

**Building New Partnerships for Conservation & Sustainable Development in the  
Tibetan Plateau Region: Recent Experiences in the Yangtze River Headwaters**

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## **Building New Partnerships for Conservation & Sustainable Development in the Tibetan Plateau Region: Recent Experiences in the Yangtze River Headwaters**

### **Abstract**

The long-term protection of natural resources requires cooperation between multiple stakeholders, including local communities and different levels of government. In many cases, input from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can also benefit both conservation and social development goals. Until recently, however, there has been little experience in China of genuine, long-term partnerships between communities, government, and civil society.

In the context of China's Agenda 21 – which recognizes many linkages between the environment, poverty and development, and also encourages greater participation of local communities and national minorities in promoting sustainability – several new partnerships have emerged in the heart of the Tibetan Plateau, near the source of the Yangtze River. Specifically, local Tibetan herders have begun to engage with township and county government as well as international organizations such as Plateau Perspectives (<http://www.plateauperspectives.org>) to address key livelihood and human security issues, including environmental conservation. The community also established a grassroots NGO, the Upper Yangtze Organization (<http://www.uyo-wildyak.org>), to support its work. Successful protection of the grassland ecology is important not only for local people, but also for the country as a whole and the world. This paper presents several key elements of Plateau Perspectives' experience to date, from 1998 to present, working with Tibetan pastoralists in Qinghai Province.

The main activities undertaken or facilitated by our on-going partnership with local communities, civil society and government in Zhiduo County -- the first county on the Yangtze River -- have included the establishment of community-based protected areas (with a focus on species such as the Tibetan antelope, snow leopard and black-necked crane), wildlife research and monitoring, NGO capacity building, and support for the provision of basic education and healthcare services.

The establishment of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve in Qinghai Province, as well as plans to provide rest for the grasslands (Ch., *tuimu huancao*) in some parts of the project area, have given rise to a number of other issues as well, such as the role to be played by local herders in the design and management of protected areas, the potential social costs and benefits of urbanization, the compatibility of livestock grazing and biodiversity protection in grassland ecosystems, multi-purpose land management, etc.

This model of conservation – i.e., building partnerships with local communities, the government, and civil society – and the lessons we have learned, may present a good way forward for environmental conservation in China's vast western region.

**Keywords:** Community Co-Management, Partnership, Yangtze River Headwaters

## INTRODUCTION

Promoting human security often presents us with a dilemma. Expenditures and efforts made to *promote* human security in one area of life often *decrease* security (or limit the resources that would otherwise be available to promote security) in *other areas* of life. For example, while environmental conservation is important and necessary to both protect and promote livelihoods that are dependant on the land, such as nomadic pastoralism in the Tibetan Plateau region of western China, it is also true that some of the proposed “solutions” to current problems of grassland degradation (even so-called scientific solutions) may in fact decrease people’s security, or at least their sense of security. In fact, at a microscopic level – i.e., the level of individuals<sup>1</sup> – the solutions do not take into account any need to protect local herders “from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life, whether in homes, in jobs, or in communities”<sup>2</sup> – disruptions which in themselves constitute a lack, even a breach, of human security.

So herein lays the dilemma: How can we promote human security in a more holistic way, that is, in a way that does not ignore *either* the regional level (e.g., provincial and national level environmental and/or socio-economic concerns) *or* the microscopic, individual level (e.g., local herders’ needs and aspirations)? In the case of pastoralists in southern Qinghai Province, a trade-off is now being made between traditional lifestyles and the protection of the grassland environment.<sup>3,4</sup> Is there a way in which *both* local/traditional pastoral livelihoods *and* ecological integrity can be maintained?

