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Enchantment and Disenchantment: The Role of Community in Natural Resource Conservation

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Abstract

The poor conservation outcomes that followed decades of intrusive resource management strategies and planned development have forced policy makers and scholars to reconsider the role of community in resource use and conservation. In a break from previous work on development which considered communities a hindrance to progressive social change, current writings champion the role of community in bringing about decentralization, meaningful participation, and conservation. But despite its recent popularity, the concept of community is rarely defined or carefully examined by those concerned with resource use and management. We seek to redress this omission by investigating "community" in work concerning resource conservation and management. We explore the conceptual origins of the community, and the ways the term has been deployed in writings on resource use. We then analyze those aspects of community most important to advocates for community's role in resource management

“community as a small spatial unit, as a homogeneous social structure, and as shared norms” and indicate the weaknesses of these approaches. Finally, we suggest a more political approach: community must be examined in the context of development and conservation by focusing on the multiple interests and actors within communities, on how these actors influence decision-making, and on the internal and external institutions that shape the decision-making process. A focus on institutions rather than “community” is likely to be more fruitful for those interested in community-based natural resource management.



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