

Revisiting Protected Area Buffer Zones:

Exploring legal and institutional reforms in buffer zone management
Decentralisation for buffer zone management

Bihari Krishna Shrestha

1. Conceptual framework

A. *Buffer zone*: a neutral space between hostile or belligerent forces that serves to prevent conflict

I. A space in which both the parties have no vested interest to transgress

II. A space that separates both the forces into their respective self-contained sphere of living

III. A space that eliminates chances for mutual belligerence (conflict)

Conceptual framework (contd.)

B. *User group*: An organization of the direct stakeholders (users) in a *certain service or infrastructure* and is characterized by:

I. Being an exclusive organization of users

II. Exclusive decision-making authority resides with the organized collectivity of the users; *user committee* functions only with the authority of the *user group*; characterised by good governance conditions

III. A self-sustaining institution exercising self-contained authority

- to identify its own needs
- to develop and implement its own plans
- to mobilize its own resources
- to formulate and enforce its own rules and regulations and to sanction deviant behaviour

Some highlights of the buffer zone arrangement

1. Purpose – mobilization of local people to minimize “undesirable impact” (on the wildlife)
2. Identified “buffer zone” space ranging between 1 to 5 kms
3. Sharing of park revenue (30-50%) with the people apparently to create a “stake” in the wildlife among the people
4. Formation of “user groups” (1400 or 4075), federated “user committees” (141); federated User Councils (11) whose heads represented in the BZMC to promote organized participation in the protection of wildlife.
5. Funds (1 crore a year) used for general development (roads, river training) and compensation in the case of depredation of livestock; 30% of funds left unused.
6. Coexistence of 376 FUGs

Performance of buffer zone in the central region

a. Superficial goodwill: while there is better “goodwill” among the people than in the past, when the people’s stakes are hurt (depredation of crops and livestock) the superficiality of the goodwill reveals itself

- In August 2010, a rhinoceros was electrocuted at the hands of a farmer who had fenced his paddy field with barbed wire with live electricity
- Regular wildlife depredation of people’s crops and livestock and “popular retaliation”
- Poachers continue to poach. It is worse during when governance situation is bad

b. Indeterminate causality: While there has been increase in the number of wildlife, it is hard to say if the critical factor is government security for wildlife or the people’s goodwill

c. No buffer effect: Conflict between people and wildlife continues. There is no “buffer” effect, i.e. no “neutral space” to keep the two parties in conflict apart.

Limitations and grey areas in the present structure of BZ approach

1. The approach does not create a “neutral space”.
2. One initial idea was to create a neutral space: no livestock and cereal crop in the buffer zone; only tree crops; people to be compensated (like “land banks” in the US many years ago) in the case of shortfalls in income. It was never tried.
3. Continued donor intervention (e.g. Park and People project) only acted as the red herring and stalled the search for real solutions.
4. The User Groups and other higher level federated entities do not manage any *service or infrastructure*, and do not contribute to “buffering” impact. It is a very poor mimicking of the Nepal’s decentralization structure. So, the park funds shared with the communities do not contribute to BZ objectives. And the elite capture of resources makes it worse.
5. The structure lacks coordination with the VDCs and FUGs; the latter’s lack of a more prominent role is particularly striking.
6. No basic data on the socio-economic composition of the population in the “buffer zone”
7. Lack of on-going analysis of the incidents of “conflict” between the wildlife and neighboring population
8. The outcome: continuing ambivalence of the park managers towards “people’s participation”

Possible steps ahead:

1. The search must continue for creating the “neutral space”.
2. Decentralization needs to be customized to the imperatives of wildlife conservation.
3. Decentralization is after all only a partnership between the state and the local communities for achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness. So, it is time for revisiting the issues of decentralization and BZ management.
4. Other possible opportunities: increased urbanization and possibility of creating a neutral space without human habitation too should be considered. Possible policy instruments too should be explored.

Thank You !