. This, in turn, affects CI's ability to work with, and receive support from, governments, multilateral donor agencies and local communities. All of this leads to an environment that hinders CI's ability to fulfill its mission.

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Critique of policy option(s)

To be sure, CI both acknowledges the need to integrate local community members and their traditional ecological knowledge into natural resource management efforts, and takes steps to do so in many places. Yet, CI's present policy regarding working with local and indigenous communities is fairly generic and non-committal, as reflected in this tagline: *Nonprofit organization applies innovations in science, economics, policy and community participation to protect the Earth's biodiversity around the world.*

While the organization's commitment to "community participation" is significantly more pronounced through its actual field work than this tagline, that commitment is still subject to the whims of funding, expediency, opportunity and the like. It is, to some degree, a commitment - a policy - of convenience, and thus subject to criticism. Yet, no doubt, some within CI would argue against a "full integration, always" policy, for a suite of reasons:

[1] working with local communities and their traditional ecological knowledge can be too time consuming for the urgency of some programs or projects;

[2] there will be times when incorporating a community's ideas into a conservation plan may well compromise the success of the conservation goal.

[3] incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into conservation plans may weaken the credibility of CI as a "science-based" organization, counter to the Mission Statement's "*building upon a strong foundation of science....*"

[4] to adopt and incorporate a "full integration, always" policy correctly and well would - at a time of budget crunch - require CI to hire more staff with the expertise needed to meet that goal.

It is true that by adopting a "full integration, always" policy, CI may - in the short run - limit its accomplishments and successes. At a time when conservation matters are more urgent than ever, and money is as tight as it's been, these are valid arguments against a more comprehensive, and committed, policy toward working with local and indigenous communities.

Yet, it is the very urgency of conservation issues and the need for increased resources that lends weight to the argument that now is the time to adopt a new “full integration, always” policy. CI’s policy regarding working with local and indigenous communities is not serving the organization as well as it could. CI’s work with these communities is now part of a norm amongst large international conservation NGOs which is increasingly challenged as not being enough.

For instance, one report titled *Out of the Loop: Why Research Rarely Reaches Policy Makers and The Public and What Can be Done* explains that “Even though participation has been officially endorsed as the preferred communications strategy by numerous organizations, including the United Nations Development Programme; the Food and Agriculture Organization; the United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Bank, ‘the modernization paradigm has persistent influence, and participatory communications is not as widely or fully practiced as commonly believed’.”

A quick search of the literature shows that many in the environmental anthropology community are pushing for increased integration of traditional ecological knowledge into conservation planning and management. Some argue that “knowledge integration has merely become a fashionable trend in natural resource management that amounts to little more than a box-ticking exercise.” (see article by Bohensky and Maru) Others have reminded conservationists that such integration is mandated by a suite of international laws, policies and treaties. A compelling example is the Convention on Biological Diversity, which urges people to “respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovation and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity....” (United Nations, 1992).

Whatever CI and other conservation “BINGOs” (big international NGOs) are doing in the realm of TEK integration is not being viewed as enough to meet the spirit of CI’s commitment to *building upon a strong foundation of science to empower societies through community participation*.

Policy recommendations

By committing to always integrating local communities and traditional ecological knowledge into the organization's efforts, CI would become more of a conservation leader, which would lead to more success in its policy, field, and fundraising programs. As mentioned earlier, adopting a "full integration, always" policy would provide CI with environmental, economic and social benefits, in that it would provide the same for the rural and indigenous communities with which CI would increasingly work.

A report on the status of TEK "integration" pointed out that "recognition of traditional knowledge in natural resource management has importance beyond scientific or broader societal merit." This includes concrete economic benefits that would come from increased local job opportunities as biology researchers, conservation planners, field program managers, natural resource enforcement officers, ecological restoration experts, and the like. Social benefits would come from [1] educational and skills training opportunities related to these natural resource management activities; [2] improved quality of life from both those new livelihoods, and the food, medicines, and sustainable lifestyles to be gained from full use of their TEK; and [3] a resulting increased sense of community value and pride.

Conservation Leader: None of the BINGOs have made such a commitment, and thus CI would further situate itself as unique and cutting edge. Moreover, CI would immediately gain the notice, and likely the support, of a suite of valuable existing and new partners: multinational donor agencies, indigenous advocacy organizations, environmental anthropologists, and academic and research institutions. Such a commitment, and its public announcement, would be newsworthy for quite some time, and position CI to be invited to participate in many new and more far-reaching academic, policy and field opportunities.

Policy: As a leader in advancing TEK integration and its triple bottom line benefits for local communities, CI would have increased clout and leverage to affect policy matters at the local, national, international and multilateral level. For instance, CI could increasingly advise agency leadership on developing more effective partnerships with indigenous organizations, while also advocating for the integration of locally-driven information and solutions in USAID development programming. In-country, CI would play a prominent role in improving relationships between indigenous communities and government representatives. Finally, human rights interests would likely want to increasingly include CI in their policy development processes.

Field Success: Many experts in the incipient field of TEK integration strongly believe that programs which “garner support of affected peoples tend to survive, whereas those that adopt a cavalier attitude toward local peoples face significant challenges toward maintaining long-term sustainability.” (Integrating Academic Disciplines, page 2). While it may take more time at first to secure these successes, ultimately the uptake time would be shorter than not, given CI’s history in working with local communities and their TEK.

Funding: No doubt, donors would be more inclined to support CI’s cutting edge model of environmental and cultural conservation. As a report titled *Conservation Biology and Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Integrating Academic Disciplines for Better Conservation Practice* highlighted, “The value of these collaborations has been recognized by a variety of funding agencies that are seeking projects with a broader impact on society.” Next, given the significant economic value that can be obtained from conserving ecosystems services, CI’s increased commitment to collaborative natural resource management would be a sound investment with benefits for CI and local communities alike.

In conclusion, as the authors of the *Integrating Academic Disciplines* point out, “...extinction threats, be they biological or cultural/linguistic, are imminent, and that by bringing these disciplines together we may be able to forge synergistic programs capable of protecting the vivid splendor of life on Earth.” This approach meshes well with CI’s mission of empowering *societies to responsibly and sustainably care for nature, our global biodiversity, for the well-being of humanity*. Elevating and strengthening Conservation International’s level of engagement with local communities by adopting a “full integration, always” policy would greatly enhance meeting both CI’s mission, and the goal of protecting the vivid splendor of life on Earth.

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