Deosai National Park: Conservation, Control and Conflicts

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Abstract

Establishing national parks and protected areas without considering necessary management and local community needs often leads to human-wildlife conflicts. One such case is the Deosai National Park (DNP) in Northern Pakistan. This paper explores and discusses conflicts that developed between local communities and their access to natural resources following the establishment of DNP in 1993. It also assesses how these conflicts were resolved through a Management Plan implemented in DNP since 2004. The Management Plan catered to local community needs and sensitivities as well as protection of endangered species such as the Himalayan brown bear. After the community-based conservation control practices were implemented, the population of the endangered Asiatic brown bear has stabilized in DNP. In view of the success of community centered conservation control practices in DNP, the paper, therefore, suggests that there is a strong need to replicate these conservation control practices in parks and protected areas across Pakistan.

Keywords: Conservation Control, Human-Wildlife Conflicts, National Parks, Deosai, Northern Areas – Pakistan

Introduction

Conservation control of endangered wildlife and rural community needs in protected areas has often led to human-wildlife conflicts (Nawaz, 2008). Sustainable and effective conservation needs to be fulfilled, therefore, there is a need to address local community needs and concerns and to effectively involve them in conservation efforts. As in other parts of the world, Pakistan is increasingly facing human-wildlife conflicts because of the exponential increase in population (Ibid). In addition, Pakistan has experienced protracted conflicts in its north-western regions, which has led to rapid deforestation and decreased available space for endangered species and wildlife (Khan and Nyborg, 2013).

This paper examines the issues surrounding establishment of the Deosai National Park (DNP), its history, and issues of conservation, control and conflicts. The focus of this paper is to achieve an understanding of the challenges surrounding establishment of DNP together with assessing how issues relating to conservation control and conflicts have been resolved. The specific objectives include:

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2) Exploring the need for conservation control and establishment of the Deosai National Park.
3) What conflicts arose following creation of the park and how were they resolved.

Study Area and Methods

DNP (75° 27'E, 36° 00'N) is a highland National Park (average elevation 4,200 m.), located in Pakistan's Northern Areas (NA) (see Map 1 below). The park was created in 1993 under the Northern Areas Wildlife Act of 1975 for conservation of the last remaining Himalayan brown bear population (Nawaz, 2008:1). It is spread over an area of 2240 Sq. Km. A large portion of the park is covered by plains, which are famous for its green grass lines and flowers (HWF, 1999). Endangered species like Ladakh Urial, Cape Hare, Snow Leopard and Tibetan Wolf are found in the park (HWF, 1999:7). The Deosai plains play an important role in the livelihoods of communities who live on the periphery of the park and have historically remained dependent on it for grazing, hunting and poaching of wildlife (Nawaz, 2008). Nomadic groups called Bakarwals or Gujjars have retained traditional access to these plains for grazing of livestock for centuries (Nawaz, 2008: 1).

Map 1.

Deosai National Park - Location (Source Google Maps)

For this paper, a thematic approach has been utilized to analyze data. Thematic analysis approaches are useful in analyzing contested themes and social science phenomena (Bryman 2004). Dominant conservation approaches and interventions as

practiced in the Deosai National Park (DNP) are analysed in relation to wildlife conservation. The paper also explores the necessity of establishing conservation parks and protected areas from a Political Ecology perspective. Literature on park conservation, protected areas, conservation control and human-wildlife conflicts and the Deosai National Park has been critically reviewed and analyzed. Moreover, to get a better picture of the challenges in DNP a number of interviews were conducted with Dr. Muhammad Ali Nawaz, who has served in DNP and completed a Doctoral dissertation on the Asiatic Brown Bear population in DNP.

