

# The **View** *from* **Airlie**



**Community  
Based  
Conservation  
in  
Perspective**



The View from Airlie **Community Based Conservation in Perspective**

**Liz Claiborne and  
Art Ortenberg Foundation**

*Trustees*

Liz Claiborne  
Art Ortenberg  
David Quarnmen  
David Western  
*Staff*  
James Murtaugh

**Authorship**

Trustees and staff of the  
Liz Claiborne and  
Art Ortenberg Foundation  
*with assistance from*  
Michael Wright

**Workshop coordination**

James Murtaugh  
Ellen Trama  
*with assistance from*  
Hilary Barbour  
Gail Bingham

**Rapporteurs**

Bruce Byers  
Enrique Ortiz  
Rebecca Sholes  
Amy Townsend  
John Waugh

**Bibliography**

Bruce Goldstein

**Cover photos**

Norman Myers,  
*Warrior*  
Bob Fennell,  
*Airlie landscape*

**Design**

Tracey Cameron

**Additional copies**

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the Liz Claiborne and  
Art Ortenberg Foundation  
650 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10019  
212.333.2536

**Note**

*The View from Airlie* is a brief narrative sampling of discussions that occurred during the Community Based Conservation Workshop held at Airlie, Virginia, the week of October 17, 1993. The workshop was sponsored by the Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation. This document is intended to convey the foundation's perceptions of that event. Readers are strongly recommended to consult the full proceedings (in press) from David Western and Michael Wright, editors, Shirley Strum, associate editor, for a more complete record of the discussions at Airlie as well as an authoritative treatment of the extensive source material prepared in advance of the workshop.

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# The Man with the Spear

During the third week of October, 1993, an unusual collection of people converged at a conference center in rural Virginia, roughly an hour southwest of Washington. They were a small group—only about sixty individuals—representing a broad range of experiences and contexts. They included tribal leaders, village organizers, regional activists, ministerial officials, field-tested biologists and anthropologists, a few eminent academic thinkers, plus representatives from both public and private donor organizations. They came from Nepal, from Tanzania, from Colombia, from Madagascar, from Paraguay, from the Central African Republic, and from fifteen other countries, including England, Australia, and the U.S. Some knew each other from previous dealings but most had arrived as strangers. With all their differences, they shared two concerns: the conservation of biological diversity and the alleviation of human poverty in rural landscapes. They shared also the dawning belief that these two concerns not only can be, but must be, addressed as a single challenge. Driven by that belief, the sixty people had assembled to ponder its implications. Their mood was urgent—tinged with desperation, tempered with hope and resolve. The questions at issue for them were: What do we do now, how do we do it, and how can we muster institutional support? The place where they met was called Airlie.

The main building at Airlie was a Georgian Revival mansion, shaded by towering hardwoods, surrounded by manicured lawns, set on a knoll above a lake. The lake harbored a small flock of half-tame geese. Bits of stale bread could be dropped from a stone footbridge to be eaten by hungry, unwary bream. There were also two swans, cruising the still water like gondolas. Meanwhile the sixty people inside the building were acutely aware that, elsewhere in the world, relations between humanity and nature are not so artificially idyllic.

Conservation is in crisis. The conventional approach isn't working. Throughout most regions of the globe, plant and animal species continue to go extinct, ecosystems continue to be destroyed or degraded, biological diversity continues to be lost, despite elaborate efforts to the contrary. Why? One crucial reason is strategic.

The chief strategy of conservationists for more than a century has been exclusionary. The idea has been to establish *protected areas*, encompassing great natural beauty or fecundity and (more recently) high floral and faunal diversity, and then to safeguard these areas by carefully limiting human use. The tangible products of this strategy have been national parks, wildlife refuges, designated “wilderness” areas in the American sense, and other types of statutorily circum-

scribed reserves, tracing back to Yellowstone, the world's first national park, established in 1872. The methods of this strategy have been proscription and enforcement—laws and penalties, wardens and guns, in some cases fences and gates. The efforts have been great. Roughly eight thousand protected areas now exist worldwide, comprising about four percent of the planet's land surface. Although the protected-area approach has yielded certain important successes, overall and for the long-term the results have been insufficient. On this point, among others, the sixty people at Airlie seemed generally to agree: Biological diversity can't be preserved—not enough of it, anyway, and not perpetually—by setting it aside within protected areas. Current trends suggest that, in the near future, the margin of insufficiency will only increase.

What exactly are the limitations of the protected-area strategy? First, there's the matter of insularity. Scientists now realize that small parcels of protected habitat, insularized (as most parks are) within a sea of human-modified terrain, tend to lose biological richness over time, by the same processes of extinction that affect oceanic islands. Most islands are biologically impoverished, and when parks become insularized they suffer impoverishment too. Second, there's the matter of scope. The protected-area strategy is too costly and too scattershot to embrace a major portion of the world's biologically rich landscapes. Eight thousand protected areas may seem a large number, but four percent of Earth's land surface isn't much; to be satisfied with that approach is to despair of the 96 percent that isn't statutorily protected. Third, there's the matter of feasibility. Many protected areas exist only on paper because governments lack the means to enforce their borders or to oversee their biological riches. Fourth, there's the matter of justice and presumption. Most wild landscapes have been anciently inhabited by indigenous peoples. In other cases, the land has been more recently occupied by needy immigrants. Who has the right to tell those people—either the indigenes or the immigrants—that they may not kill an animal or cut a plant? Arguably, a larger unit of society does have that right, in some circumstances; but not always, not everywhere, and more often than not the moral questions are nightmarish. The protected-area approach, dependent on centralized power and top-down planning, has often robbed rural communities of their traditional



Norman Myers

user-rights over forests, waters, fisheries, and wildlife, without offering appropriate remuneration. It has obliged poor people who are resident in contested landscapes to bear most of the costs of conservation, while larger societal interests reap most of the benefits. The result is that many rural communities now regard conservation as inherently anti-development and anti-people. Finally, then, there's the matter of sheer conflict. As human population continues growing, pressure on protected areas will grow too. Hungry people will take what they need. Why wouldn't they? They have no choice. Blockading rural people against the use of their own landscape without offering them viable alternatives will always, to the blockaded, seem perverse and intolerable. And will always, consequently, be futile.