Plateau Perspectives’ work in the source area of the Yangtze River has shown that there may in fact be a way, one based on genuine and long-term partnerships between local communities, the government, and civil society.<sup>5</sup> This paper summarizes the conservation and sustainable development work we have undertaken to date. It also presents suggestions – in the form of lessons learned – for consideration and possible application in the context of China’s Western Development Strategy. The lessons may

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<sup>1</sup> According to Umegaki (2003) the over-arching “agenda in promoting human security” is the adoption of “microscopic views on life [along with] critical views toward the primacy of the state, and equally critical views toward globalization.” Studies in human security are thus focussed primarily on *people*, that is, on *individuals* and *local communities*.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd Axworthy (2001), quoted by Umegaki (2003).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in an article entitled “Saving the Yellow River,” the Xinhua News Agency reported on April 22, 2003: “Over time people have abused the river’s resources and it is now time for mankind to act ... even if it costs the inhabitants along its banks their traditional lifestyles and livelihoods... [The] changes, possibly painful, [will be] at the expense of local lifestyles that have endured for more than a thousand years...”

<sup>4</sup> Williams (2002) describes the historico-cultural background to the current, mainstream view in China that traditional pastoral lifestyles and a modernization of pastoral production systems (putatively to promote sustainability as well as economic efficiency) are inexorably in conflict: “For centuries, Chinese literati viewed and described neighbouring mobile populations [such as Tibetan pastoralists] and their homelands in the most disparaging terms. These derogatory Confucian attitudes were only strengthened by Marxist orthodoxy after 1949. The Marx-Lenin-Mao line of political philosophy viewed nomadic pastoralism as an evolutionary dead-end standing in opposition to national progress, scientific rationalism, and economic development. Mainstream Chinese intellectuals in the reform era still consider the land and people to be ‘in the way’ of modernization – obsolete and disposable in their traditional composition.”

<sup>5</sup> Plateau Perspectives is a Canadian NGO that has worked in the high grasslands of Qinghai Province since 1998. More information is available on their website, <http://www.plateauperspectives.org>.

be especially relevant for the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve in southern Qinghai Province, where a “community co-management plan” for the protection and sustainable utilization of the local natural resources (e.g., grassland resources, wildlife, ecotourism, cultural sites, etc.) is presently under consideration.

## BACKGROUND

### *The Place & People*

Located in the heart of the Tibetan Plateau (see Fig. 1), Zhiduo County encompasses the highest populated area on the Yangtze River, which flows 6,363 km from glacial peaks in southwest Qinghai Province all the way to the East China Sea. The total area of the county is 80,220 km<sup>2</sup> with an average elevation over 4,500 m above sea level. The environment is semi-arid and arid grassland, varying from alpine meadows in the east to alpine steppe and desert areas in the west of the county. Some small areas of scrubland can be found in riparian zones (i.e., on the banks of streams and rivers) while large areas of the county are covered by bare rock and snow.

One of the most unique features of Zhiduo County is that it comprises a large part of the Yangtze River headwaters. The wetlands of Suojia Township, for example, are a critical component of what has been termed the “water tower of Asia,” the heart of Tibetan Plateau ecosystems (in terms of ecological services provided). The ecological integrity and health of the county's grasslands/wetlands are therefore crucial to the Yangtze River's flow, and equally important for the provision of many other downstream benefits for a huge proportion of the Chinese nation. In total, the Yangtze River basin is home to around 400 million people, or nearly one-third of China's population.

