

The Yunnan Initiative strengthens cultures and biodiversity

While there is growing evidence of deteriorating biodiversity and a decrease in cultural diversity, there is also an increasing number of people engaged in developing alternatives. These include local and indigenous peoples, grassroots organisations, NGO workers, activists, scientists, and policy makers, who all aim to strengthen local cultures and enhance biodiversity. The recent Congress on Cultures and Biodiversity, held in July 2000 in Yunnan, China, resulted in the Yunnan Initiative, an important synthesis of principles and strategic actions.

The Yunnan Initiative calls attention to the uncertainties that local and indigenous peoples face in their quest to use, nurture and sustain the ecosystems in which they live and on which they depend. The congress was an excellent opportunity to bring together representatives of local communities, researchers, policy makers and other stakeholders to exchange ideas and experiences about the conservation of biological resources and cultural diversity in China and other parts of the world. Approaches were developed which, if adopted, would make it possible for government and non-government organisations to act in ways that would strengthen the ability of local communities to govern their natural resources and secure their livelihoods.

The congress was organised by the Centre for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), the Kunming Institute of Botany, and the Yunnan provincial government. Financial support came from the Ford Foundation (Beijing), with supplementary grants from other institutions, including the Yunnan provincial government, GTZ, WWF, the Nature Conservancy, and Compas. In total 200 people participated, 80 from China and 120 from 27 countries

in Asia, Australia, North America, South America, Africa and Europe. Compas representatives from Agruco (Bolivia), AZ-TREC (Zimbabwe), IDEA (India), ECO (Sri Lanka) and the Netherlands also took part and prepared a workshop to share their experiences.

Culture and biodiversity

The outcome of the Congress, the Yunnan Initiative, provides a vision, principles and actions to enhance the ability of local groups to strengthen their culture while finding innovative ways to improve their livelihood and enhance biodiversity. It concluded that, though some local groups may be more resilient than others, the activities of many of them can be strengthened if they are assisted in their partnerships with the government, non-governmental organisations, and the commercial sector. These partnerships must be based on participatory processes and intercultural dialogue, and aim for an interaction between local knowledge and aspects of Western knowledge, and an equitable and sustainable stream of benefits.

The Yunnan Initiative supports earlier declarations about the importance of local

communities in conserving biodiversity, like the Code of Ethics of the International Society of Ethnobiology and the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992). This convention has also stressed the necessity of respecting cultural and spiritual values in making efforts to achieve the sustainable development of local communities and the ecosystems on which they depend.

Working group recommendations

The final document on the Yunnan Initiative includes sections on general principles and actions, as well as plans for regional actions as agreed upon by the participating organisations. Specific recommendations were developed by eight working groups on the following topics: nature reserves and local communities; cosmovision; agro-biodiversity; community-based resource management; globalisation, markets and biodiversity; eco-cultural tourism; intercultural dialogue and participation; indigenous resource rights; and traditional architecture. Here we will give a short overview of the recommendations developed on each of these topics.

Nature reserves and local communities

Development of protected area systems areas regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives is a challenge currently faced by all countries of the world. Integrated and comprehensive plans are needed and this planning process should be part of a regional strategy to develop a green, sustainable economy. The working group recommended that this process should be open to all stakeholders, especially local communities. Such protected areas should be managed in respectful ways taking the cultural values and needs of local peoples into consideration, while protecting the natural resources.

Traditional values embedded in cultural practices, such as sacred sites, often provide conservation strategies for the management of natural resources. These local practices contribute to biodiversity conservation and must therefore be better understood and respected. Successful strategies also depend on the degree of



Participants of the Congress on Cultures and Biodiversity during a field trip in Xishuangbanna, enjoying a local meal with a great diversity of rice varieties and local vegetables

women's participation, conflict management in the communities, and traditional knowledge transfer between generations.

Cosmovision

Development proposals are frequently in conflict with community values, practices and belief systems. Research and development initiatives should respect prevailing indigenous knowledge systems and respond to the needs and future visions identified by local communities. To achieve this, a dialogue between community members and outsiders should be created and information exchanged on important. Development agencies should be sensitised to the interaction between local cosmovisions, agricultural practices and biodiversity. Spiritual leaders should be given the opportunity to meet, and their roles should be enhanced. Local spiritual leaders, community members and scientists should engage in collaborative action research. Moreover, women's access to benefits and participation in decision-making should be promoted.

