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Involving Religious Leaders in Conservation Education in the Western Karakorum, Pakistan

Kashif M. Sheikh

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Best conservation results are achieved when maximum attention is given to local participation through appropriate communication and education. In the western Karakorum, Pakistan—where religious institutions and leaders enjoy the respect of the local communities and the Islamic perception of the environment is traditionally conservation oriented—communication and education regarding conservation were found to be very successful when enabled by religious leaders. This article presents examples of conservation interventions attempted with local community

groups and traditional institutions. The mediation of local religious teachers enhanced community participation in collecting knowledge about and protecting biodiversity in a region under population pressure. The leaders' support for conservation education and their mediation between traditional beliefs and practices on the one hand, and new insights and trends from the world at large on the other, also made it possible to address conflict-laden issues emerging from the tourism industry in this fascinating mountain region.



Description of the area and problem setting

In the last 30 years, the opening of the Karakorum Highway, population increase, and the growing tourism industry have resulted in increasing pressure on natural resources in the Naltar area (36°7' N and 74°14' E) in the western Karakorum region. This area harbors great biological diversity and is inhabited by culturally diverse groups, including Gujjars (cattle-owning nomad herders). It is home to unique wildlife, with many endemic and threatened species of mammals, birds, and plants of high medicinal and commercial importance, as well as valuable mixed forests.

The means of earning a livelihood are limited, though. Local inhabitants have inherent abilities to use their wild resources in their own traditional and sustainable ways. However, some local practices have become a challenge to the mountain environment, leading to rapid deterioration of biodiversity, especially when forest slopes, talus, and fans are converted into agricultural belts after clear-cutting forests, resulting in bare slopes and landslides (Figure 1). Often, conflicts arise from land ownership or clear-cutting disputes. The area is also visited by tourists, climbers, scientists, and explorers, who benefit from a tourism infrastructure that is mainly externally driven.

The local communities are very religious. Islam is the main religion, with parallel faiths such as Shia, Suni, Ismaili, and others. As shown in an action-research project that lasted from 1996 to 2002, religion

and religious institutions can play a pivotal educational and conservation role in natural resource management. The project aimed to enrich knowledge of biodiversity by capitalizing on local knowledge, gaining the confidence of the communities with the help of their religious leaders, and sharing and exchanging this knowledge through “conservation education,” ie sustainable and environmentally responsible education that promotes a balance between human needs and the survival of other organisms, while also maximizing local participation.

Involving religious leaders

Religious leaders in Islam are highly respected individuals; they are approached by community members on matters dealing with all aspects of daily life according to the teachings of Islam. To gain sound knowledge of wild resources in the various parts of this

FIGURE 1 Forest and bush are cleared for land to cultivate potatoes. (Photo by Kashif M. Sheikh)