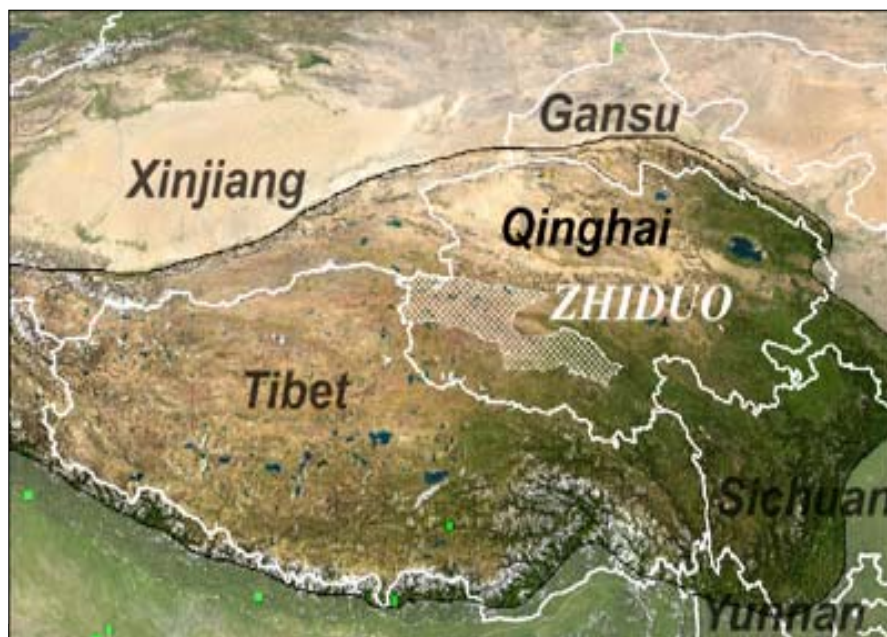


Figure 1. Map of western China, the Tibetan Plateau, and Plateau Perspectives' main project area (Zhiduo County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture).

One of six counties in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Zhiduo County is itself divided into six “townships” (sub-county administrative units; the former communes), each of which is further sub-divided into “villages” and “small villages” (the former brigades and work units, respectively). For example, Suojia Township has 4 villages (namely Muqu, Yaqu, Jiongqu, and Dangqu), each of which is also divided into small villages (in total, 16 small villages). A strong sense of *community* is still present at the township level and below, but not nearly so much at higher administrative levels.

The population of Zhiduo County is 22,854 people. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of the population is Tibetan, and over 90 percent of people are pastoralists (livestock herders) who jointly manage over 475,000 head of livestock, mostly sheep and yak. In total, the county is divided into 6 townships, 20 villages, and 68 small villages. The average population density throughout the county is 0.25 people per square kilometre.<sup>6</sup>

The traditional way of life – nomadic pastoralism – has been developed over hundreds of years, and Tibetan herders have acquired intricate ecological knowledge about their environment. A wide variety of livestock and rangeland management practices have enabled them to survive in an extremely harsh environment, including a multi-species grazing system as a form of risk management, the seasonal mobility of herds, and a flexible, opportunistic approach to all aspects of livelihood (Ekvall 1968, Foggin 2000, Goldstein & Beall 1990, Miller 2003, Schaller 1998).

Wildlife is abundant in Zhiduo County, particularly in western townships (especially Suojia Township). The widespread distribution and relatively large populations of native ungulates in the area – including the Tibetan antelope (*chiru*), wild ass (*kiang*), Tibetan gazelle, Tibetan wild yak, white-lipped deer, blue sheep (*bharal*), and argali – are clearly reminiscent of East Africa’s Serengeti Plains (cf. Schaller 1998). Other rare, endangered and/or endemic wildlife species include the snow leopard, Pallas’ cat, and brown bear. In some cases, wildlife populations are even increasing in number, such as the snow leopard. The vast wetlands also provide important breeding grounds for numerous migratory water birds such as the black-necked crane.

Thus the place (grassland and wetland ecosystems), the people (Tibetan herders, and a traditional way of life) and the wildlife (biodiversity / natural environment) in the headwaters of the Yangtze River are all important – and clearly worth protecting.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Civil Society in Zhiduo County***

Returning to the topic of partnerships, while *government* and *local people* have long been recognized as key players in “development work” worldwide,<sup>8</sup> the role to be

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<sup>6</sup> See official Yushu government website, URL <http://www.qhyushu.gov.cn/html/zqjj/zhiduoqian.htm>, viewed on 15 April 2004.

