

Science for Environment Policy

Protected areas that allow access to local people also benefit wildlife

Protected areas that allow local people to use the resources in a sustainable way are better for biodiversity conservation than excluding people entirely, a new study suggests. In a review of over 160 scientific studies, the researchers found that protected areas which were managed to allow sustainable access yielded greater socioeconomic benefits. Importantly, those with greater socioeconomic benefits were also more likely to report biodiversity benefits.

Biodiversity is in drastic decline all over the world. To combat this, many countries have set up protected areas to protect wildlife. However, protected areas can create conflicts with local people, if they are excluded from areas where they used to gather food, for example. There is a continued debate as to whether the conservation outcomes of protected areas would be best served by excluding people entirely. Some argue that this is the only way to achieve effective biodiversity protection, while others say that, even setting aside any ethical concerns, excluding locals would not aid long-term wildlife protection.

In this study, the researchers set out to investigate the evidence for these two opposing positions. After conducting a literature search for peer-reviewed papers that examined the conservation and socioeconomic achievements of protected areas, they identified papers covering 160 protected areas across six continents and both terrestrial and marine habitats.

In each case, they recorded whether the [biodiversity conservation](#) or socioeconomic objectives had been met, and analysed this alongside factors such as the strictness of protection, and impacts on local livelihoods.

The results showed that protected areas reporting socioeconomic benefits are also more likely to report biodiversity benefits. Similarly, those areas with positive impacts for livelihood and culture are more likely to have better conservation outcomes. Importantly, such socioeconomic benefits are more likely to be found in protected areas managed to allow local people to use the resources in a sustainable manner, rather than being excluded entirely.

These are important results, say the authors, because they suggest that the dual aims of effective conservation and positive socioeconomic outcomes are not necessarily conflicting, and can be achieved in tandem. Therefore allowing local people access to the areas in a sustainable way has beneficial effects for long-term conservation. They caution, however, that each situation should be considered individually. In the case of extreme poaching pressure, for example, strict protection may be needed. However in general, effective biodiversity protection is more likely to occur if there are also positive impacts for local people.

The results also showed that protected areas which are co-managed — by the community and a conservation body — resulted in greater empowerment of local people, increased financial benefits, and less uneven distribution of costs than either state-managed or community-managed areas. Interestingly, this suggests that rather than community-managed areas being uniformly better for local people, having a conservation body involved also bring local benefits.



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