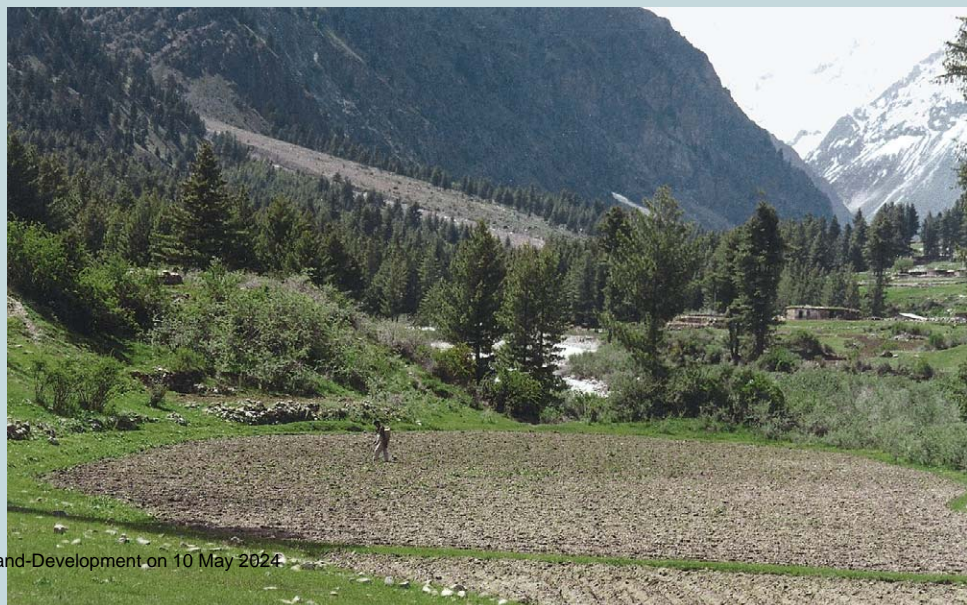




FIGURE 2 A local elder who took an interest in our conservation work and shared valuable information from the past. (Photo by Kashif M. Sheikh)

remote area, religious leaders of all ethnic backgrounds were contacted. Their viewpoints about nature and their opinions about conserving it were recorded in focused interdisciplinary discussions, interviews, and field interactions.

The Imams also identified key informants and helped to organize various meetings with representatives of mountain societies, including school teachers, landlords, farmers, hunters, laborers, Gujjars, and forest guards. All these individuals helped in shaping the knowledge base on wild resources, while at the same time benefiting from current scientific insights into conservation issues. Religious leaders also agreed on a broad curriculum of conservation issues that should be conveyed to the mountain communities. This process thus led to mutual learning.

Strong support was also offered by most leaders in developing strategies and actions to reach out to the people. Conservation actions were taken informally in the light of guidance from most elders and local leaders. Many special and weekly meetings were held at the mosques and other places where most community members gathered for their evening conversation. Religious leaders helped the researchers understand the socioeconomic context, as well as the conservation aspects inherent in their religion (Figure 2).

A detailed inventory of local environmental problems and conservation prospects was identified with the elders and local leaders. This inventory served as a guiding tool for prioritizing various local conservation actions. While people were busy cultivating their summer crops, they were approached about sharing the values of conservation and the role that they could play. Religious and local leaders also volunteered to go to different villages to work with various communities in communicating the need for conservation.

Developing a shared and participatory vision of environmental stewardship

In Islam, conservation of the environment is based on the principle that all components of the environment were created by God, and that all living things were creat-

ed with different functions. These functions are carefully balanced by the Almighty creator. But as emphasized by Mawil Izzi Dien, to assume that the environment's benefits to human beings are the sole reason for its protection can lead to environmental misuse or destruction.

A common vision of sustainable natural resource use was therefore established with the religious leaders, who understood the need for environmental protection but also emphasized that the local population's means of earning a living are meager. The religious leaders emphasized that Islam portrays human beings as the best of all living organisms but also makes them fully responsible for taking care of resources and preserving values, based on the principles of justice and equity. The leaders taught people that they are the most essential elements of the environment and their interaction at micro and macro-levels of resource use cannot be ignored.

Examples of mutual learning

Successful linkage with the schools and the community

Religious leaders helped to contact local schools to determine the degree of knowledge among teachers regarding environmental issues. Meetings were held with the local school administration, and slide shows were conducted to ascertain their appreciation of the importance of conservation of wild resources (Figure 3). The latest ideas about sustainable development were also exchanged with the local communities.

Visits of children to nesting sites of birds and critical habitats

Birds are among the best indicators of a healthy environment. This principle was explained in schools with the help of school teachers, and many children were able to learn about it in their local language. The children learned about the importance of not disturbing birds' nests or destroying their nesting sites. On-site explanations about nesting requirements and the roles of individual species in the environment were given. Because bushes are being cut from the river edges and along the streams for use as a wall around houses to keep the cat-

tle and roaming domestic animals away from households, local leaders were told about the importance of the bushes for a variety of breeding species.