<sup>7</sup> More information on Zhiduo County can be found in BWG (2001), Mallon & Bayar (2002) and Foggin (2000, *in press*) – including its physical and human geography, history, culture, socio-economic development, and recent community-based conservation efforts.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, though, that these players – i.e., government and local people – should perhaps be designated as primary *decision-makers* and *recipients* of change, respectively. This terminology more accurately depicts the reality prior to the introduction of civil society (in its many forms) in the overall “development equation.”

played by *civil society* in China's development strategy remains unclear.<sup>9</sup> In the case of several development initiatives in Zhiduo County, however, two NGOs – one local, the other international – have already played a significant role. Their work is therefore reviewed here, with the hope of finding new directions for sustainable development, particularly within the context of recently unveiled plans to attempt “community co-management” of the area's natural resources. In short, this new approach means that local Tibetan people will work – both directly (e.g., through village committees) and indirectly (e.g., through a grassroots NGO) – with government and non-government organizations to cooperatively research, plan and implement appropriate interventions for community development and the protection of native biodiversity.

Clearly the most significant organization in Zhiduo County is a local NGO, the Upper Yangtze Organization (UYO), a community-based establishment that aims to benefit local Tibetan herders while protecting the natural environment. A history of this NGO, its goals and objectives, and a critical analysis of the key innovative features of the community that have led to its successful environmental management are described elsewhere (Foggin, *in press*). In this paper, however, it is Plateau Perspectives' work – and our perception of what has succeeded and what has not – that is described.

Plateau Perspectives is an international NGO that has worked with UYO leaders since December 1997, and with local Tibetan communities in Suojia Township (in western Zhiduo County) since June 1998. Support for Plateau Perspectives' work has come from local government – from the village up to the prefecture level – as well as from provincial and national agencies.<sup>10</sup> While we have been formed in many ways by our local partners (Foggin 2000, *in press*), our analysis and self-evaluation of past work will differ from theirs, largely because as an international organization, our views will stem from a more regional/global perspective.<sup>11</sup>

Several other international NGOs have also worked in the project area. However none appears to have adopted the same community-based approach as Plateau Perspectives, whether in extent or degree, nor have they integrated their work to the same degree – incorporating conservation, community development, and local empowerment.

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<sup>9</sup> Civil society here is meant to include both registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as less formal community-based groups (e.g., local committees). For more information on the recent history of civil society in China, see *Chapter 8: Regional Conservation in the Source Area of the Yangtze River (Suojia Township): A Case Study* in Foggin (2000). Also see Kelliher (1997), Zhang (2003), Young (2001) and Foggin (*in press*).

<sup>10</sup> National level support for Plateau Perspectives' work in Suojia Township has come mainly from the Biodiversity Working Group (BWG), a section of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment & Development (CCICED) – a high-level, policy-oriented advisory body established by the State Council of China to help implement China's Agenda 21. The recommendations presented to senior officials in Beijing have been based on fieldwork such as the Alpine Grassland Project, which was undertaken cooperatively with Plateau Perspectives and the UYO. Plateau Perspectives also was directly involved in planning and facilitating sectoral meetings with provincial leaders, *Workshop on Biodiversity Conservation in Qinghai Province*, held in Xining in June 2001 (BWG 2001).

<sup>11</sup> It is the whole spectrum of views, however, from local to international, which has formed the basis of our on-going work in Zhiduo County, now under the umbrella of the *Yangtze Headwaters Sustainable Development Project* (see URL: [http://www.plateauperspectives.org/yangtze\\_headwaters\\_project.htm](http://www.plateauperspectives.org/yangtze_headwaters_project.htm)).

## **PLATEAU PERSPECTIVES' EXPERIENCE TO DATE**

From 1998 to the present, Plateau Perspectives' work in Zhiduo County has included four main areas of work, described below.

### ***Community-based Protected Areas in Suojia Township***

Plateau Perspectives' first area of work was to provide expert assistance and support to the UYO and local government to formulate a multiple-use land management plan. The plan included the establishment of four community-supported protected areas. Central zones were determined based on the abundance and distribution of four focal species: the snow leopard, Tibetan antelope, Tibetan wild ass, and black-necked crane. A protected area for wild yak and a large wetland area were added at a later stage. The snow leopard conservation zone was also later extended to include its entire, relatively contiguous, rugged mountain habitat in Suojia Township.

