

What is Community-based Natural Resource Management ?

(An Introduction to CBNRM by Matthew Rice, ART)

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While most rural people in Africa consider themselves farmers, their use of domestic animals or crops is often supplemented by the harvesting of wild animal and plant species for food, fuel, shelter, medicines and much more. Where people are living in arid or semi-arid ecosystems natural resources are a capital base for rural communities and it is the use of these resources that forms the basis for rural livelihoods, rather than conventional agriculture. Where impoverished rural people live in communities, without private ownership of land, forests or wildlife, the over-use of natural resources is common - particularly since traditional "Chiefly" authority has been destroyed

In fact, in no circumstance has any State really been able to control the use of resources by rural people. The real outcome has been a situation known by sociologists as 'Open Access' in which it is in everyone's interests to harvest or otherwise use resources before their neighbours do so! This is not the end of the story, because rural people have also been denied access to valuable natural resources through the creation of protected areas. The result has been animosity between local people and national conservation management authorities as poor communities have been forced into the illegal and unsustainable use of these protected areas simply to survive.

Recently there has been a paradigm shift in thinking about the most appropriate way to manage natural resources and the relationship between government and communities. It is now generally accepted that resource management in the past has often been inequitable to traditional communities, that the state is unable to manage all the resources for which it is responsible, and that local solutions must be found for problems involving the environment and development. Thus devolution improves the management of complex situations.

Since the principle resource users in rural Africa still live communally, modern response to this new outlook is Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) where rural communities are once more given the right to manage and benefit from the resources with which they live and which they need for their livelihoods. Effective CBNRM broadens the productive base for communities and enhances greater self-sufficiency. In many cases it allows value to be added to wild resources which is important in Africa where the terms of trade are improving for natural resources and conservation but declining for primary commodities, agriculture,

CBNRM recognises that people live in communities, which have a right to develop their

own rules and systems for harvesting at sustainable levels, and seeks to integrate modern scientific and economic knowledge into these new systems. For example, CBNRM recognises that there is a relationship between the unit of management, the amount of benefits accruing to that unit and the level of responsibility it adopts. Overall the experience of CBNRM is positively demonstrating that the involvement of communities really can provide incentives for the conservation of wildlife, forests and other resources at the same time as providing new and alternative economic opportunities for rural people.

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