

Social criteria for assessing conservation policy instruments

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Summary

Assessing social impacts of conservation policy involves more than measuring changes in socially-related indicators and establishing attribution. Judgement is needed as to whether the observed social impacts of the policy instrument are fair or acceptable. This paper draws lessons from policy case studies on how this challenge can be tackled.

Abstract

There is increasing recognition that social impacts are important factors to consider in the assessment of conservation policy instruments. The Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Programme of Work on Protected Areas, for example, calls on Parties to assess the social and economic impacts of establishing and maintaining protected areas particularly for local communities and indigenous peoples (<https://www.cbd.int/programmes/pa/pow-goals-alone.pdf>).

But the assessment of social impact is conceptually and practically challenging. While a number of frameworks for assessment have been developed, they raise significant issues of interpretation and judgement. In addition to practical challenges of determining which stakeholder groups and which social variables are of the most concern, and establishing attribution, there is a fundamental challenge of determining whether the overall outcomes are fair. This is complicated by the potential for tradeoffs between achieving the social goals and environmental goals of the policy instrument. Ultimately a judgement is needed as to whether these observed or predicted changes are acceptable. This has several implications for the assessment of a conservation policy mix.

First it requires going beyond the fairness of outcomes to consider also the fairness of process, or procedural justice in the process of decision-making and in the design and implementation of the policy instrument. Second, it requires criteria for determining fairness of both process and outcomes, but there is no single set of criteria that can be applied in all situations. In examining distribution of costs and benefits of a policy instrument between different groups, equal shares of costs or benefits to individuals may be considered appropriate in some situations, but in others where there are marked differences in income or wealth, the criterion of allocation according to need may provide a better basis for assessment. Third it raises the question of whose fairness criteria should be applied, those of external researchers or those of the affected population? This in turn has implications for the type of research methods that need to be employed.

This paper will review how these issues have been addressed in assessments of the social impacts of conservation policy instruments. With examples from the Policymix case studies and other research, it will draw lessons on how social criteria can be applied in assessment.