Through this process, Plateau Perspectives and the UYO were also able to introduce the notion of public participation into relevant conservation planning documents. The main components of the multiple-use land management plan developed in Suojia were subsequently included in several national documents, ultimately leading to the present approved document entitled *The Biodiversity Conservation & Community Livelihood Co-Management Plan in the Suojia Area, Qinghai, China* (QEPB et al. 2003), which may in fact be applicable even to the entire Sanjiangyuan region. In this way, Plateau Perspectives has been able to influence the management plan – from the early stages of conservation planning, and from the “bottom-up” incorporating local views and opinions into the overall process. We now propose to help implement the plan in cooperation with the UYO, local government, and the reserve's management bureau.

### ***Wildlife Research & Monitoring in Suojia Township***

In a more tangible way, Plateau Perspectives also assisted in the development of the Suojia Environmental Monitoring Unit (SEMU), which is comprised of 16 herders who serve as regular wildlife monitors. These monitors were provided with binoculars and other tools, as well as basic training, to monitor the distribution and abundance of several key wildlife species – a service/function that they, as local people living on the land, can undertake more regularly, more comprehensively, and more cost-efficiently than any formal government bureau (Foggin 2000, BWG 2001). The SEMU can also raise community awareness of other environmental issues, and it can equally serve as an important focal point for future conservation planning and project implementation. This work – as with most of our work in Zhiduo County – has been done in collaboration with the UYO.

### ***Capacity Building of a Grassroots NGO, the Upper Yangtze Organization (UYO)***

As can be read in much of what has been written above, both explicitly and implicitly, Plateau Perspectives' work is clearly not independent of that of the Upper Yangtze Organization (UYO). Indeed, much if not all of the work we have undertaken in the area since 1998 has been done in collaboration with the UYO. This is by choice, since the best capacity building comes from close, long-term collaboration between partners – as opposed to a trainer/trainee relationship, the only form of relationship possible

during short-duration workshops, however well run or intentioned a workshop is. The flip-side of such close collaboration is that we, too, have been formed in many ways by our partner organization, the UYO, and at times it becomes difficult to distinguish which ideas and plans have stemmed from where. However, we can confidently say that, as an international NGO with resident international expertise, we have brought many new ideas to the project table, and that specific capacity building activities such as teacher training workshops and wildlife surveys have also been undertaken, to good effect. New teaching methods have been adopted, both in regular teaching and for environmental education in the community; scientific research design is now better understood; improved project management methods are being adopted; and a basic understanding of grassland ecology, public health, the value of indigenous knowledge, and other topics important for successful conservation and sustainable development in the Tibetan Plateau environment are increasing within the UYO – and through the UYO to the Tibetan community at large.

### ***Education & Health Projects in Zhiduo County***

Tightly linked with the programme areas described above, Plateau Perspectives has also undertaken a variety of community-based projects in education and health. These projects include a doctor training programme, the establishment of village tent schools, and teacher training workshops – as well as regular, on-going capacity building of the UYO in service provision for low density, seasonally mobile (nomad) populations.

Taking Plateau Perspectives' village doctor training programme as example, the basic premise is that by providing local communities with needed services, and by enabling community members themselves (in this case, village doctors) to serve as providers, there will be a sense of empowerment – of increased hope that change is possible, and that change need not be driven only from the outside. In this way, people can be freed from lives of dependency, subsistence, and also from indifference to the conservation goals of the recently established Sanjiangyuan National Nature Preserve. This model was first developed for use in Tibetan regions of China by Future Generation, in their *Pendebe* work in the Qomolangma (Mt Everest) National Nature Preserve (UNSD 1998, Taylor-Ide & Taylor 2002). Through such a process, the work of local doctors – who are *de facto* community leaders – can be further strengthened and enhanced. One way has been to give training in the broader concepts of community development (including needs assessment and prioritization, sustainable use of natural resources and protection of biodiversity, and community mobilization) as well as to refine their medical skills and build their capacity to improve community health.



## CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS, FUTURE CONCERNS

The socio-political context in which Plateau Perspectives' work has been (is being) undertaken is both variable and, at times, unpredictable. Two major policies/decisions in particular have affected the entire "development landscape" in Zhiduo County and the surrounding pastoral regions. The first is the establishment of a national nature reserve,<sup>12</sup> with almost no consultation at the local level, whether with the local government or otherwise. Rather, local people simply were informed of its existence, largely as a *fait accompli*. The most immediate implication for local people is that they now live under an increased level of uncertainty – i.e., there is increased human *insecurity*, at the so-called microscopic/individual level – since they may be evacuated (relocated) from the reserve's core zones at any time. It is unique, therefore, that the implementation of a community co-management plan is even being contemplated in Suojia Township, an area that includes part of the nature reserve's largest core zone. Many details, however, have yet to be discussed, decided, funded, and implemented.

The second main government policy that now affects vast areas of alpine grassland in Qinghai Province is the *tuimu huancao* ("restore the land to grassland") policy. While the necessity of this national policy is argued largely on the grounds of environmental conservation – i.e., by banning livestock grazing, the grassland is meant to receive the rest it needs to return to its former ecological state – this policy also can present a number of social challenges. As has been observed in other instances worldwide, the sedentarization of nomads is never straightforward, nor always beneficial, at least not for the people that are affected most directly, the herders themselves. There is also considerable concern about long-term environmental consequences of sedentarization efforts, both because of increased grazing pressure and other physical disturbances of grassland areas near the new urban centres, and also because grassland ecosystems have in fact evolved over millennia with presence of grazers. At least some grazing – whether by livestock or wildlife species – is a natural part of all grassland ecosystems. Thus, with removal of all livestock, and with no or little wildlife in large areas of the Tibetan Plateau, grassland species composition may shift in possibly unpredictable ways. Widescale ecological experiments often may carry with them intrinsic dangers, and these are often unforeseen and unpredictable. Therefore local situations must be considered, especially if there is already considerable conservation benefit derived by the presence of local people, such as already shown in Suojia Township (see below).

Social consequences of the simple *threat* of moving to new homes, whether due to nature reserve laws or new grassland regulations, include increased sense of insecurity, the selling of livestock prior to resettlement schemes that may not even materialize, and stress-related health problems associated with uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Social costs associated with *actually* moving poor people to the periphery of urban centres are also high and would likely include unemployment (since the move is meant to be only temporary, around ten years, with annual financial compensation), difficulties in providing social services across socio-economic strata, other forms of disparities and inequities, and a loss of traditional knowledge of pastoral practices and

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<sup>12</sup> The Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve covers a total area of 152,300 km<sup>2</sup>. It is comprised of 18 core zones for wildlife protection, adjacent buffer zones (where sustainable levels of animal husbandry can be practiced), and peripheral research/development zones.

grassland ecology. All these factors can lead to social instability, which is clearly not in the interest of the State.

### ***The Value of Keeping Tibetan Herders on the Land***

From an ecological perspective, livestock grazing is not innately bad for grasslands, and a mid-range level of grazing may in fact be beneficial for grassland biodiversity. Possibly more important than providing entire “rest” to the grassland by removing all herders and their livestock from the land is the protection afforded by local people. For example, in Suojia and Qumahe townships, which together comprise the largest core zone of the nature reserve,

- poachers have already been chased away by local people;
- laws and regulations have been adopted by local communities;
- traditional wildlife sanctuaries (sites of cultural or religious significance) have been recognized, and new protected areas delineated;
- local herders have formed a team to monitor wildlife populations and to note trends in the distribution and abundance of key species.

In these ways local communities can, and do, contribute significantly even to national conservation goals in the Tibetan Plateau region. More than any government bureau located in a city far away, herders can

- monitor wildlife populations regularly throughout the year, in all seasons; and
- as a team, include the entire geographic region within their scope (as opposed to conducting only single transect surveys or block surveys).

