NATIONAL PARKS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES: TOGETHER TOWARD VIABLE DEVELOPMENT?

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INTRODUCTION

The establishment of protected areas (parks and reserves) by central governments for purposes of conservation is without doubt in keeping with national and international environmental strategies. But, do these conservation areas in fact constitute a means for adjacent local communities to attain sustainable development? Are they the tools for sustainable development that we had hoped they would be? While it has been shown that human activities, both industrial and non-industrial, impact on ecosystems, it is not often that we conceive of parks and reserves as having social impacts on their neighboring communities. Are there effects, desirable or otherwise, on rural populations who must cope with the zoning of the land on which they depend for subsistence as a conservation area? Recent research shows that the social costs are substantial and the benefits meager for such communities in developing countries, particularly in cases of involuntary relocation (Rao and Geisler, 1990; Wells and Brandon, 1992; West and Brechin, 1991). So many aspects of community life - culture, economic orientation, lifestyle, land use practices - find themselves modified by the creation of protected areas.

Does a similar situation prevail in the industrialized world? There is little mention, in either the scientific literature or in social impact assessment (SIA) reports, of studies of parks and protected areas in these countries. It does not seem that subjecting these types of conservation projects and policies to a formal process of impact assessment (IA) is on the agenda of governments and international organizations. It is more or less taken for granted that the environment (in the biophysical sense) will benefit from such projects. But, in a context where the environment is seen as including human as well as social factors, and where IA is seen as a means of attaining sustainable development (as per Agenda 21), should not the creation of national parks be subject to impact assessment, social IA in particular?

With this in mind, the objective of our paper is to examine the relevance of SIA when applied to the study of protected zones established within populated areas. We postulate that the success of parks, as components of sustainable development policies and practices, does not rest solely upon adequate protection of the so-called natural milieu, but also on the social vitality and the economic viability of the human community as well as on the active participation of the local people as full partners. It should not be forgotten that many parks in the world today find themselves in crisis, particularly as a result of conflicts with local populations. For more than a few rural communities in difficulty, the establishment of national parks has created numerous expectations as to the socio-economic benefits accruing from investments and tourism. By themselves, these expectations would turn the park into a major player, but it assumes even greater importance because many of these communities have reoriented their development toward recreation and tourism. Admittedly, local development is a continuous process in which many actors and other elements come into play. But in a context of economic reconversion - from the exploitation of natural resources to ecotourism - the park becomes a major force for change, an actor whose strategies and actions significantly modify the sociospatial dynamics of rural communities.

To illustrate these remarks, I will describe a case study conducted in the province of Quebec (Canada). Before discussing it, however, I would like to outline some aspects of the issue as discussed in the recent literature. And by way of a conclusion, I will propose three recommendations.

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1. NATIONAL PARKS VERSUS LOCAL COMMUNITIES: THE LINKS

It is not a question here of making a sterile comparison of opposites - environment vs. development, man vs. nature - but rather of understanding the forces at play as well as the dynamics of local communities in order to better manage the direction of change. In this respect, conservation strategies and park creation have become important forces for change, forces which entail consequences that need to be better understood.

As I have suggested in my introduction, national conservation strategies, as laudable as they may be, do not necessarily guarantee viable local development, and they may result in conflict between traditional land use practices of the local people and new directions in land use. But what exactly are the social costs of conserving these samples of “nature”? With respect to biosphere reserves in the United States, Solecki (1994: 242) notes a number of paradoxical effects on rural communities: “unexpected development-shifts, sudden shifts in the distribution of the social benefits and costs of economic development, and the loss of local governments’ abilities to provide certain public services.”

Those of us who subscribe to the idea of viable development, believe that the participation of local communities is essential to the success of parks and natural reserves. But local participation levels may be minimal, even in integrated conservation development projects (ICDP’s), in spite of their goal of integration into the social and economic development of their milieu (Wells and Brandon, 1991). In their study of 23 ICDP’s around the world, Wells and Brandon (1991: 161) point out the low level of effective participation (5/23) as well as numerous and persistent barriers to the integration of the local people. One of these being the fact that the conservation areas “have been designed without adequate understanding of the local socioeconomic context.” (Ibid.).

If the participation of local communities is meant to empower them to become actors in their own development, environmental education becomes of fundamental importance. Here again, one would expect that parks would foster this educational process. However, studies have shown that efforts at increasing environmental awareness have been directed toward the visitor rather than toward the local resident (West and Brechin, 1991).

Until recently, excluding indigenous human activities from inside park perimeters has been a dominant policy, as much in developing countries as in the so-called developed nations, the ideology of strict environmental protection being considered inevitably disadvantageous, and having priority over human interests. Thus, in the name of idealized rational planning, people or even entire villages have been relocated, meaning not only uprooting but also impoverishment: Cahuita National Park (Costa Rica), Myika National Park (Malawi) and Gir National Park (India) are cases in point (West and Brechin, 1991).