The real trouble with the protected-area strategy is that it tends to omit humanity from the realm of nature and from the enterprise of nature-conservation. Humanity can't be omitted. *Homo sapiens* is an ecological reality, an ineluctable part of the larger landscapes outside of protected areas, where most of Earth's biological diversity abides. Realism, not to mention justice, therefore demands that efforts to conserve biological diversity must be efforts to address human needs too.

But it's a hard truth to implement and an easy one to forget. On the first afternoon of the gathering at Airlie, a distinguished professor from Zimbabwe, Marshall Murphree, told an emblematic story. Murphree's son, an ecologist, had been escorting a delegation of European Community officials on a tour across Omay Communal Land, a tribal reservation that borders Matusadona National Park. The EC delegation was much concerned over this region's wildlife. Driving along a dusty road, while some members of the delegation held forth on the subject of the African elephant and its conservation, they passed an Omay man, walking alone with a spear on his shoulder. Ultimately it will be *that* man, and not us, who decides the fate of the elephants, said Murphree's son. The delegates came alert. "*What* man, *what* man?" They hadn't even seen him.

The common purpose at Airlie, as Professor Murphree understood, was to bring the man with the spear back into view.



## Seeking Advice on Community Based Conservation

The workshop at Airlie was sponsored and convened by the Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation. The motive, as expressed by Art Ortenberg in his welcoming remarks to the group, was to secure advice, “from the most experienced on-the-ground practitioners we can call upon, as to how we can best convert donor dollars into real, effective, smart, lasting, community-based conservation.” The foundation’s assumption, as Ortenberg explained, was that he and his fellow trustees would profit immediately from such advice—but that other people and institutions would profit eventually. “We’re being so bold,” he said, “as to make ourselves a proxy for the donor community as a whole.” Based on their own experiences of trying to foster conservation in conflict-racked landscapes, Ortenberg and his fellow trustees were convinced that “other donor entities should want, and will want, exactly the sort of advice we’re asking for now.” Although the Airlie gathering was small—conceived and designed as an informal workshop, not a grand conference—representatives from the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the MacArthur Foundation were present too. If those donor representatives were united in perplexity and frustration, dissatisfied with the expensive failures of the old way, they were also united in the hopeful perception that a new approach is available.

The new approach, based on positive local participation, not just on proscription and enforcement, has sprung up during the last two decades in a variety of cases around the world. Mostly these cases have remained inconspicuous: small-scale efforts, each involving a handful of families, a few villages, a tiny operating budget, a modest bit of landscape. They haven’t made headlines. They haven’t achieved dramatic results—only incremental results that show promise of dramatic possibilities. They comprise a wide variety of ecosystems, resources, and locales, from the harvestable sea creatures of the Maluku Islands, to the non-timber forest products of Amazonia, to the wildlife on the Maasai lands in Kenya; but they have important aspects in common. The new approach, which these cases variously embody, concedes the futility of lock-out policies in the face of human poverty and hostility, and seeks ways to make local communities the *beneficiaries* and the *custodians* of conservation efforts. This approach has spread quickly but quietly in some developing countries, and has even begun taking hold around Yellowstone. It’s what Art Ortenberg alluded to with the phrase “community-based conservation.”

That phrase is easier said than done. Among the more difficult riddles addressed at Airlie was: How can international donor entities play a construc-

tive role in community-based conservation efforts that, by definition, should be initiated, designed, and controlled at the local level? It might seem paradoxical. Do outsiders have *any* legitimate role? Yes, they do; but not a serene nor an unambiguous role; they need to prepare themselves for some genuinely uncomfortable changes. Supplying money just isn't enough. Supplying money while dictating means and ends, imposing values and structures, is too much. The sense of the group at Airlie was that a new matrix of expectations and relationships—to include both rights and responsibilities, accountability as well as trust, long-term patience, equitable partnership, flexibility, a more enlightened apportioning of costs and benefits, a vision of nature from which humans are inextricable, and a seamless linkage between conservation efforts and community development—must be established. These are all lofty generalities, admittedly. The workshop consisted of five days worth of discussion, by tough-minded practitioners, about how such lofty generalities could be made real.

**“Is community-based conservation possible? Yes, but success in this area is a good deal rarer than the literature suggests.**

**Possible? Yes.**

**Difficult? Yes.”**

**Roland Bunch**

The convening foundation, LCAOF, had commissioned a series of case studies describing community-based conservation efforts currently underway in a variety of situations and locales. The cases had been selected not as models of ideal methodology or unmitigated success, but as fair samples of trial, error, lesson, and promise in the real world. There were fifteen of these cases, spread across a wide range of ecosystems: from the Amazon forests of Brazil and Peru, to the savannas of Kenya and Zimbabwe, to the North York Moors of England, to the dry forests of eastern India, to the mountainous rainforests of Madagascar and Papua New Guinea, to the Kakadu region of northern Australia, and back around to the conifer woods of Yellowstone. The range of enterprises included extractive reserves (Brazil), communal gardening plots within forest (Peru), local proprietorship of wildlife and ecotourism resources (Kenya and Zimbabwe), incentive payments to private landowners for fostering biological diversity (England), forest management by community councils (India), joint-management agreements between a national parks agency and an indigenous people (Australia), and various others. (A full list of the case studies appears at the end of this pamphlet.) Printed copies of the fifteen case stud-

ies were circulated, in advance, to the invited participants who would meet at Airlie—heavy homework for a bunch of busy but committed people.

Each participant also received a set of seven analytical papers (likewise commissioned by LCAOF, and likewise listed at the back of this pamphlet), which took the case studies as their common texts for consideration of some overarching themes. Those theme papers discussed land tenure, local participation, cultural traditions, ecological factors, the various origins of community-based conservation efforts, the role of institutions, and the impact of national policies. Finally, a single introductory paper outlining the whole subject of community-based conservation, in all its unresolved complexity, was co-authored by David Western and Michael Wright. Western, an internationally renowned ecologist and conservationist (and a trustee of LCAOF) who has worked for decades in partnership with the Maasai people in southern Kenya, had been the originating force behind the Airlie workshop, and would function as its chairman; Wright, developer of the World Wildlife Fund's Wildlands and Human Needs Program, had also been instrumental in organizing the event. The intent of their co-authored paper was to incite and focus discussion, not to preempt it. Virtually the only assumption that seemed safe to the LCAOF trustees, as workshop participants began arriving at Airlie, was that there would be plenty to talk about and plenty to learn. Every invited participant had a head full of fervent convictions, a lifetime's experience, and an armload of paper.