Informal visits to village homes

Informal visits were made to various villages and homes to learn about local community needs. Women were asked about their practices of collecting firewood, what type of wood they prefer, and what wood they avoid collecting. Unfortunately, wood resources are becoming very scarce; conservation options were discussed.

Interaction with Gujjars

In the beginning, it was rather difficult to interact with the Gujjar populations, who settle on the upper slopes of the mountains and graze their animals throughout summers; but they became willing after listening to the call of local religious leaders. Their lifestyle is very different from others, and they spend most of their time in the pastures at higher elevations, and are involved in hunting wildlife and extracting medicinal plants. They also make contracts with people in the nearby towns and villages in exchange for grazing their livestock in pastures, and they receive wheat flour and other commodities in return for their service. In this way the burden on pastures increases manifold.

Superstitions: “good” and “bad” forests

We also discussed stories, told by those who live near the forests, of evil spirits living in the forests who do not let people pass through or collect dry wood. Many people in the villages were afraid of such stories. With the help of the religious leaders, we discovered that the storytellers actually cut trees illegally to steal wood. They cut trees and burned the remaining stump, to create the impression that this was done by an evil spirit. The religious leaders also helped educate these people by personally urging them to stop such rumors in the community.

Lessons learned and options for the future

The religious leaders pointed out a key lesson taught by the Quran: it acknowl-

edges that while humans may currently have an advantage over other organisms, nevertheless, these creatures are living beings like us, and worthy of respect and protection. No other creature is able to perform the task of protecting the environment. Therefore, the Almighty has entrusted humans with a duty that no other creature can accept.

Even though the scale of activities within this research project was confined to a few valleys, it is anticipated that involving local religious institutions in any efforts dealing with the conservation of the environment can be very effective in the short and long term. The innovative tool of conservation education promoted through local religious and traditional institutions provided a way forward towards successful conservation. Clear progress was made in educating rural mountain communities regarding the role of biodiversity in their livelihoods, community use of resources, and sharing of rights to natural resources such as pastures, wildlife hunting, and forests, in accord with local rules and traditions. In turn, the communities gained a sense of the value of their knowledge, and were consequently empowered.

Effective integration of influential local religious leaders at all levels of thinking, planning, managing, and implementing projects is crucial for long-term research, conservation, and development programs in mountain areas such as the Karakorum (Figure 4). Moreover, reli-

FIGURE 3 A view of the main school in the Naltar Valley. (Photo by Kashif M. Sheikh)



FIGURE 4 A meeting with local villagers and religious leaders emphasizing the need for local-level conservation efforts and greater local participation. (Photo by Kashif M. Sheikh)



religious leaders can help with another current challenge in mountain areas: the growing tourism industry can benefit local communities and provide sorely needed income, provided the local population has a say in developing and running business.

Currently, most tourism benefits outsiders rather than the mountain communities affected by visitors and by socio-cultural change; here too, religious leaders can help local communities achieve appropriate integration into policy and regulatory positions, as well as assist them in gaining access to market opportunities and developing domestic nature-based

tourism in remote valleys. Locals are aware that they cannot solely depend on tourism because it is a very unpredictable source of income. Moreover, tourism would also require some social adjustments of their traditional and cultural norms, which they may not be willing to make immediately. These are challenges for the future that the mutual learning approach presented here will hopefully help to address. Recommendations thus include:

- The creation of integrated platforms for social learning and to fulfill biological, spiritual, and emotional needs; religious institutions and teachers can play a considerable role in this regard.
- Any future conservation endeavors in such areas should take strict account of all segments of religious institutions and leaders of mountain societies for enhanced achievement in conservation and management efforts.
- Further technical investment in capacity development and training of northern communities for their appropriate integration in policy regulation and in gaining access to market opportunities is recommended. In this way, the owners or creators of indigenous knowledge can influence existing agreements/regulations.

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