In addition, the establishment of protected zones in populated areas results in the imposition of regulations aimed at modifying local land use practices. Thus, certain recreational or subsistence activities such as forest use, agriculture, hunting and fishing become limited or even forbidden within the protected area. These regulations - or rather limitations - may provoke conflicts between park management and local residents.

Foremost among the expected benefits are those linked to tourism, particularly because the promotion of tourism in parks is encouraged by governments seeking new sources of revenue. But here again, numerous studies have shown that few local communities have managed to profit from it. In developing countries, the capital investments in the tourist industry are often held in large part by foreigners, while the local populace is confined to jobs in the service or support sectors (Soubeiran, 1991; West and Brechin, 1991). In the wealthy countries, the upper echelon and decision-making posts are held by more highly educated workers, often coming from outside the local area, for example in the case of the Virgin Islands National Park in the United States (Owlig, 1980). In addition, benefits are often unevenly distributed among communities and individuals (Solecki, 1994: 244). Finally, it should not be forgotten that even “green” tourist traffic exerts increased pressure on local and park ecosystems. There are certainly other types of impacts, but for the purposes of this paper we have retained those related to the issues of local participation, environmental education, the effect of park regulations and the economic repercussions of tourism.
2. A CASE STUDY: THE COMMUNITIES ADJACENT TO THE SAGUENAY AND SAGUENAY-SAINT LAWRENCE PARKS (QUEBEC, CANADA)

We believe the issues this study raises are representative of the larger, worldwide debate and that it has much to teach us on the applicability of sustainable development principles and social impact assessment. The area in question is situated in the province of Quebec along the Saguenay and Saint Lawrence river corridors and encompasses over fifteen non-native rural communities, a single Amerindian (native) community and two adjacent parks, one of which - the Saguenay Park (284 km²) - is land-based and under provincial jurisdiction and the other, a marine park - the Saguenay-Saint Lawrence Park (1138 km²) - is under combined federal-provincial jurisdiction. These two parks are downstream from an industrialized area which has considerable negative impact on the water quality of both the Saguenay and the Saint Lawrence Rivers.

Historically speaking, the Saguenay conservation park was created by the government of Quebec in 1983, within a political context of conflict with the federal government, which wanted to affirm its presence in the separatist Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean area. Faced with Quebec’s refusal to cede its territory, Ottawa envisaged instead the creation of a national marine park, which finally became the object of a federal-provincial agreement in 1990, but which was not scheduled to become officially established until 1996.

For the neighbouring communities, most of which were showing signs of economic and social distress, the advent of significant government investment meant some hope for survival through economic spin-offs, particularly from tourism. Even though, officially, it was environmental protection that legitimized the creation of these parks, it was the prospect of local economic benefits which fuelled the necessary consensus among the local people. An area peripheral to the Saguenay Park was designated (based on the French model of the parc des Étangs) to receive a special subsidy of 10 million dollars (Quebec-Ottawa, 1986-1991), which served to support various development projects, particularly tourist accommodation infrastructures (Quebec, 1991: 1). In the case of the marine park, a similar amount is expected to be allocated within the next 5 years for investment in the main centres of attraction defined in the overall park plan. All of which brings us to the question of who has benefited and who will benefit from these investments.

It should be noted that the development of the communities in the study area (with the exception of Tadoussac at the confluence of the Saguenay and Saint Lawrence rivers) has, since the beginning, been oriented towards the exploitation of natural resources and subsistence activities linked to forestry, fishing and agriculture. The reorientation over the past dozen years or so toward activities based on tourism and ecotourism represents a major economic change, in which the parks have become a key elements of the basic infrastructure. But to what extent does the presence of these parks strengthen or inhibit the capacity of the local communities to direct their own development? To answer this question, we looked at the following indicators: 1) the geographic origin of park workers and that of the proprietors of the new facilities for tourist accommodation; 2) the spatial distribution of benefits; 3) the degree of local participation; 4) the awareness of environmental protection issues, and 5) park regulations. Even if a direct causal relationship cannot be established, these criteria are indeed indicative of the effects of parks on the local milieu.

In terms of geographic origins, we found that workers employed directly by the Saguenay Park come from the region, whereas marine park employees come mainly from outside the region. With respect to the geographical origin of the proprietors, we found that for 15 of those businesses (out of a possible 35), a majority (12) were residing in the peripheral area at the time of acquiring their enterprises.