Since herders value their natural environment and are enthusiastic about seeing wildlife, they also (up to now) are pleased to serve this purpose without payment. This lends a further economic argument, cost-effectiveness, to all the other reasons already given as to why local herders should be kept on the land.

In short, Tibetan herders are much more valuable as stewards or custodians of the land, rather than harmful for conservation as has often been assumed (Williams 2002).

For these reasons, we place great hope in the community co-management plan already agreed for implementation in Suojia Township. If successful, this plan can serve as a model for community-based rangeland management in a broader geographic region, serving the interests of both pastoralists and nature conservation. And, already, initial success can be seen in the community’s involvement in Suojia Township, and in the increases in wildlife populations observed in the project area. The challenge now is to make the transition from individual *ad hoc* conservation activities to more formalized plans for the entire region. This work can then later be “scaled-up” to a larger area and human population. Failure to do this, on the other hand, leaves only one option – to move people off the land – and this, as outlined above, has social consequences (and probable environmental consequences) that are far from optimal.

## **PARTNERSHIP-BUILDING FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION: THE ART OF FINDING COMMON GROUND**

Building on Plateau Perspectives' recent experiences in the Yangtze River headwaters – working together with local Tibetan communities, the UYO, and local government – we have found that the only sure way forward is to form long-lasting, and genuine, partnerships. No single partner alone can meet the needs of the place, only a team effort can. However, every partner *de facto* comes with its own priority concerns or areas of interest. Thus *consensus-building* becomes very significant. How can a broad consensus be built among different players, sometimes with divergent goals? In short, how does one build *genuine, equal partnerships*?

The answer to this question can be found in both a negative and a positive statement. First, contrary to popular belief, participation can in fact be harmful to the participants, if abused (e.g., by endorsing unequal power relations; see Cooke & Kothari 2001). Indeed, there are many real potential pitfalls to participation (which nonetheless is a necessary precursor to partnership-building) that must be kept clearly in mind. One insightful categorization of different levels of participation is outlined by Pretty (1995), ranging from *manipulative participation* (where participation is but pretence) through *passive participation*, *participation by consultation*, *participation for material incentives*, *functional participation*, and finally to a more genuine *interactive participation*, and ultimately *self-mobilization*. Thus even the concept of participation – as well as sustainability and local ownership (Westing 1996) – can be, and often is, interpreted in many different ways. Consequently, as described in Foggin (*in press*),

“one danger for external organizations [including government bureaus] is that (knowingly or unknowingly) they appropriate for themselves ownership of work that in fact is the intellectual property of other people, often the local or indigenous people. In Suojia, this problem has already occurred on at least two occasions when external agencies acted as though the community had undertaken no previous work of its own, and all the efforts made by the community were futile without the external assistance. There also have been problems with a lack of respect given to UYO members by external partners because of their lack of formal education [even though many UYO members in fact have provincial-level education]. Although partnerships have continued for pragmatic reasons, lack of genuine participation and mutual respect has led on some occasions to a loss of confidence among the local people, resulting in a loss in project sustainability.”

It is clear, therefore, that we must strive to reach *functional participation* at least, and preferably *interactive participation*, if community co-management is to have a chance of lasting success.

Second, there must be an authentic desire among all stakeholders to build partnerships *as among co-equal players*. It is difficult, however, to devolve or “give away” power, that is, to decentralize important decision-making processes in ways that will include local people. This area is therefore still a critical part of the “development equation” in community-based natural resource management. Fortunately, China's Agenda 21 clearly indicates willingness – and even recognition of the *necessity* – to involve local communities, as well as minorities and women, in assessing and addressing issues of national importance such as poverty alleviation and environmental protection (ACCA21 1994, SEPA 2001, Foggin 2000, 2002, *in press*). Putting these concepts

into practice, though, is quite difficult. Nonetheless, approval even to trial community co-management in Suojia Township, as outlined in the afore-mentioned *Biodiversity Conservation & Community Livelihood Co-Management Plan*, gives ample room to hope that a more cooperative arrangement (i.e., genuine partnership) can be developed among stakeholders in the project area to manage the region's spectacular biodiversity.

