

## Working with traditional authorities to conserve nature in West Africa

**Patrick Adjewodah** (Nature Conservation Research Centre, P.O. Box KN 925 Kaneshie, Accra Ghana. Fax 233 (21) 253718. [PatrickAdjewodah@ncrc-ghana.org](mailto:PatrickAdjewodah@ncrc-ghana.org)) and **Paul Beier**

In many villages in northern Ghana, the chief, his elders, and the earth priests constitute a governing body known as traditional authority. The chief makes rules and settle disputes. The earth priest or *tindana* holds the communal lands, rivers, and associated resources in trust, ensuring that the relationship between the land, the people, and their ancestors is harmonious. Following cultural and religious norms, the tindana ensures equitable distribution use of resources. His interpretation of taboos and divinations governs how the community relates to the environment. The chiefly power and the tindana thus provide an institutional framework, which supports an indigenous system of natural resource management. Until recently, progressive forces, including many conservationists, have underestimated – and often undermined – the potential for these institutions to conserve nature in Ghana.

During and after colonial times, Ghana shifted from traditional management to state-run systems, including the establishment of government controlled wildlife parks and forest reserves. The conventional wisdom was that under traditional authority, people indiscriminately used natural resources. However, there is no inherent conflict between traditional authority and conservation, and in retrospect it was a mistake to abandon rather than engage traditional authority. At a recent workshop in Ghana, state agencies, conservation NGOs, and traditional authorities recounted the conservation successes and failures of both traditional authority regimes and western approaches (D Millar, AA Apusigah, and A Berinyuu. 2004. The chief, the forester, and the fireman. Workshop proceedings, University of Development Studies, Bolgatanga, Ghana). The workshop participants – including representatives of Ghana's government – concluded that

traditional authority offers the most promising vehicle to reverse resource decline in northern Ghana. Similarly, in 1994, Ghana adopted a Forestry and Wildlife Policy that calls for returning ownership of the nation's forest reserves to local traditional authorities, and development of collaborative institutions for managing them.

Since 1999, we have collaborated on the Wechiau Community Hippopotamus Sanctuary (WCHS) in northern Ghana. The Black Volta River near Wechiau harbors one of only two hippo populations remaining in Ghana. In the early 1990s, the Wildlife Division of Ghana proposed a national reserve to protect this population, but traditional authorities rejected this idea, fearing (with good reason) that a national reserve would alienate their people from the land. After a series of discussions with Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC – a Ghanaian conservation NGO) during 1998, the traditional authorities agreed to establish a sanctuary that would be owned and operated by the traditional authority in concert with a Sanctuary Management Board, with benefits flowing to the communities. NCRC would offer technical assistance, and the Ghana Tourist Board would help develop tourism, but the Sanctuary would in no sense be a government reserve. The tindana consulted the ancestors and received their approval. Recognition of the traditional authority was essential, and built local trust for later steps.

Consideration of local economic and social aspirations was also critical. People wanted better education for their children, improved roads, and economic benefits, without giving up the right to continue farming and fishing. While promising to develop tourism, and to seek government and international aid for these goals, NCRC emphasized that benefits would

be modest and would take years to materialize. NCRC won local trust and cooperation by respecting local culture, ensuring that all stakeholders participated from the start, and committing to certain activities without promising a particular outcome. Another key element was repeated emphasis that local institutions would be responsible for success or failure of the experiment. NCRC loudly proclaimed that it would not and could not be the paternalistic power behind WCHS – such an approach would fail as rapidly as a government-imposed reserve.

In 5 years, WCHS has become Ghana's premiere model for community conservation and is inspiring similar initiatives elsewhere. The sanctuary conserves about 24 hippos, 237 bird species, and 210 plant species in a core area of about 40 km<sup>2</sup> along the Black Volta River. In the larger 150 km<sup>2</sup> development zone, 22 villages benefit from the project via sustainable use of natural resources and community-based eco-tourism and cultural tourism. NCRC did succeed in obtaining various grants that subsidized the initial years. But since late 2003, monthly tourist revenue has paid all operating costs (local manager, guards, guides, tourist lodge, visitor center). Since 2002, the project has facilitated the arrival of 6 new boreholes and 2 new schools in the development zone. Revenue from the project, along with donations of foreign visitors, is funding a new scholarship program for elementary and secondary education. Accordingly, in 2004, we ended two of the subsidies (a Peace Corps volunteer, and an EarthWatch project). Ongoing subsidies from Calgary Zoo and USAID are targeted at new infrastructure, local capacity-building, and strategic initiatives. We are especially pleased that Ghanaian tourists outnumber foreign visitors, indicating that the sanctuary provides conservation education as well as conservation.

The traditional authority is not democratic. From the outset, all parties realized that this could lead to problems, because most of the sanctuary's farmers and fishermen belonged to

ethnic groups that are considered immigrants and not part of the traditional authority. After many hours of negotiations, the traditional authority agreed to vest decision-making and management in a new local institution – the Sanctuary Management Board (SMB). The SMB consists of chiefs, tindanas, opinion leaders and representatives from the twenty-two project communities, which are bound together by a common allegiance to the Paramount Chief of Wechiau. Thus the traditional authority holds enormous power on the SMB, but all stakeholders – including women and all ethnic groups – participate in the SMB. This inclusive approach would not have been possible under the traditional system alone. The integration of old and new local institutions permeates the project. For instance, the bylaws are enforced by a traditional court presided over by the chief and his council, but fines are deposited in a sanctuary account to which all the communities are entitled.

Our approach won't work everywhere. In Ghana, many traditional authorities are plagued with internal conflicts, and some have lost the respect of their people. However, where traditional authority still commands respect, it can be a powerful ally of nature conservation. By voluntarily sharing its power with more democratic local institutions, traditional authorities can maintain their own relevance. A strong traditional authority can also serve cultural conservation, replacing erosion of traditional values and beliefs with locally controlled cultural evolution.

Over the centuries, various peoples around the globe have independently created institutions that solve the 'tragedy of the commons' to manage resources sustainably. Western social scientists have focused primarily on solutions involving either centralization or privatization. However we believe that traditional authorities and new local institutions can offer enduring resilient solutions that neither privatize nor impose central government control over common resources.