Concerning the distribution of benefits, another analysis, based on the ex post study of 27 project proposals subsidized by the federal-provincial agreement for the revitalization of the peripheral area in the 1980’s, shows that 2/3 of the subsidies were accorded to municipalities and non-profit organizations, and 1/3 of these funds were concentrated in Anse Saint-Jean, Tadoussac and Ville de La Baie (Quebec, 1991). However, these three communities were no different from the others studied in experiencing serious difficulties in managing their development. This is at least suggested by the preliminary results of a diachronic statistical study of approximately 20 single and compound indicators which I carried out in 1981 and 1991. For example, the village of Rivière Éternité, while in a potentially favoured position as “gateway” to the Saguenay Park, is a case in point which leads us to question the potential of parks to facilitate the empowerment of the local communities. Dramatic increases in unemployment, continuing loss of population, increases in the number of low-income families, and minimal increases in average family income have become the lot of this community...
of 615 inhabitants. Paradoxically, this is the community which was the moving force behind the initial development of the exceptional site it occupies on the Saguenay fjord. However, it must be pointed out that the infrastructures needed to take care of the influx of tourists are relatively new (less than 10 years old) and that many communities are now better equipped to respond to the increasing demand.

As was previously suggested, local participation in the different stages of park creation and management is essential for the success of both conservation objectives and sustainable development strategies. This brings us to the question of who participates - is it the local community as a whole or formally constituted organizations and their directors? During the setting up of the marine park, two public hearings were conducted by the federal government (1990 and 1993). For the 1990 hearings on the park boundaries, briefs were presented, over three-quarters of them submitted by organizations or groups of organizations, half of which were active in the local area (Ottawa et Québec, 1991). The coordinating committee formed to apply the master plan was essentially composed of official representatives of local and county institutions at the federal and provincial governments.

We also wanted to verify if the presence of the two parks had modified in any way local practices/attitudes due to greater awareness of environmental protection issues and development strategies. After conducting about 30 interviews with local leaders, we found little evidence of a relationship between the presence of the parks and a change in attitude. There was a fundamental lack of understanding of the meaning of sustainable development: with few exceptions, the concept of environment did not enter into their notion of "sustainable", the term referring, in their minds, only to jobs and the economy. The presence of parks on the doorstep has not resulted in any local environmental protection initiatives, but rather in the development of interpretive activities for tourists. It should be noted that the two parks we studied have no environmental education programs aimed at local residents; in the case of the marine park, the educational objectives are oriented towards the visitor (Ottawa et Québec, 1995).

Among the principal consequences of zoning protected areas are the restrictions imposed on traditional land use practices such as hunting and fishing. In the case of the Saguenay Marine Park, fear of losing these traditional rights was one of the first concerns expressed by the local people as well as by the entrepreneurs newly engaged in the business of whale-watching excursions. Our study shows that this fear was felt mainly in the communities which derive revenue from or practice recreational activities on the lands in question. In addition, the popularity of whale-watching excursions (which result in increased tourist traffic on the riverside quays and restricted local access) is felt by many local people to have deprived them of their traditional social meeting place.

In view of the indicators we have touched upon here, it is difficult to confirm at this stage of our research that there is a strong correlation between the presence of national parks and the practice of sustainable development at the local community level. There is, however, a direct link between parks and expansion of the tourism sector of the local and regional economies. Should parks be the promoting tourism to the degree they are? The reorientation of the local economy toward tourism and the designation of protected areas engender important changes, as much biophysical as social, and these should be evaluated and monitored. The present lack of assessment and monitoring are particularly critical in a context such as that of the Saguenay parks where the park becomes the backbone of the local tourist industry, and where increased usage of protected areas is expected within the next decade.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IA

The preliminary results of our study point out the complexity and the difficulty of linking national conservation strategies to the development of rural communities. They also underline the great importance of this link. If we wish to avoid reducing our parks to museum specimens of our natural heritage or to vast playgrounds for urbanites and tourists longing for a moment in the "great outdoors", we must ensure that their development is closely linked to that of local adjacent communities. This implies the need for a far greater awareness on the part of decision-makers and managers not only of the realities of small communities, but at the same time, of the changes brought about by the presence of parks. It also means that there is a need for evaluative research to identify and monitor the forces at work, the social impacts of parks and of tourism, as well as to elaborate new strategies based on local participation.
We would therefore like to make the following recommendations:

1) that impact studies, including SIA, be carried out before protected zones are established in populated areas, and that these studies be carried out by independent multidisciplinary teams governed by a committee, at least half of which should be made up of private citizens from the communities involved (Gagnon, 1995);

2) that the governments or international organizations involved in the creation of protected areas set up monitoring committees, representative of the major participants and also of the local citizens, and be mandated to monitor not only ecosystem health but also the quality of the relationship between the park and the local people, so as to maximize benefits and mitigate negative effects, including those relative to the tourist trade.

3) that these assessment and monitoring procedures be open, participatory and integrated into the strategies of viable local development, where community members are true actors in the process of their own development.

These recommendations are in keeping with the concept of viable local development, as distinct from "sustainable development", which, as others have already noted, has become a mere buzzword. Local viable development recognizes that individuals, like communities see their territory as "home". Seeing its territory as "home" means that the community is able to elaborate development strategies which give priority to 1) the knowledge and strengths of the social actors, 2) community identity, 3) the viability of ecosystems, both physical and human, 4) the spirit of mutual support and equity between individuals and communities.

References