Political Ecology Based Perspectives of Conservation and Control

Political Ecology is the field of study in which broader perspectives of the term are analyzed, through an overview of research from different sources highlights the commonalities and differences (Robbins, 2004). The antithesis of political ecology is "apolitical ecology", which tends to be more localized and explains nature from a non-power relations perspective (Robbins, 2004). In contrast to "Apolitical Ecology", Political Ecology takes a holistic approach towards issues of range management, land degradation and conservation efforts, it analyses and deconstructs perspectives from different stakeholders with the aim of building up a broader picture (Blaikie, 2001). One of the earliest proponents of Political Ecology thinking was Kropotkin, who for the first time attempted to dispel the prevailing notions of "taken for granted" scientific knowledge and sought to establish a differing account of social and natural dispensations (Robbins 2004). A classic case of the "Political Ecological" discourse is range ecology changes in subtropical Africa which were long blamed on pastoralists' excessive overuse of resources. Recent studies, however, suggest that independent natural cyclic factors such as rainfall and not pastoralists were the reasons for this phenomenon (Robbins 2004). Hence, it is important that as opposed to mainstream approaches, ecological issues need to be studied while taking into account all factors that can influence any particular issue. The interests of the local population, the environment as well as external groups, all need to be safeguarded when considering ecological problems. Adherence to a "justice based approach" that focuses upon legal conformation of property rights and equitable access to resources for marginalized people represents the way forward (Robbins 2004). Local institutional development, respect for indigenous knowledge based practices and participatory initiatives form a prerequisite for a 'Political ecology framework'.

The political ecology discourse received credence by the exposition of colonialist fallacies which tended to degrade third world ecological practices (Bryant, 2001). This has been possible in part by analyzing and studying the ecological links from political, economic and cultural aspects. Political Ecology provides an all-encompassing approach wherein intricate long standing ecological issues are analyzed from multiple angles. It seeks to draw a "chain of explanation" which leads from producers, their techniques, to markets and then to states and finally to global actors (Robbins 2004:72-5). Political ecologists in turn focus on the power relations which are a basis of these complex systems to see how they influence and set the dominant narratives. Because of the

complexities involved in analyzing all these elements simultaneously, an effort is made to study key variables that are interdependent and sensitive to change (Robbins 2004). The field itself has undergone a long and arduous process in the face of counter 'apolitical' dominant voices. Thus, through prolonged synthesis, a new ecological thinking has emerged that takes into account the best practices from both capitalistic and Marxist tendencies (Bryant, 2001).

In relation to this paper, application of Political Ecology approaches take central stage, since Conservation efforts including establishment of Protected Areas and parks when analyzed through Political Ecology perspectives reveal interesting facts, which otherwise may have been ignored or left out. Deconstructing complex narratives often highlights the relationships amongst indigenous people, conservation efforts, protected areas and their social impacts (Adams & Hutton, 2007). Establishment of conservation areas are often preceded by arguments in support of nature preservation alongside concocted claims about rights and interests of people already residing in those areas.

Before the establishment of DNP, contested arguments about rights and interests of people took place. Therefore, it is imperative that policy planners concerned with nature conservation sufficiently take into account competing interests, while going ahead with such initiatives. Unfortunately, it is seen that often the larger and more resourceful conservation agencies are mostly preoccupied with funding and publicity issues instead of focusing on "all inclusive" deliberative processes (Adams & Hutton, 2007). However, conservation biologists are increasingly breaking away from these institutionalized notions which offer a ray of hope for future conservation practices.

Environmental degradation is another narrative that political ecology seeks to define from a social perspective focusing on natural and human causes (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Degradation is a "loss of capability" involving processes of damage and renewal which are influenced by natural and human forces. It is also referred to as irreversible rehabilitation in a time scale with reference to humans (Abel & Blaikie, 1989). Another term used to depict capabilities of ecological settings is "carrying capacity". It refers to the capacities of a system to remain in stable states by giving suitable returns. Political ecology in turn, deconstructs myths about land degradation linked to loss in carrying capacity with a view to preserving the rights of pastoralists, so that their livelihood security can be ensured and a system formed where benefits and costs are shared and distributed equally amongst all stakeholders.

So the crux of the matter is that political ecological thinking and not 'apolitical' ecological notions must hold sway in the ecological debate. Political ecology has in itself the inherent capacity to achieve the desired objectives, if one is to consider all segments in an ecological setting and if equitable apportionment is the foremost aim. However, alongside its superior notions there are also some tendencies in Political Ecology which can potentially drift it from its high ideals. One such area can be the sound judgement of political ecologists in choosing the best causal significance factors in different scales

(Vadya & Walters, 1999).There have also been instances where Political Ecologists have been unable to find a proper balance between the environmental and political events and have overestimated the political aspects (Vadya & Walters, 1999). However, with the onset of the Rights based and other ethical discourses in Development, one remains optimistic that political ecology will also set the ball rolling for the welfare of both natural and human considerations.