The workshop began with a plenary session, on Monday, and then broke into smaller groups focused thematically. It reassembled into the plenum, on Wednesday, and broke again into smaller groups, this time according to geographical region. By late Thursday afternoon, every voice had been heard, and the smaller groups had reported back to each other—in cold print, using flipcharts and an overhead projector—just what they thought about the essence, the problems, the requirements, and the future of community-based conservation.

## The Missing Word

Perez Olindo, a senior conservationist from Kenya, spoke up during the first plenary session. “I lived in a community that had the use of certain resources. Not the ownership, but the use. That community was then invaded by foreign laws, foreign values, that changed the meanings of words. *Use. Collect. Hunt.*” And there was one utterly alien word that had arrived with the invaders, he added: “*Poach.*” The missing word among this colonial lexicon, as Olindo well knew, was *tenure*.

Tenure is a complicated and variable concept, implying arrangements more subtle than mere ownership. Owen Lynch and Janice Alcorn had pointed out in their theme paper on the subject that tenure doesn’t define relationships between people and resources so much as it defines relationships between people and other people. It specifies who may use, who may inhabit, who may harvest, who may inherit, who may collect, who may hunt, under what circumstances and to what extent; it also specifies, implicitly, who may not. A tenure system, in any given situation, is the traditionally accepted (and, in some cases but not all, legally codified) understanding of user-rights, interests, and limits. So tenure is central to the issue of who can and should conserve what resources for *whom*.

Land itself is the underpinning resource and the most elemental focus of tenure concerns. But the list continues with water, forests, fisheries, minerals, wildlife, and other categories of resource, not the least precious of which—as the Airlie participants recognized—are the genetic resources inherent in biological diversity. Who holds the user-rights, and therefore the rights of commercial exploitation, over germplasm and phytochemicals that might derive from tropical forests, or over the knowledge of indigenous people who inhabit those forests? Who holds the user-rights over the wet breath of the Amazon forest, exhaling oxygen and moisture back into the sky above central Brazil? Who holds the user-rights over the wildebeests, zebras, and elephants that trample back and forth between Amboseli National Park and the Maasai pasture lands nearby? These are intricately consequential questions. Perez Olindo stated why: “Use is a necessary ingredient of the protection of biodiversity. If you outlaw use, it will be a recipe for the most rapid depletion, degradation, extinction.” And the systematic understanding that legitimizes and limits use is what’s called tenure.

All rural communities have their systems of tenure. Whether ancient or recently evolved, those systems derive from direct experience at using, main-

taining, and apportioning particular resources. In many cases, especially among indigenous peoples, they entail communal as distinct from individual forms of proprietorship. Also, traditional tenure systems are often framed in unique language and complex cultural practices, and like any aspect of culture they're constantly evolving. Furthermore, they aren't readily compatible with the concept of ownership as codified in developed countries and as imposed on developing countries during colonial periods. Traditional tenure systems don't generally confer exclusive ownership of resources within neatly mapped boundaries. Simon Metcalfe, a rural-development specialist from Zimbabwe who helped shape a path-breaking program (known by the acronym CAMPFIRE) of communal wildlife management by indigenous people, offered an observation on this matter of boundaries. The only boundary applicable to many traditional tenure systems, according to Metcalfe, may be political rather than geographic: the boundary of participation within the system.

But national governments often refuse to recognize such traditional tenure systems—and this emerged as a grievous concern at Airlie. As governments impose their own codified systems of resource ownership, traditional rights and culturally enforced limits are disallowed, and resources are thrown open to exploitation without the constraints of long-term self-interest and place-specific knowledge that characterize traditional systems. Cindy Gilday, an aboriginal-rights activist from Canada with her own roots among the Dene people of the Northwest Territories, spoke passionately about one consequence of cross-jurisdictional tenure disputes upon the Dene: a Japanese pulp mill on the headwaters of the salmon-rich Mackenzie River. All agreed that security of tenure, for rural communities, is utterly prerequisite to community-based conservation.

Without secure tenure, rural communities have no standing in the decision-making process that determines use or protection of resources. Equally baneful, those communities have no incentive to manage their resources sustainably. Michael Hill, of the Australian Nature Conservation Agency, noted: "Local communities have the capacity—and will use that capacity—to destroy conservation efforts if they're not in agreement with them." And no community will be in agreement, Hill might have added, if the establishment



Gene Blackwell

of a new protected area, by government fiat, entails the loss of their own traditional rights of tenure.

John Marrinka, a soft-spoken Maasai leader from southern Kenya, could confirm that. “I have a certain experience in these matters,” he said. “Amboseli National Park was our land.”

The people who live on the savanna, in the forest, along the banks of the river—the people whose daily lives and traditions are inseparable from the biological systems at issue—need and deserve assurance that conservation efforts will promote their long-term as well as their short-term interests. For that assurance, tenure is the crucial first element. Without secure tenure, the members of rural communities can *only* afford to consider their own short-term interests. They are compelled to exploit resources for maximum immediate gain, regardless of future consequences for themselves, for the resource base, or for biological diversity. Why should the Dene maintain their own traditional strictures on salmon-harvest along the Mackenzie River, conserving that resource for their posterity, if Mitsubishi has already begun poisoning the waters upstream?

Margaret Taylor, the ambassador from Papua New Guinea to the U.S., sounded another cautionary note that echoed through subsequent discussions at Airlie. Taylor is a member of a traditional clan-group in the highlands of PNG; she’s also a graduate of Harvard Law. She understands intimately the interests of highland villagers. “The basic desire,” she said, “is to improve their material wealth.” And what does material wealth mean in their terms? It means “a bit of cash to buy trade goods, a school, a health clinic, a road, an airstrip”—in short, access to the larger society and to the larger economy. “We are prepared to give up our forests and our way of life for economic development,” she recognized. Her point was this: that traditional tenure systems may unravel under stress from market forces and rising expectations.

