

In Conversation: Patrick Christie

2001-05-24

Sheila Riordon

The increased commercialization and exploitation of aquatic resources, deforestation and pollution, and encroachments on communally owned resources by national and transnational private interests are placing the world's coastal regions under enormous pressure. One example is the Pearl Lagoon estuary, the main basin on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.

Taking Care of What We Have: Participatory Natural Resource Management on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua documents the story of the Coastal Area Monitoring Project and Laboratory (CAMPlab), launched in 1993. It describes how the marginalized communities of Pearl Lagoon have successfully developed alternative strategies for managing their natural resources, despite a hostile political and policy environment. Sheila Riordon recently interviewed co-author Patrick Christie, who has been involved in the project since its inception, for *IDRC Reports Online*.

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What is this book about?

The book is trying to capture the story of the CAMPlab project and the work that was done using participatory action research [PAR] for natural resource management on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. It's a complicated story, so we try to tie in a lot of different factors: ecological, political, and social factors; changes that have happened in Nicaragua; and difficulties in implementing a project like this in a context that's not very supportive. The idea of the book was really to document and explore that because there's a lot of interest in participatory natural resources management, but there are not many detailed case studies that look at it from multiple perspectives and really analyse it.

What is PAR, and what influenced you to adopt this approach?

PAR is a *method* of investigation; it is a system of information gathering that tries to democratize the information gathering process. Essential to that, we try to have equitable relationships between multiple actors (such as local people, outsiders). The whole idea is not to negate that people have different skills or sources of information. PAR focuses on collecting information about issues that are controversial and disempowering to local people. In the case of Nicaragua, use of the environment has been a marginalizing issue to the local people and that's why the PAR process in Pearl Lagoon focused on that very issue.

What first brought you to Pearl Lagoon, and what motivated this research?

The history of conservation and resource management in the tropics has been heavily influenced by biological sciences — by people who went to the tropics to describe places and, more recently, conservation biologists going to the tropics to make recommendations to governments and NGOs. I've always felt uncomfortable that my role as a biologist was to go and tell people how to manage their resources. In addition, I'm concerned with the potential for paternalistic relationships between an outsider and a community — those kinds of relationships just don't work. I went to Pearl Lagoon as part of a group of ecologists from the University of Michigan who were studying with Nicaraguan ecologists. I became friends with [Nicaraguan biologist] Roberto Rigby, and I developed a friendship and an affinity with the place. It has a lot of complexity, both culturally and ecologically. I fell in love with the Atlantic coast and also became fascinated with it.

Your book mentions the civil war and the way it has affected the people. What other factors have affected community resource management in Pearl Lagoon area?

The unique history of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua heavily influenced the potential for using PAR. The Atlantic coast was colonized by the British for many centuries and subsequently was influenced by the United States. This set up a barrier between the Atlantic and the Pacific coasts — and Managua. The Atlantic coast is very underdeveloped; there are not a lot of social services available. People on the Atlantic coast refer to themselves as the 'internal colony' of Nicaragua because many times they feel as though they're being colonized by their own government.

When you start a practice of PAR, which is based on the interests and perspectives of people at the community level, it resonates very strongly with them because they see the PAR process as a tool to realize self-determination. They're tired of decisions about fisheries or use of the forest being made at a national level when those decisions don't consider the interests and needs of the community. Of course, PAR can be perceived as creating troubles for the national government, which has referred to the CAMPlab project as 'radicalizing' people against their own government. This has been troubling to me because I'm not very comfortable with conflict. However, there's a quote from Paulo Freire [a Brazilian educator and intellectual], that "conflicts are the midwives of consciousness." I think it's quite true, at some point, at any level in any society. One hopes this doesn't mean *violent* conflict, but that it will resolve itself at the level of discussion and debate.

What are the main benefits that CAMPlab has given the inhabitants of Pearl Lagoon?

Two things. One is a voice. Undoubtedly, much of environmental or natural resource management is about the management of information. Historically, people's knowledge about the fisheries and about their own lives had not been taken into consideration. Giving voice to people in marginalized communities is remarkably important and powerful. More practically, helping people learn techniques for gathering that information — working with students to monitor water quality in their area, and knowing when water has been contaminated and is unsafe to consume — inspires people. Some of the students, by being involved in this, have decided: "I want to become a forester," or "I want to study natural resource management at the university." These options were never in their realm of possibilities before.

What were the highlights of your own involvement with the Pearl Lagoon communities?

I had a number of remarkable encounters with people from whom I learned a great deal, and who I have a great deal of respect for. People in Pearl Lagoon are remarkably entertaining with their stories. Until quite recently, there hasn't been television or electricity, and so the oral tradition in Pearl Lagoon is quite strong. I spent a lot of time on porches talking with people. One of these

persons was McKinley Tinkam, who up until about five years ago, in his eighties, was still shrimp fishing. He's also a snake doctor, meaning that he knows how to cure snakebites — and there are some terrible snakebites you can get there.

In terms of the project, it's always inspiring when people feel as though they're making some progress in their life and moving toward something they believe in. There were a number of times in the course of the work in the field where people would express feelings that they'd progressed towards more control over their lives. I found those moments to be opportunities to recharge my own batteries and become more inspired.

Can the experience of Pearl Lagoon be applied to other issues in the region, and/or extrapolated and applied to other geographical regions?

Undoubtedly. In fact, the whole Sandanista Revolution in the '80s was an experience in participatory democracy. It had its weaknesses: there were instances when people on the coast were not treated well. But one of the pleasures of working in Pearl Lagoon was that they all had experience with teaching health brigades or reading-writing brigades — which was based on Freirian thought. So in many cases it wasn't new to them. So, yes, it can be applied in other areas of work, and certainly it's being applied all over the world now.

The Authors

Patrick Christie is a research associate at the School of Marine Affairs, University of Washington (USA), and associate editor of the journal *Coastal Management*. **David Bradford** is the executive director of the Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (CIDCA) in Managua, Nicaragua. **Ray Garth** is a community investigator and forest technician for CAMPlab. **Bonifacio Gonzalez** is a community investigator for CAMPlab. **Mark Hostetler** is currently studying for a doctorate in geography at York University in Canada. **Oswaldo Morales** is a project administrator and community investigator for CAMPlab. **Roberto Rigby** is studying marine biology at the Centre for Marine Research in Havana, Cuba. **Bertha Simmons** is coordinator of the CAMPlab project. **Eduardo Tinkam** is a community investigator for CAMPlab. **Gabriel Vega** is an ecologist and researcher for CAMPlab. **Ronnie Vernooy** is a program officer at the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa, Canada. **Noreen White** is the executive subdirector of CIDCA.

The Book

[Taking Care of What We Have: Participatory Natural Resource Management on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua](#)

by Patrick Christie, David Bradford, Ray Garth, Bonifacio Gonzalez, Mark Hostetler, Oswaldo Morales, Roberto Rigby, Bertha Simmons, Eduardo Tinkam, Gabriel Vega, Ronnie Vernooy, and Noreen White, IDRC/CIDCA 2000.