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Title: When You Are Gone. Smartphones, Stewardship and Sustainability in a Community-Driven Conservation Project in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan



In recent years, the expert-driven, prescriptive approach to natural conservation has given in to community-based ecosystem stewardship. It is assumed that stewardship creates the sense of ownership on the part of local stakeholders, which can boost the conservation projects' prospects of long-term sustainability. This is important because the imperative of sustainability has become an explicit policy within the development sector: donors choose projects that assume a high level of community engagement which, they expect, will enhance the prospects of sustaining the impacts in the long-term. Yet it is rarely examined whether the local perspectives match the expectations of the Western stakeholders.

In this paper, we investigate the sustainability prospects of a conservation project in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan. Founded by ESPA (Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation), the project built upon launching a community-led environmental virtual observatory (EVO). The aim of the EVO was to innovate participatory environmental monitoring together with the ecosystem stewards (mountain communities) and to generate evidence to support sustainable livelihoods. Technology transfer (smartphones, weather stations and camera traps) was a core component of the project. Upon the project's closure, we comparatively investigated the viewpoints of the EVO's three target groups (national park rangers, local teachers and herder communities) regarding the future of the project. Our results show that while the EVO has a high chance of sustainability, local users adapt it for purposes that do not always match the ideas of the donors. For example, Kyrgyz herders planned to use the project's CyberTracker App to map out and eliminate the wolf populations that attack their yaks and cattle.

Our contribution to scholarship and policy-making is two-fold. First, we shed light on the diverse perspectives regarding the long-term outcomes of conservation projects. While immediate benefits of community-led conservation are well-documented, less is known about what happens when funding ceases. Second, we argue that while community-based conservation may be a useful formulation of goals on developmental issues, it carries the false promise of a conflict-free consensus whereas, in fact, vital interests do conflict. Accordingly, we aim to inform the debate on the utility of the sustainability imperative in development policy.