At Airlie, the small group that considered the tenure issue included Michael Hill and Simon Metcalfe and Owen Lynch, Nightingale Rukubangaiza of Uganda, Antonio Brack-Egg of Peru, Tri Nugroho of Indonesia, and others. Based on their day’s deliberations, they returned to the plenum with a number of comments and recommendations. It’s essential, they advised, that governments should “recognize existing, community-based tenure systems.” The nationalize-and-regulate approach often misfires. Governments tend to claim authority whether or not they have the means to exercise it

effectively. Failure to exercise authority allows open access to resources. Forests and fisheries are overexploited. Protected areas suffer ecological erosion. And rural communities, with their traditional tenure systems overridden, “seldom are compensated directly for their loss of access.” But the problem isn’t irreversible. In such circumstances, governments “should consider returning nationalized resource systems to community-based tenure systems, which can often be more cost-effective.” The group added that the CBC approach might help return such landscapes not just to productivity but to ecological health as well.

They shared one other observation: In the struggle by rural communities to find allies among international funding bodies, insecure tenure itself often discourages donor investment. Donors should look beyond the immediate difficulties presented by insecurity of tenure, and should mobilize broad institutional support for efforts by communities toward recapturing their tenure rights as one step in the long-term conservation process. This is a point that the trustees of the Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation take to heart.

## Intervening Thoughts

Early in the workshop, an important paradox (already alluded to) came under scrutiny: Outsiders such as donors or professional fieldworkers, hoping to foster community-based conservation, face the danger of subverting their own intent by the imposition of goals, means, and expectations on the rural communities among whom they work. Can a conservation project be truly community-based if it's initiated with foreign money and shaped by foreign professionals? Can scientific and technical advisers help local people to make well-informed choices, yet allow them the liberty to make dubious choices, if that's what the people see fit to do? Can final control of a project be devolved to the local level? Fabio Feldman, a Brazilian congressman and outspoken conservationist, voiced an objection. "I think we must change our approach in this discussion. We've been saying, How can we *help* them, local communities. We should say, How can we learn from them."

Owen Lynch agreed. "A lot of the rhetoric so far here," he said, "has been very interventionist."

It was true that "interventionist" sounded like a nasty word for an unsavory, retrograde attitude. Still, the line between non-intervention and fatalistic indifference seemed blurry. Don Tuzin, an anthropologist with two decades of experience among traditional villages in Papua New Guinea, granted Lynch his point but wondered what *is* the appropriate role for outsiders. If not intervention, in some sense, then what? Can outsiders play any part in community-based conservation without violating the local autonomy that they profess to value? "I hope so," Tuzin said frankly. "Because I like being here, and I'd like this conference to continue. For a few days, at least."

A wan joke, perhaps, but the distressing implications of Tuzin's concern were never far from the minds of the participants. And the workshop did continue.



The moral dilemma is not whether to intervene, David Western argued, but how.

The more practical dilemma involves reciprocal participation by the community. Any intervention by well-meaning outsiders will be futile unless the local people are active and vested participants. In some instances—and arguably these are ideal—the local people themselves have initiated the CBC effort, and support from outsiders has been merely responsive. But that sort of instance is rare, at least presently. Even among the fifteen commissioned case studies, only a few described conservation efforts that arose from spontaneous local initiative: the Forest Protection Committees in eastern India, the extractive reserves in Brazil, maybe one or two more. Each of the other efforts was either jointly created-and-discovered by an ad-hoc alliance of local people and outsiders, or else it was initiated solely by outsiders, who took pains to elicit local assent and involvement as time progressed. But assent and involvement of that sort aren't synonymous with responsible control. Not many of the case studies showed real community control of project design and implementation. Marshall Murphree had recognized this disparity, in his own theme paper, when he wrote that “proprietaryship in some significant form must be in place or projected to the community itself. In its absence, other forms of community ‘involvement’ or ‘participation’ must be understood for what they are: co-optive, co-operative or collaborative arrangements.” Those arrangements might in some cases be effective, he added, but they don't fill the bill for community-based conservation.

One of the problems with such arrangements, among many, is that insubstantial involvement translates to insubstantial commitment. Short-term conservation achievements won't necessarily hold for the long term, if the community has been patronized in an unequal partnership while its deep-seated understanding of its own biological resources, and its own short-and long-term interests, have remained unchanged. Meg Taylor again spoke knowingly of the people in the villages, and of their adaptable tolerance of outsiders: “They'll let you come, and do your project. And then they'll wait for you, hurriedly, to leave. So they can get back to the rhythms of their life.” Participation can be illusory. And without a clearly agreed-upon basis for long-term reciprocity, illusory participation can be a cynical expedient.

This big issue of community participation divides itself into some smaller—but still difficult—questions. If a community does participate substantively, just who makes those substantive decisions? Which faction, which sociolog-

## A Tough Question, Among Others

ical fragment, exercises control? Who reaps the rewards? Who contributes the costs? Who *is* the community, in any given instance of community-based conservation? The situation-specific answers to these questions can determine failure or success of the effort. Peter Little, a research anthropologist with experience in rural development, had cited an illuminating case in his theme paper: the Oku Mountain Forest Project in Cameroon. Male community members had participated in the design and implementation of this project, under the traditional structure of male-dominant community governance; and subsequently, in their harvest of forest products, the males generally abided by the project's conservation guidelines. Women of the community, who held a traditional right to graze goats in the forest, did not share in deliberations about the project; and it seems no mere coincidence that, during the drought years that followed, excessive goat-grazing became a threat to the biological diversity of the forest. Unintentionally (or maybe not), the women took revenge for having been excluded from the decision process.

“What we need are

shifts in trust and

respect for local groups.”

Sandy Davis

It's no wonder that the theme of participation, with such subtleties wrapped into it, is a tough one. Janet Bedasse, of the Jamaica Conservation and Development Trust, reported back to the plenum from the small group that had wrestled with that theme for a day. The group had also included Andreas Lehnhoff of Guatemala, Liying Su of China, Maria Angela Marcovaldi of Brazil, Krisnawati Suryanata of Indonesia, Chandra Gurung of Nepal, and several others. They offered some pungent observations.

If outsiders hope to elicit real community participation in CBC enterprises, this group advised, then outsiders must allow communities to define success *in their own terms*. (It's a provocative notion, not a platitude: communities defining project success in their own terms. For some donors and field professionals, it may represent a choking pill; but the conveners of the workshop had asked for medicine, not candy.) Also, the CBC enterprises must be flexible, with a capacity to adapt and to change. On the other hand, those enterprises should be bolstered with explicit agreements delineating the rights and the obligations of the parties involved. Beyond this, Janet Bedasse reported three other recommendations that seemed ringingly clear. First, CBC participants in various countries, in various situations, need information about each

other. The community-based approach is still evolving; its practitioners are isolated and perplexed. New forms of cross-fertilizing exchange of ideas and experiences are desperately needed. Second, donors and other outsiders should support existing, local organizations that effect fuller participation in community governance, and should encourage development of such organizations where they don't exist. Women's groups, for example. Farmers' cooperatives. Village committees of forest-product harvesters, as in eastern India. Third, Bedasse and her collaborators reminded the plenum that "community-based conservation takes time," far more time than the funding cycles of international aid agencies, or the impatience of private foundations, often allow. Long-term commitment, they declared, is essential.

