

Dibbin Reserve: the trade-off between environmental conservation and economic development

Odeh Al-Jayyousi, Regional Director, IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)

orj@iucn.org

This historical debate between conservation and development is manifested in the recent agreement by Jordan-Dubai Capital (JDC) and the investment unit of the Social Security Corporation (SSC) to construct a JD 100 million comprehensive tourism complex in Dibbin. The controversy is a classical debate between conservationists and developers. The intent of this article is to shed some light on the two perspectives rather than attempting to find answers. The questions that we need to think of are: How can conservation inform development rather than be a tax on development? How can conservation present opportunities through promoting new research and innovations in clean and environmentally friendly technologies?. How local people can be part of the decision making process and benefit from development around protected areas?

Currently, the Royal Scientific Society (RSCN) is managing a project nearby the planned development. The RSCN project aims to establish a nature reserve in Dibeen Forest in northern Jordan, one of the best remaining examples of natural pine-oak forest in the region. It supports over 17 endangered species and other globally significant biodiversity.

It is argued that economic growth and development has not done as much to reduce poverty as was hoped and the extent to which growth has benefited the poor differs hugely between countries. The underlying principles for sustainable development need to be critically and actively applied to both poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation.

The benefits of macro-economic growth seldom reach all the poor, especially the rural poor. In fact, large scale development projects have sometimes contributed to the general public good only at the expense of the vulnerable people's livelihood, thus increasing localized poverty.

In contrast, conservation has contributed to human wellbeing by safeguarding global public goods and by maintaining ecosystem services at the regional and national level. At times, however, it has also contributed to local poverty by denying people control and access to the natural resources that underpin their livelihood. This has occurred both in protected areas and with nationalized resources, such as forest concessions, which often exclude use for local benefits in the name of conservation and natural resources management.

In both development and conservation activities, the tendency to focus on broader global and national public benefits - at the expense of local benefits – can adversely affect livelihood. While recognizing the need for development and conservation agencies to better integrate poverty reduction and conservation objectives, there is a need to develop sound criteria for development to contribute actively to long term sustainability and to poverty alleviation.

Realistically, integrated approaches to conservation and development cannot promise perfect win-win solutions. Pure conservation-focused interventions seldom deliver perfect conservation outcomes either. It is time to look for the best possible outcomes, bearing in mind the principles of equity. This implies genuine shared decision making and participation by local communities in land use decisions. Participatory decision-making involves all stakeholders to negotiate land-use objectives and ways to meet those objectives.

The lack of a clearly understood link between corporate and natural value (or natural capital) has meant that business has been mainstreamed to understand that there are both threats and opportunities posed by mismanagement of biodiversity and have often seen the issue of biodiversity management as a governmental or societal responsibility. The role of business in biodiversity should not be overlooked in light of the commitment and adoption of social corporate responsibility by many private actors.

For biodiversity conservation and development to contribute fully to poverty reduction, a fundamental shift is needed to more systemic and people-centred approaches that build on poor people's priorities and capabilities. The key of success lies within country-led mechanisms to set, measure, and achieve country-specific environmental sustainability targets that draws on existing development frameworks and strategies.

Finally, can our NGOs be a real advocacy group that inspire and nurture creative tension as part of civil society globalization? Both partners who represent the civil society, the Royal Society for Conservation of Nature (RSCN) and Jordan River Foundation (JRF) are sound and credible civil society institutions that have the organizational capacity to defend the public interest and voice the local concerns. Having a sound environmental impact assessment (EIA) process which ensures full participation is a key to help construct a shared vision between the business sector, the conservation community and the local people. EIA will ensure that pre-cautionary principle, i.e, "*when in doubt, do not do it*" will be applied and sound and conscious decisions will be based on sound judgments that consider the wider notions of inter-generational equity and the value of the natural capital.

Using the metaphor from our culture, this tradeoff between business and conservation options is best represented by the local proverb “*we do not want the wolf to die, nor we do want the sheep to vanish*”. Reconciling conservation and development is about reaching a social contract that takes into account the needs for all concerned.