The Challenge of Protecting the Last Asiatic Brown Bear Habitat

The area surrounding Deosai has generally been regarded as one of the last known abodes of the Himalayan brown bear population. However, studies conducted in the early 1990's revealed stark facts that the population of the Asiatic Brown Bear had declined rapidly (Nawaz, 2008: 92). This caused deep concern amongst conservationists, wildlife officials, and other stakeholders. The reason was that if Asiatic Brown bear population in the area had fallen below the threshold of twenty-six bears, the Asiatic Brown Bear would have faced extinction (HWF, 1999). Large scale poaching of the animal was taking place and bear trade markets were operating in nearby areas (Nawaz, 2008:97). Deosai was hence declared a Protected Area in 1993. However, inhabitants of the area remained opposed to this since they felt that they would lose traditional grazing and access rights to the Deosai plains.

Establishment of protected parks and areas usually lead to a host of issues and challenges. These can be solved only by balancing relationships amongst indigenous people, conservation efforts and their social impacts (Adams & Hutton, 2007). Trade offs between conservation and their social impacts including poverty and rural livelihoods are an inherent reality in the post-protected zones creation phase (Brockington & Schmidt-Soltau, 2004). This is because development planners often tend to ignore the requirements of farmers, herders and rural communities disregarding local dynamics while undertaking conservation practices (Robbins, 2004:176). The establishment of Deosai National Park in 1993 led to conflicts that affected livelihoods of indigenous communities who were dependent on the Deosai plains. Access of Bakarwals and indigenous communities to the Park was restricted since 1993. This was in spite of the fact that Bakarwals have historically retained access to Deosai.

Consequently, a thorough analysis of the situation was carried out which included consulting local communities of Deosai and a 'holistic management plan' was drawn up that has been implemented since 2004 (HWF, 2008). This task was carried out by the Himalayan Wildlife Foundation (HWF) – which is a non-partisan foundation that brings together a select group of 'conservation biologists' who formulated the 'Deosai Management Plan'. The HWF now operates a reduced role of analyzing Brown bear populations within DNP. In contrast to HWF, which is a relatively small conservation entity, larger and more resourceful conservation agencies are usually preoccupied with funding and publicity issues instead of focusing on community centered approaches and processes (Adams & Hutton, 2007). Therefore, there is an urgent need for non-partisan and independent groups to be given the

responsibility to conduct objective evaluation of major conservation challenges, since larger NGOs' credibility is influenced by their diverse interests (Chapin, 2004:30).

Conservation and Control in DNP

Conventional conservation approaches advocate that indigenous communities should be excluded from using Protected Areas (Robbins, 2004:148). DNP was created under the Northern Areas Wildlife Preservation Act of 1975, which bars populations from accessing Protected Areas and Parks (Nawaz, 2008:19). This is highly discriminatory since communities were deprived of their land to which they held access and property rights for centuries. Thus, DNP in its initial form, pursued a 'fortress like' conservation approach that sought to take from locals their rights and livelihoods under the fold of sustainable conservation (Robbins, 2004:149-50). The Political ecology narrative emphasizes that conservation goals have historically not been met, since traditional land holders were evicted and displaced from protected areas. However, the elite continued to get unhindered access to protected areas and parks under the garb of conservation (Robbins, 2004:153). This gave vent to feelings of indignation resulting in larger conflicts (Robbins, 2004:153), which were also evident in the aftermath of DNPs establishment. Since 1993, the HWF and the Northern Areas (NA's) Forests and Wildlife Department (NAFWD) embarked on a conservation program to save the Brown bear population in Deosai. Since the establishment of DNP, the park has helped stabilize Brown bear population whose growth has exceeded its intrinsic growth (Nawaz, 2008:1). The aims and objectives of establishing DNP were outlined by Nawaz (2008: 19): "DNP had a three-fold challenge for management, a biological challenge to conserve the small brown bear population, a resource management challenge to balance the needs of people without compromising on the ecological integrity and a sociopolitical challenge to build confidence of the local communities by engaging them into the conservation process."