And there was an especially tough question that they offered back to the plenum unanswered. "How can outsiders leave enough space for significant local participation while maintaining accountability?" It would take something more than eleven people spending a day in a committee room, they concluded, to solve that one. But the sense of the plenum seemed to be that while such accommodations are difficult to define on paper, they are easily recognized in the field.

## Monster from the Depths

The matter of national and international politics also reared its head, like a sea monster surfacing to inspect a very small boat. Its breath was hot and sulfurous, but the sailors remained calm.

Jeff McNeely, director of the Biodiversity Programme at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, touched on it first. In the course of a wide-ranging plenary discussion, he posed the question: Who decides what's an "acceptable" loss of biological diversity? No one can deny that some losses are inevitable, given the current trends of human population growth and resource consumption. But who draws the line between what's tolerable, in the face of demographic, political, and economic pressures, and what's intolerable? Who determines where the limits will be set? Who decides which species of rhinoceros, which species of beetle, which species of soil fungus will be allowed to survive, and which won't? McNeely glanced around. Anyone in the plenum who expected airy idealism from him was mistaken. The answer is simple, he said. "Politicians do." McNeely's point was that political involvement, therefore, is an important though neglected tool for conservationists—and not least important for those who aspire to promote community-based conservation.

"This *is* politics," Fabio Feldman responded, referring to the Airlie assemblage itself. "*Everything* is politics," he added. Both men clearly agreed that political efforts on all levels—local, national, international, and among activists working outside of conventionally political contexts—are crucial to the success of community-based conservation.

Juan Mayr, of Colombia, turned attention back to the same subject later. Mayr is a professional photographer who has devoted himself, for some years, to community-based conservation in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Despite the prestigious awards that have come to him for his work in the highlands, he remains an unpretentious man, fervently focused on local realities and concrete action, impatient with sulfurous exhalations. "Political peoples," he said, meaning the official sort to be found in Bogota or Jakarta or Washington, "have a very big ignorance of the mountain."

And it's a matter not only of ignorance, but also of indifference. "National governments generally don't give a damn about conservation," Marshall Murphree noted. "Just look at the national budgets."

But whether or not politicians comprehend or care about the particularities of the mountain, or the savanna, or the lowland rainforest, they make decisions and set policies affecting those ecosystems and the human communities

within them. It isn't entirely illogical that they should, since rural communities by their nature are small, whereas ecosystems by their nature are extensive, and the consequences of resource depletion or ecological degradation extend far beyond the boundaries of any given community. Deforestation in a highland drainage could deprive farmers downstream of perennial water supplies, or destroy a subsistence fishery with siltation. A single community along the migratory route of the Serengeti wildebeests could exterminate the herds and preempt the livelihoods of thousands of Tanzanians and Kenyans involved in the tourism industry. Western and Wright had made these points in their introductory paper. They had also recognized that the strong trend toward centralized national authority, characteristic of most countries during the modern era, has tended to subvert the traditional, local systems of communal authority. Increasing urbanization during recent decades has exacerbated the problem, since rural communities generally lack the political potency of urban populations when it comes to influencing national policies. The imbalance is aggravated further when rural areas hold commodity resources such as minerals, oil, or timber that offer tantalizing potential for financing industrial development, servicing foreign debt, or simply getting rich. What's the remedy for this tension between national and local concerns? "Should a government abrogate its broader responsibility in the process of devolving proprietary rights to local communities?" asked Western and Wright. The Airlie participants had grappled with that riddle too.

But the workshop was less concerned with considering how governments should act, in regard to national policies, than with how donors and fieldworkers and other CBC practitioners should act. The main goal at Airlie was not macro-analysis; it was to generate applicable principles for action.

Some bits of useful advice emerged from the small group that considered the subject of policy. This group had the thinking of Meg Taylor, Fabio Feldman, and Perez Olindo, as well as Rory Tolentino of the Philippines, Alison Richard of the Peabody Museum at Yale and the Beza Mahafaly project in Madagascar, John Robinson of the Wildlife Conservation Society, and David Schmidt, a county commissioner from a timber-producing community

"The first year we went there, we never talk about forest protection. We never talk about the animal protection. We talk about drinking water."

Chandra Prasad Gurung

in Oregon. They concluded that national policies should indeed be adjusted to devolve more rights and responsibilities back onto local communities, for the protection and use of biological resources. But they warned, too, that outsiders should be very damn careful about how they urge such adjustments. Patience and more patience, the group advised. Discretion and humility. Promote conservation education at all levels, provide technical and financial resources, offer training to strengthen the country's indigenous non-governmental organizations, help local communities to develop their *own* policy initiatives. Presumptuous unilateral efforts by outsiders to define a country's national priorities or policies, on the other hand, are inappropriate, repeat, inappropriate. Finally, the group made the pointed but apt suggestion that donors and international conservation organizations "should develop an understanding of broad, north-south policy issues (debt, equitable terms of trade, biotechnology, intellectual property rights) and exercise policy influence on their own governments and multilateral development banks." These issues are critical and may in the long run be determinant, they were saying. The northern industrial countries must examine their own behavior and then set an example for the rest of the world, not simply offer prescriptions for others to follow.



Bob Fennell

## A New Dictionary of Conservation

Language barriers were only a modest problem at Airlie, cheerfully overcome, since the participants were generally comfortable in English. No one tallied the other languages that might have been spoken, but the list certainly included Chinese, Nepali, Bahasa Indonesia, Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili, Filipino, and French. It became apparent, as a small irony of the situation, that some of the main nodes of potential linguistic confusion existed not between languages but within English itself. There was a whole list of words for which definitions were problematic, controversial, or at least various: “rights,” “incentives,” “democracy,” “participation,” “dependency,” “resources,” “environment,” “biodiversity,” and even the very bookends of the CBC concept, “community” and “conservation.” No one seemed to have any disagreement about “based,” but perhaps only because the matter never came up. The people at Airlie realized that they could devote half their week to wrangling over definitions. They chose rather to treat these semantic ineffables as small plots of gumbo in the road—they went carefully around, instead of wallowing through, and spent their travel time trying to make some mileage.

