

Bolivia: Talking Across Boundaries

Setting aside wild lands seems like an idea that is easy to love. But for people living next to a protected area, it can be disturbing to find that the land where you once hunted, grazed your animals, and cut wood is suddenly forbidden, or governed by mysterious rules and regulations. To tell people living near parks, reserves, and refuges about the importance of protecting biodiversity, and to find out what kinds of research would meet their needs, the Center for Biodiversity and Conservation hosted a series of workshops in Bolivia this spring that brought together scientists,



Eleanor Sterling/AMNH

Edgar Palma, facilitator for both workshops.

park personnel, and area residents to discuss conservation

and how it affects communities near protected land.

Two five-day workshops were sponsored by the Center, in partnership with Museo de Historia Natural Noel Kempff Mercado in Santa Cruz, the Colección Boliviana de Fauna in La Paz, and the Servicio Nacional de Areas Protegidas (SERNAP). They were held in May 1999 at the Ulla Ulla Wildlife Reserve and the Estación Biológica Tunquini (Tunquini Biological Station) in Cotapata National Park. In these workshops, the presenters—scientists and educators from the Center and its partner institutions in Bolivia, and park personnel—talked about why protecting biodiversity is important, and showed how conservation relates to the lives of

local people. Scientists and park guards explained some of the work they do, and representatives from the community asked questions and presented their concerns.

In discussions before the workshops, local people had pointed out that they didn't understand what the scientists were doing in the parks. In their presentations, scientists from the United States and Bolivia talked about how they go about their studies—of birds, mammals, insects, reptiles, plants—and, importantly, why, stressing the importance of healthy, diverse ecosystems. The park guards were also interested in the scientists' talk; some of the guards had received little training, and felt they understood the purpose of the parks better after listening to the scientists explain their work.

There were misconceptions about what the park meant for the local people—what access they had, and which areas were subject to park regulations. The workshops gave the park guards an opportunity to talk about their work and the reasons for it, and opened channels of communication.

In Ulla Ulla, the proposed expansion of the park by 50 percent was a concern. Area residents brought up problems that are difficult to resolve: for instance, they were interested in grazing their livestock (llamas and alpacas) in the park, which was set up as a reserve for vicuñas.

One theme common to both workshops was participation. People who took part in the workshops said that they were unlike any others they had attended. In the past, they had been lectured to, and their only activity had been taking notes. In these workshops, they were made a part of the discussion, contributing their knowledge and experience, and often finding alternative solutions for themselves.

One of the Center's primary goals in holding these workshops is to reach a



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Community members in the Ulla Ulla workshop, demonstrating the model interpretive center they constructed.

broader audience and engage them in biodiversity conservation. In Bolivia, this had an unexpected but welcome result. People in the local communities were proud of their tradition of living in harmony with their

environment, but felt they were moving away from the older ways. The discussions about the importance of conservation and biodiversity reminded them of how they used to live, and served to validate their ancient traditions.

Important to the success of the workshops was the lively personality of facilitator Edgar Palma, from Guatemala. Edgar's ability to turn common objects—newspapers, tree branches, green peppers—into props for communicating ideas about biodiversity helped bring everyone into the discussion.

It is not a simple thing to resolve competing needs. The people living near protected areas need to make a living. The park guards need to protect the wildlife in the refuges. Scientists know that reserves must be of a certain size to function as refuges of biodiversity. A certain amount of conflict is inevitable. And a reasonable question was posed by local people: what do they stand to gain from the parks? from conservation?

How such questions are answered, and how the people living near reserves come to understand the issues may make all the difference in the world to biodiversity conservation in these regions.

Next year the Center will host a third workshop in Amboró National Park; after this, a cross-workshop will be held, with participants from all three workshops contributing.

Eleanor Sterling/AMNH



On the altiplano: Llamas and alpacas grazing near Ulla Ulla.