

Book Review

Fortmann, L. 2008. *Participatory Research in Conservation and Rural Livelihoods*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

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Ranging from close-knit communities to stakeholders brought together by dynamic global incentives, people around the world face the challenge of using commons provided by nature in a sustainable fashion. Fortmann's collection of case studies from Zimbabwe, Indonesia, Sweden, USA, Honduras, Kenya and Rwanda show the many benefits and challenges of a participatory research approach for studying relationships and social strategies for stewarding natural resources. In many cases the approach empowered local people who were typically marginalized within their own society and the research process enhanced their capacity to manage local natural resource commons for which they had a genuine concern. Participatory research approaches compliment commons management and solutions are often most sustainable when user groups are involved in designing rules of use (e.g. allocation decisions with water, fisheries, and forest products).

Instead of the learned expert doing research on a community or group and then leaving to write a dissertation or book, in the participatory research approach the outsider acts as research facilitator. They guide local users of various natural resources, some of them commons, to define and do research appropriate for locally perceived needs and problems. The book provides examples of participatory research on seed varieties, non-timber forest products, large landscapes, forests, and village areas and spans many cultures and geographies.

In many of the case studies, graduate students were applying the participatory research method rather than seasoned academics. I found the first case study that took place in Honduras to be particularly convincing as the researcher was skeptical of the method, but kept trying the approach guiding local farmers in running field trials to select seeds suitable to local conditions. The eventual outcome was that a few farmers actually developed new varieties of beans and began marketing them.

While this collection may be a “cup of tea” for social scientists, conservation biologists looking for ways to stop resource abuse by a burgeoning human populace may find it overly sociological. Many chapters stray far off course from the resource conservation theme waxing long on internal cross-examinations of the perceptions of local people or celebrating the process for empowering women. Still, these are important and interesting aspects of commons stewardship. The most surprising sociological case was in Sweden where rural women were empowered by a female researcher from India and became proactive and outspoken about village and forest management, a decision arena dominated by the rural men. Hearing the voices of those often treated as anthropological subjects provides fresh insight into why resources are so often abused and why many rural women and poorer families are disenfranchised from aiding in conservation. The case in Honduras was very positive for seed diversity and empowerment of the rural farmer. In contrast the negative and exploitative attitudes of Mexican immigrants harvesting Salal (a green used in the floral industry) in the pacific northwest of the USA highlight a commons management failure on US public lands. I felt great compassion for the graduate student who tackled that case. Overall, the book is an engaging collection of convincing cases for participatory methods in resource commons research. The book will be especially useful for graduate students as the cases clearly address pros and cons of participatory approaches, and were written by student practitioners.

Having seen plenty of nature disappear in my lifetime, I am deeply troubled by the tragic losses of species and native vegetation types world over. I wholeheartedly applaud any researchers that are investing their social capital to build local capacity to constrain the abuse of nature, maintain ecosystem services, and sustain biological diversity. Preventing the demise of the very ecological services that allow each of us to live on the planet in a healthy and just way seems to be the biggest challenge facing humanity.

Kudos to Fortmann and colleagues for researching conservation with local people and facilitating approaches in natural resources and commons problem solving. In contrast with government control and privatization, commons management by enlightened users shines with social equity, but whether it truly results in conservation and sustainability of natural resources depends on the constraints and rules put into action and how well those rules are followed (Ostrom 1990). The cases in Fortmann’s collection give readers some insight into the real challenges of the latter approach. When push comes to shove in a world of 10–12 billion, it will take creative social approaches to prevent wholesale destruction of the planet’s commons.

Literature cited

Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.