Late in the week, though, Twig Johnson of USAID offered a suggestion about terminology that held promise of having some practical, operational significance. Speaking from the perspective of a donor agency, he said: “We need to focus on support for people, institutions, process, rather than for ‘projects.’” The word and the concept, “project,” does seem to embody all those elements of the conventional approach that are contrary to the essence of CBC: imposed design, imposed criteria for success, foreign technical experts in charge, a sudden infusion of cash, a large proportion of that cash spent on expatriate salaries and fly-in consultants, an emphasis on tangible but often immaterial accomplishments (such as putting up buildings, equipping offices, or hiring employees), a creation of inflated expectations and dependency among the community, a short-term commitment by the foreign experts, a short-term commitment by the funding source, an infatuation with the dramatic and the exotic and (given the importance of newsletters and other media in justifying an organization’s activities to its membership or its public constituency) the photogenic, a presumption that an off-the-rack design appropriate to one locale will also be appropriate to another, a presumption that enlarging the scale of an enterprise will correspondingly enlarge its positive result, a demand for laborious accounting that isn’t synonymous with community accountability, a tendency toward self-justificatory distortion written into project reports, a disinclination to admit failure,

an inability to learn from failure, and an impatient eagerness to declare victory and withdraw. Johnson was right: CBC is not about inserting such projects into ecosystems and communities. It's about a process that can never be neatly framed within jurisdictional boundaries, line budgets, planning horizons, or viewfinders: helping rural communities to stabilize, or in some cases to reshape, their relations with the finite biological riches amid which they exist.

During the last plenary session, on the last afternoon of the workshop, Twig Johnson proposed another interesting set of revisions to the conservation dictionary. While almost everyone else had been meeting in final small-group

sessions according to region—an Asia group, an Africa group, a Latin America group, a North America group—Johnson and a handful of others had discussed the role of, and the problems attributable to, donor institutions. This group had included Jeff McNeely of IUCN, John Robinson of WCS, Michael Wright of WWF, Shelton Davis of the World Bank, Cynthia Mackie of Conservation International, as well as Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg of LCAOF. Reporting to the plenum on their behalf, Johnson delivered a partly facetious and mildly self-mocking announcement: His group had decided to eliminate donors. What? The word, that is, “donors.” It was gone. Erased. Too many perverse connotations. In its place, the

group had chosen to talk and to think about “resource brokers.” USAID and the World Bank and the MacArthur Foundation and LCAOF and the others—presto, chango, and henceforth they should consider themselves “resource brokers,” not “donors,” Johnson decreed. While his little group had been at it, Johnson said, they also eliminated “recipients.” In place of that word, “partners.” The serious point behind all this, he explained, was that the fundamental relations between those two categories of actor had to be changed. The new relations should be characterized by mutual interests and mutual responsibilities. The defining considerations, he said, addressing a hypothetical partner and a room full of real ones, should be: “What do *you* want? What do I want? What will *you* give? What will I give? And how do we determine whether or not it's happening?”



William B. Folsom



Of course everyone was aware that nothing substantive can be achieved merely by presto-chango corrections of language. Johnson's group, accordingly, made one further and all-important recommendation: This time, by God, instead of just talking about change, let's actually do it.

Professor Murphree rose to say: "I want to congratulate our former 'donors' on their reincarnation." He added that, as an element of the new relations, perhaps more thought should be given to the accountability of resource brokers toward their partners, and not just vice versa.

Meg Taylor wondered whether it was realistic. "I like what I heard," she said. "But is this going to be marketable to other donors?"

Hers was a crucial question. And no one in that room, on that afternoon, could guarantee an answer.

## The View from Airline

The U.S. Interior Secretary, Bruce Babbitt, joined the workshop for breakfast on Friday morning. His car had taken nearly an hour to work its way out from Washington, through the undulant pastures and the autumn foliage of eastern Virginia, and his boss, the President, was expecting him back promptly for a cabinet meeting; but Secretary Babbitt had stolen the time from other affairs because he recognized that there was something extraordinary about this quiet little gathering. He gave a brief talk describing certain problems with which his department was currently occupied. And then, equally significant, he listened. He sipped at his coffee and focused on the faces around him. He wanted to hear about this CBC business, and about what had transpired here at Airlie over the past five days. Juan Mayr spoke up: “We found, in these meeting, some new aspects. Donors and policy are starting to change—and this is important.” The Secretary was not in position to know, as others by then were, that Juan Mayr is no man to make such a statement just for politeness.

The conveners of the workshop shared Secretary Babbitt’s sense that listening is the better part of wisdom, and that these people who had travelled to Airlie—from their mountains, from their forests, from their savannas, from their agencies, from their universities, from their villages—were profoundly worth hearing. Most of them, like Mayr, live lives too full of real work to be able to afford talk for the sake of talk. The important message that came out of Airlie, if there is one, and we think there is, came in their voices. It’s an aggregate message, touching on a small number of related concerns and mostly framed in response to a simple question: What do you need? The question had been posed implicitly in the invitations to Airlie, explicitly during the working sessions, and in several different forms: What do you need from donors, what do you need from the institutions that donors can influence, what do you need from yourselves, if community-based conservation is to succeed? The answers had been coming all week.

Chandra Gurung: “Flexibility.”

Julius Ningu, of Tanzania, agreeing with Gurung: “If we want to succeed in community-based conservation, there is a need of flexibility in the agendas of interested parties.”

Juan Mayr: “Information.”

Andreas Lehnhoff, agreeing with Mayr: “This workshop has shown us how productive it is to have case studies in your hand, and a sense of what’s going on in the world.”

Cindy Gilday: “The acknowledgement of the rights of indigenous people is an absolutely necessary element in any conservation effort.” Many others made the same point somewhat more broadly: that security of tenure for rural communities is a prerequisite to community-based conservation.

Chandra Gurung again: “A very important part is to get the trust of the people. That takes a long time. When you have the trust of the people, then it takes off.” Patience. Long-term commitment. Sympathetic sensitivity to the short-term exigencies that drive rural communities to degrade their own landscapes, and a willingness to cultivate indigenous solutions, rather than imposing exotic ones. Gurung alluded to his experience with the Annapurna Conservation Area as an example. “The first year we went there, we never talk about forest protection. We never talk about the animal protection. We talk about drinking water.”

