Stifled Stakeholders and Subdued Participation: Interpreting Local Responses Toward Shimentai Nature Reserve in South China

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ABSTRACT / In recent decades, protected-area management in many developing countries has been molded to win the support and participation of local people. Increasingly, research initiatives are undertaken to enhance understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of rural stakeholders. The effectiveness of the expanding protected-area system in China is critically constrained by similar considerations of community mentality. This paper provides an empirical assessment of local responses towards conservation efforts based on a case study of the recently established Shimentai Nature Reserve (SNR) situated in Yingde, Guangdong Province, China. Questionnaire surveys, face-to-face interviews, and group discussions were employed to gauge local residents’ knowledge, perceptions, and expectations towards the SNR. The study covered seven villages situated in and around the reserve, grouped into far-zone (floodplain) and near-zone (upland) categories, accommodating Hakka (Han) and minority Yao peoples. Many respondents had inadequate knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of the reserve. Although most respondents welcomed the expected park-related dividends, the most affected near-zone villagers anticipated losses due to restriction on traditional resource-extraction activities in the forest. The local expectations were influenced by place of residence, emigration of rural young, and household affluence. The lack of local participation in management and inadequate dissemination of information posed obstacles to effective conservation. The high expectation of accruing benefits from development projects, including tourism, might be misplaced and might not be realized. The present honeymoon period of positive attitudes could end soon if the hopes remain unfulfilled for too long. The need to win sustained local support and provide alternative means of livelihood is emphasized.

Between 1978 and 1999, the number of nature reserves in China grew rapidly, from 34 to 1,146, occupying 8.8% of its territory. For most reserve authorities in China, the widespread and escalating people–park conflicts present a tough management challenge, which, in many cases have caused further damages to valuable habitats, ecosystems, flora, and fauna that are supposed to be protected (Harkness 1998, Han 2000, Coggins 2000). The severity of the conflicts has reached such an extent that some “flagship” nature reserves, for instance, Wolong and Changbai Mountain Nature Reserves, were subject to aggravating anthropogenic threats and consequently have become increasingly degraded and fragmented (Zhao 1999, Liu and others 2001).

This undesirable situation is linked to a daunting 60 million or so people living inside and around nature reserves, of whom over 75% are peasants (Miao 2000). Similar to other developing countries (Nepal and Weber 1995, Ite 1996, Albert 1996), such local communities’ poverty and dependence on natural resource is often the rule rather than the exception in China (Harkness 1998, Herrold 1999, Coggins 2000). Meanwhile, this reserve-tied rural population keeps increasing, thus raising its impact, on top of the population’s rising aspirations for a better life. Unfortunately, the reserve management has an unrealistic perception of traditional means of livelihood and attempts to exclude the rural population from the reserve. By imposing various regulations that restrict legitimate resource-usage rights while giving little in return to local inhabitants, protected-area (PA) authorities have generated much local hostility (Wells and Brandon 1992, Albert 1996, Lewis 1996, Han 2000).

Another factor emanates from the process of establishing and managing nature reserves in China, in which only “experts” (biologists, geographers, PA managers, local and central government officers) were actively involved (Han 2000). The top-down process com-
monly paid insufficient attention to the significant role of local participation in PA planning, management, and decision-making (Wells and Brandon 1992, Lewis 1996, Borrini-Feyerabend 1996, Harkness 1998, Hackel 1999). The country’s Nature Reserve Ordinance also does not clearly offer a provision to justify or require local participation.


A number of studies worldwide have examined the varied local responses towards PAs with surveys and other social science research tools. Newmark and Leonard (1993) and Boer and Baquete (1998) showed that access to park-related benefits has positive effect on the perceptions and attitudes of local people. However, if the benefits are perceived to be small, unevenly distributed, or expected yet not realized, conservation approaches may fail to win genuine support (Ite 1996, Gillingham and Lee 1999, Mehta and Kellert 1998). The absence of local participation in decision-making of PA affairs may discourage learning about conservation and encourage negative attitudes (Fiallo and Jacobson 1995, Ite 1996, Trakolis 2001). Some socio-economic factors, such as age, educational attainment, place of residence, affluence, and ethnic origin, could significantly shape the conservation attitudes of local people (Newmark and Leonard 1993, Fiallo and Jacobson 1995).

Past research on China’s nature reserves tended to focus on flora and fauna or addressed management issues from the perspective of reserve managers and the government (Mackinnon and others 1996, Zhao 1999, Yang 1999, Han 2000). Published studies, in either Chinese or English, that specifically examine local responses towards PAs in the context of China remain scarce (Zhuge 2000). The recent designation of Shimentai Nature Reserve (SNR), situated in Yingde, Guangdong Province, China, furnished an opportunity to conduct such investigations. This study empirically assesses local responses towards conservation and management efforts in SNR. The specific objectives include: (1) to discern the level of local knowledge of conservation initiatives; (2) to evaluate and interpret the perceptions, expectations, and attitudes of local people; (3) to discuss factors that can influence local expectations; (4) to comment on ad hoc approaches for nature reserve management in China.

Methods

Study Area

The SNR, established in 1998 as a provincial rank nature reserve, is located in the northern part of Yingde (24°22′~24°31′N and 113°05′~113°31′E), central Guangdong Province (Figure 1). It is demarcated into three concentric zones (Figure 2), namely core, buffer, and transition. By law, human disturbance is prohibited in the core zone, only scientific research and monitoring are allowed in the buffer zone, and the transition zone is designated to facilitate benign human activities such as scientific research, environmental education, agroforestry, and nature tourism.

Covering 33,555 ha, the reserve extends from east to west and lies some 20~30 km by road north of Yingde township. It is by far the largest terrestrial protected area in Guangdong Province. Largely covered by forests, the reserve encompasses 15 village committees (Cun min wei yuan hui, the lowest administrative unit in rural China. Each usually encompasses 4~30 villages in Yingde), which are attached to five surrounding administrative towns. SNR’s significance is enhanced by contiguity with Luokeng Nature Reserve to its north in Qujiang County (Figure 2).

SNR is dominated by a subtropical monsoon climate with alternating moist and dry seasons. Most rains fall...