Local communities must therefore be accorded significant consideration for the success of conservational planning, 'co-management and participatory development' initiatives (Jeferry and Vira, 2001). DNP is a classical example wherein communities have gradually transitioned to be important stakeholders in management and conservation processes. Since the management plan's execution, a strict control regime has been put in place and check posts have been erected for monitoring the main entry points into the park. All staff employed belongs to the local communities. Hence, poaching was controlled and the bear trade stopped, which was the single biggest threat to the bear population in the park (Nawaz, 2007). The communities around the park remained dependent on it for their livelihoods; therefore, their rights and interests were kept central to conservation planning.

Analyzing Human-Wildlife Conflicts in DNP and Their Resolution

Environmental conflicts normally arise when state authorities or other entities – under the guise of conservation efforts – enclose resources of the communities (Robbins, 2004:173). Conservation efforts in Pakistan have traditionally not involved public

participation and current government law does not permit any kind of public rights and resource utilization within PA's (Nawaz, 2008:2). The 2004 Management Plan divided the park into three zones. The area most frequented by the bear population was classified, while separate zones were allocated for community grazing and Gujjars (traditional migrant herders), who come for grazing from the Punjab province during the summer season (HWF, 1999:7). The zoning allowed communities access to pastures, which are crucial for their survival, but not to the core bear habitat areas, thereby checking excessive grazing practices of the Gujjars and confining them to specific zones (Nawaz, 2008:2). This was done by seeking relaxation from existing laws, which was permitted as a special case (Ibid). In 2004, the peripheral communities had a population of 13,000, a livestock of 25,000 of which approximately 9,000 grazed in DNP (Nawaz, 2008: 1).

While analyzing Resource conflicts, Political ecologists carefully consider issues pertaining to resource control including the scale of benefits yielded as well as the potential beneficiaries of these resources (Robbins, 2004:174). Community participation in DNP was achieved by sharing park benefits and recognizing community rights which was a major departure from conventional protected areas management in Pakistan (Nawaz, 2008:19). The inflows from park tourism were allocated to communities who were also allowed opportunities to sustain their livelihoods which reduced opposition to the Park from within the community. Implementing holistic conservation and control measures need to consider historical access patterns, assess prevalent usage mechanisms and a look into future possibilities (Robbins, 2004:153). DNP, thus represents a case where conflicts that were created because of the parks creation were resolved and transformed in the long run by satisfying needs of both community and conservation.

The underlying idea behind DNP has been to augment the population of brown bears (Nawaz, 2008). From the experiences in DNP, it is clear that in Pakistan changes to the existing regulatory frameworks and legal statues are needed for successful integrated protected areas conservation and management. Conservation conflicts can only be resolved by adhering to holistic efforts that focus upon both social and conservation aspects. The premise for zoning and buffer zones creation considers indigenous communities as primitive by ignoring social relationships and their linkages with political economy (Nuemann, 1997). This practice seems to have been adhered to in the case of DNP. It is obvious that the DNP management process, just like other conservation efforts, considers communities as farmers and herders ignoring the social and ecological adaptations that are associated with conservation (Robbins, 2004:182). The people of the area are largely following a rural based life style but with the passage of time, further issues are likely to crop up, which will be difficult to solve if current conservation frameworks and laws are not updated or reviewed according to the new needs.

Conclusion

The establishment as well as management and conservation control in Desoai National Park have been a considerable success in a developing country like Pakistan, where state

institutions often have limited resources. DNP is a successful case of improving the socio-economic conditions of indigenous communities by integrating them into long term conservation efforts. It has been proposed to extend the scope of the park to the neighboring valleys since the park itself is not sufficient for long term revival of the bear population in terms of its genetic connectivity to neighboring populations in India (Nawaz, 2008:1). However, the livelihoods of the populations of the neighboring valleys would also have to be preserved, so that win-win scenarios are created both from conservation and communities based perspectives.

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