Derek Statham, of the North York Moors enterprise in England: “Most farmers have great sympathy for conservation—providing the financial incentives are there.” So who will bear the costs, and who reap the benefits, of conserving biological diversity? Are citizens of the more affluent countries, or of the more cash-rich urban sectors of a given country, willing to provide incentive payments to rural communities in exchange for pains taken to preserve species richness? It’s happening at North York Moors and it might, Statham suggested, be appropriate elsewhere.

Liyang Su: “The linkage is very important. But what it is? Very complicated.” The linkage she referred to was that between international donors and various community groups, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations within any given country, each of which is often isolated from the others. “What do you ask donor to do? For me is, should be a link between those group. Government. Local community. NGO.” She added: “Put them together.”

Andreas Lehnhoff again, on the subject of linkage between international donors and small local organizations, which is often attenuated through an excess of middlemen: “We need less and less intermediaries to make the connection to the funding sources.”

Esther Prieto, of Paraguay: “Maybe we can socialize our informations through a particular publication.”



Gene Blackwell

Antonio Brack-Egg: “Every meeting ends same: ‘We need a network now.’” Yet, concurring with Mayr and Lehnhoff and Prieto and others, he did believe that enhanced flow of information, among CBC efforts throughout the world, would be valuable. And not just in English, he added.



Gene Blackwell

These emerged as points of consensus. There’s need for an international network, yes, that could continue the process of mutual enlightenment and support begun here at Airlie. There’s need for multilingual sharing of technical information. There’s need for education and technical training, so that in-country experts and local community members can assume the functions too often performed by expatriates and fly-in consultants. There’s need for fostering local and national organizations that can increasingly take over the roles played by international agencies and conservation groups. There’s need for tenurial security. There’s need for site-specific, small-scale solutions, laboriously fitted to local situations, with no presumption of their large-scale duplicability. There’s need for ingenious new forms of contractual understanding that ensure mutual accountability between the brokers of external resources and their local-community

partners. There’s need for donors, by that name or any other, to take the risky and uncomfortable step of loosening their control over project design, time frame, and (most risky of all) the criteria for success.

What else might be necessary? Marshall Murphree made a summary comment: “If what has been said in this room this week is correct, there needs to be lots of renegotiation.”

And again Juan Mayr, with a characteristic reminder that even the most forthright exchange of information is only a beginning, and that encouraging words, after all, are just words: “What we need is to go there, *somewhere*, and to *start to work*.”

After the breakfast with Secretary Babbitt, after the last panel, after the final page of the final flip-chart had been flipped, David Western spoke

to whole group. They were no longer so much a “plenum,” with the sterile formality that term suggests, as a gaggle of colleagues. Western recalled a major international conference, titled “Conservation *for* Sustainable Development,” that he had attended in Bali in 1982. At the time, the conference title had seemed oxymoronic at best, flat-out contradictory at worst. Conservation for development? Yet nowadays, Western observed, we realize that it’s futile to talk about conservation without also talking about the alleviation of human needs. If we’ve changed that much in little more than a decade, he said, then how much more different will our perspective be ten years from now?

And what exactly has changed in conservation since then? he asked himself. Well, the old approach was a heavy-handed, top-down, culturally Western set of procedures and attitudes. It consisted mainly of setting aside protected areas, then pretending that they were going to survive. In some situations that approach has been useful, in many others it hasn’t worked. Now we recognize that it’s just not enough. “There’s a whole society asking, ‘What is the relationship between people and nature? How has it gone wrong?’” Meanwhile, he noted, in a few scattered places the new approach has taken hold.

“It seems to me that we’re on the verge of a sea-change in the way conservation is done,” Western said. With this new approach, conservation will be “embedded within” the human-modified landscape, rather than being separated from or imposed upon it. “And so, in a sense, I think conservation is almost going to disappear, as a separate, single enterprise.” He foresaw it, instead, embedded within a larger enterprise. This larger enterprise will integrate also the work of development specialists, economists, agronomists, health professionals, national organizations, regional activists, and rural communities taking collective measures toward their own short- and long-term self-interests.

Western’s view into the future was not unduly rosy. There are tremendous obstacles to community-based conservation, he admitted. But there are grounds for tremendous hope. That view seemed to be generally shared.

Before scattering toward distant airports, everyone assembled for a group

“Have I learned anything  
in the last four days  
that I didn't know before?

No.

Do I have a much  
clearer vision of it now,  
than I did before?

Yes.”

John Robinson

photograph on the back steps of the Georgian Revival mansion. John Marrinka was in his stunning white suit, Juan Mayr wore a festive tie that he had bought for a dollar beneath the streets of New York, Esther Prieto was resplendent, others were dressed variously, as had variously seemed appropriate for breakfast with a Secretary of the Interior. There were sixty different costumes, as there were sixty different voices. Colleagues now, they arranged themselves shoulder-to-shoulder on the steps. They all faced in one direction, out over the lovely but improbable Airlie grounds. They grinned for the photographer. Not far away, the swans and the half-tame geese were at leisure. Elsewhere in the world, human-occupied landscapes were not so artificially idyllic, and there was work to be done.



David W. Harp

1  
Ecosystem Conservation and Rural  
Development: The Amboseli Case Study  
*David Western*

2  
Into the Woods: Natural Forest Management  
Experiences, Niger  
*Jonathan Otto*

3  
The Zimbabwe Communal Areas  
Management Programme for Indigenous  
Resources (CAMPFIRE)  
*Simon Metcalfe*

4  
Ranomafana National Park, Madagascar:  
Rainforest Conservation and Economic  
Development  
*Patricia Wright*

5  
The Resurgence of Community Forest  
Management: Case Studies from Eastern  
*Mark Poffenberger*

6  
Imagining Marine Resource Management  
Institutions in the Maluku Islands, Indonesia  
1870–1992  
*Charles Zerner*

7  
A Profile and Interim Assessment of the  
Annapurna Conservation Area Project, Nepal  
*Michael P. Wells*

8  
Subsistence Farming and Ecotourism:  
Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area,  
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*Mary Pearl*