Finding "common ground" starts with a simple recognition that many different people have a stake in the future of the area, and that all the stakeholders should join together to find the solution or solutions most suitable to all.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The basic lessons we have learned about successful environmental conservation (and other aspects of community development) include the following:

- Partnerships are essential
- Local people must be included amongst the stakeholders in partnership
- Partnerships must be genuine (i.e., not based on manipulative participation, passive participation, participation by consultation only, etc.)
- All members of genuine partnerships have abilities or resources to contribute – including local communities, government, and local and international NGOs
- Local people's resources include traditional ecological knowledge, an intimate knowledge of past/present conditions of local natural resources, an enthusiasm for wildlife conservation, and time/effort to contribute to conservation efforts
- Together, local communities can work with the government and with NGOs to develop sound, viable, multi-purpose land management plans; these plans are generally well founded in the reality of the place and people, and thus confer a much greater sense of local ownership, hope, and security to the people most directly affected<sup>13</sup>
- Civil society, both national and international, can also serve to some degree as a voice for local people and communities, thus acting as a catalyst for positive change – particularly by promoting a greater involvement of local stakeholders in decision-making as well as by building local capacity to participate in the science (and the art) of environmental conservation
- Finally, an array of unique, innovative features in Suojia community have also contributed to their successful environmental management, namely leadership,

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<sup>13</sup> A very important concept, the *dimensionality of development*, is developed in detail by Taylor-Ide & Taylor (2002): "Change is commonly viewed in one dimension, but in reality there are at least three dimensions: bottom-up actions by people, top-down policies from government, and outside-in contribution of ideas and skills... Just as the world is not flat, social change is not one-dimensional... Failures [we have seen] taught us that an outsider's good intentions are generally a bad starting point and that community successes tend to evaporate once governments or donors assume control."

pioneering spirit, long-term vision, and local ownership; good communication between the community and the outside world, along with a desire to learn as well as to discuss/debate key development issues; and a growing hope in the community, based on initial positive outcomes (Foggin *in press*)<sup>14</sup>

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Plateau Perspectives has already worked in the Yangtze River headwaters for over six years, and we plan to continue for at least several more years. In its most basic form, our work can be summed up as one of building up and encouraging local partners to plan and implement long-lasting (sustainable) activities in environmental conservation and community development. To this end, Plateau Perspectives has just signed a new partnership agreement with the county government and the UYO – a project entitled *Yangtze Headwaters Sustainable Development Project (2004-2008)*. While this new phase of our work will certainly present its own challenges, particularly as we scale-up to broader geographic regions and human populations, there is also a lot that we can learn from our experience to date. This paper has attempted to present some of these experiences, along with the context of our work, to inform other similar projects in western China. The key lesson we have learned is that close cooperation with local people generally will bring much more benefit than harm for sustainable development, including environmental conservation – and this even in environments where people have long been perceived as the cause of land degradation.

Taking the conservation of natural resources and local people's sense of security (vis-à-vis their future) as two fundamental building blocks for regional human security, this paper has equally presented a case – still in progress – of work focussed on building partnerships for conservation and development. This study has shown that, far from detracting from the State's development goals, partnerships with local people and local communities in fact promote security at both the local/microscopic level and the national level (since national security is enhanced when social stability increases). It is therefore imperative that local communities become more involved in the science of conservation, rather than be excluded and relegated to the role of simple observer, or worse still, be denigrated as main perpetrators of environmental degradation. In the end, it is only when local communities, civil society and government come together in partnership that there is even a chance of successful, long-term conservation. This has been demonstrated in several other places in China (see Taylor-Ide & Taylor 2002), and thus far it has been proven true in Plateau Perspectives' experience as well.

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<sup>14</sup> It is especially important that international NGOs take the time to work at the right speed (i.e., at the rate of the local community), and not drive local people to meet their own (external NGO) project goals. More often than not, externally-driven projects kill innovation, local ownership, and sustainability.

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