Agro-biodiversity

Farmers in traditional farming communities use and maintain very diverse genetic resources, which are often closely related to their culture. Actions to preserve agro-biodiversity are recommended, such as promoting the balance between marketed and subsistence crops; enhancing farmers access to critical information on policies that affect their culture and biodiversity; strengthening farmers and their institutions in agro-biodiversity management; and creating awareness about the interaction between traditional local foods and rare crop varieties.

Community-based resource management

Everywhere, communities have learnt how to manage their resources in their own local context. This learning can be strengthened with good facilitation. Meanwhile, there are significant differences between the interests and understanding of different stakeholders regarding natural resource management. The perceptions within communities are neither homogeneous nor static, and conflicts within communities as well as between communities and outside agents are all too common. Actions recommended include: facilitating communities to develop indigenous indicators of environment and resource change; to support the establishment of local resource management associations to improve control over natural resources; and to use modern media to ensure access to information about available resources, commodity prices and changes in environmental laws.

Globalisation, markets and biodiversity

Global and regional markets have both positive and negative impact on biodiversity and local cultures. Issues that should

be considered include ensuring that local communities share in the benefits of their own products and knowledge; improving access to markets and shorten trade links; promoting sustainable harvesting to counter over-collection of forest products; creating green markets and informing consumers about issues related to local cultures and biological resources. Local sustainable production systems must be connected to the growing green products market. In order to achieve a green economy, research centres should focus on developing technologies, market institutions and policy mechanisms to optimise the use of ecological and cultural resources.

Eco-cultural tourism

The planning of tourism activities should actively involve all stakeholders - governments, tour-operators, NGOs and local communities - to improve mutual understanding, cooperation and intercultural dialogue. Eco-tourism should be community-based and the communities should share in the benefits. Therefore, the tourism master plans should reflect the positive and negative impact of tourism. Certification programmes should include the hiring and training of local people, as well as environmental and cultural sensitivity; tour-operators should make direct contributions to biodiversity conservation and cultural protection. Local NGOs can assist by educating local communities about the impact and possibilities of developing tourism services. This can lead to creating guidelines that can stimulate culturally and environmentally appropriate activities for tourists.

Intercultural dialogue and participation

Indigenous knowledge and innovation in natural resource management are closely related to spiritual concepts and practices. Understanding this indigenous cosmovision can only be achieved by engaging in intercultural dialogue, which includes encounters between groups from different backgrounds. Support programmes for cultural self-education and intercultural dialogue should be established. Indigenous communities should strengthen their capacity to test and adapt external knowledge in ways that complements local knowledge and practices.

Indigenous resource rights

Indigenous resource rights refer to the right of indigenous peoples to maintain control over their cultural institutions, territories, language and knowledge systems. This control should be enhanced, and mechanisms established for adequate benefit sharing of the wider application of indigenous knowledge and practices. This includes, in connection with the recommendations from the World Trade Organi-



Photo: COMPAS

Local markets are important trading places of local varieties and products, Valle Alto, Bolivia

sation and the Convention of Biological Diversity, the establishment of a time-frame for the creation of a system that regulates all aspects of the indigenous intellectual property rights. Until this has been established, the access to indigenous knowledge systems should be limited.

Meanwhile, networks and partnerships between local peoples, government, NGOs and universities should be established or strengthened. Priorities for research and documentation include: assessment of changes in indigenous knowledge and practices; development of criteria for monitoring and evaluating social and environmental change; policies, legislation and ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of traditional resource rights.

Traditional architecture

Traditional architecture is the cultural and technological heritage of ancient construction techniques, which make use of renewable and ecologically friendly resources such as clay, timber and bamboo. The buildings constructed with these materials and techniques bear witness to a living and contemporary heritage. Academic, social and political action is needed to raise awareness about this heritage. An endogenous conservation-development approach is needed to ensure the continuity of using these techniques.

For further information:

Go to <http://cbik.org> or read the proceedings of the congress:

Xianchu, Xu (Editor in Chief), 2000

Links between Cultures and Biodiversity: Proceedings of the Cultures and Biodiversity Congress, 20-30 July 2000, Yunnan, P.R. of China. Yunnan Science and Technology Press