9  
Extractive Reserves in Brazil:  
A Critical Analysis  
*Eduardo Martins*

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BOSCOSA: Forest Conservation and  
Management on the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica  
*Richard Z. Donovan*

11  
Ecofarming in the Peruvian Amazon:  
The Integrated Family and Communal  
Gardening Project (HIFCO)  
*Bruce Cabarle*

12a  
Community Based Approaches to Wildlife  
Conservation in Neotropical Forests  
*John G. Robinson and Kent H. Redford*

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Managing Wildlife with Local Communities:  
The Case of the Reserva Comunal  
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Kakadu National Park: An Australian  
Experience in Joint Management  
*Michael Hill*

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North York Moors National Park, UK  
*Derek Statham*

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Conservation in Greater Yellowstone  
*Dennis Glick, Dave Neary, Luther Propst and  
Ray Rasker*

# Thematic Papers

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The Link Between Local Participation  
and Improved Conservation:  
A Review of Issues and Experiences  
*Peter D. Little*

2  
National Policy Context for Community  
Action  
*Fabio Feldman*

3  
Cultural Traditions and Community Based  
Conservation  
*Charles D. Kleymeyer*

4  
The Role of Institutions  
*Marshall W. Murphree*

5  
Tenurial Rights and Community Based  
Conservation  
*Owen J. Lynch and Janis B. Alcorn*

6  
Are Successful Community Based Conservation  
Projects Designed or Discovered?  
*Frances J. Seymour*

7  
Ecological Limits and Opportunities for  
Community Based Conservation  
*Nick Salafsky*



**Janis Alcorn**

Biodiversity Support Program  
USA

**Hilary Barbour**

World Wildlife Fund  
USA

**Janet Bedasse**

Jamaica Conservation and Development Trust  
Jamaica

**Martha Belcher**

SEJATI  
Indonesia

**Gail Bingham**

RESOLVE  
World Wildlife Fund  
USA

**Fernanda Gabriella Borger**

University of São Paulo  
Brazil

**Antonio Brack-Egg**

UNDP/Amazon Cooperation Treaty  
Ecuador

**Roland Bunch**

COSECHA  
Honduras

**Bruce Byers**

Office of Environment and Natural Resources  
USAID  
USA

**Liz Claiborne**

Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation  
USA

**Laura Cornwell**

Chesapeake Biological Laboratory  
University of Maryland  
USA

**Sandy Davis**

Social Policy and Resettlement Division  
The World Bank  
USA

**Gustave Doungoube**

Reserve Dzanga-Sangha/Parc National  
De Dzanga Kdoki  
Central African Republic

**Fabio Feldman**

House of Representatives  
Brazil

**Tom Fox**

Center for International Development  
and Environment  
World Resources Institute

**Cindy Gilday**

Department of Renewable Resources  
Government of Northwest Territories  
Canada

# Participants

**Bruce Goldstein**

University of California, Santa Cruz  
USA

**Chandra Prasad Gurung**

King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation  
Nepal

**Michael Hill**

Australian Nature Conservation Agency  
Australia

**Michael Jenkins**

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur  
Foundation  
USA

**Twig Johnson**

Office of Environment and Natural Resources  
USAID  
USA

**Dennis King**

Chesapeake Biological Laboratory  
University of Maryland  
USA

**Chuck Kleymeyer**

InterAmerican Foundation  
USA

**Ronald Léger**

Community Based Exchange  
Costa Rica

**Andreas Lehnhoff**

Defensores de la Naturaleza  
Guatemala

**Peter Little**

Institute for Development Anthropology  
USA

**Owen Lynch**

World Resources Institute  
USA

**Cynthia Mackie**

Conservation International  
USA

**Maria Angela Marcovaldi**

Fundação Pro Tamar (TAMAR)  
Brazil

**John Marrinka**

Olgulului Group Ranch  
Kenya

**Thirtha Maskey**

Department of Parks and  
Wildlife Conservation  
Nepal

**Juan Mayr**

Fundación Pro-Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta  
Colombia

**Jeffrey A. McNeely**

IUCN  
Switzerland

**Simon Metcalfe**

Centre for Applied Social Sciences  
University of Zimbabwe  
Zimbabwe

**Marshall W. Murphree**  
Centre for Applied Social Sciences  
University of Zimbabwe  
Zimbabwe

**James Murtaugh**  
Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation  
USA

**Julius Ningu**  
East Usambaras Conservation and  
Development Project  
Tanzania

**Tri Nugroho**  
Lembaga Alam Tropika Indonesia (LATIN)  
Indonesia

**Perez Olindo**  
African Wildlife Foundation  
Kenya

**Art Ortenberg**  
Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation  
USA

**Enrique Ortiz**  
Conservation International  
USA

**Esther Prieto**  
Centro de Estudios Humanitarios  
Paraguay

**David Quammen**  
Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation  
USA

**Alison Richard**  
Peabody Museum of Natural History  
Yale University  
USA

**John Robinson**  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
USA

**Nightingale Rukuba-Ngaiza**  
Northeastern University  
Uganda

**Nick Salafsky**  
Biodiversity Support Program  
USA

**Kenneth Sayre**  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Notre Dame  
USA

**David R. Schmidt**  
Linn County, Oregon  
Board of Commissioners  
USA

**Frances J. Seymour**  
World Wildlife Fund  
USA

**Phil Shabecoff**  
Greenwire  
USA

**Rebecca Sholes**  
AMID East  
American Mideast Education Training  
Services, Inc.  
USA

**Derek Statham**  
North York Moors National Park  
Great Britain

**Shirley Strum**  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
Kenya

**Liyang Su**  
International Crane Foundation  
China

**Krisnawati Suryanata**  
University of California, Berkeley  
Indonesia

**Margaret Taylor**  
Ambassador to the United States  
Papua New Guinea

**Aurora F. Tolentino**  
Philippines Business for Social Progress  
Philippines

**Amy Townsend**  
Institute for Global Environmental Strategies  
USA

**Ellen Trama**  
Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation  
USA

**Don Tuzin**  
Department of Anthropology  
University of California, San Diego  
USA

**John Waugh**  
IUCN  
USA

**W. William Weeks**  
The Nature Conservancy  
USA

**David Western**  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
Kenya

**Michael Wright**  
The Nature Conservancy  
USA

**Patricia Wright**  
Ranomafana National Park Project  
Madagascar



*Participants  
Community Based  
Conservation Workshop  
Airlie, Virginia  
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