

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Training for Protected Area Management in Lao PDR

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Background

Protected area establishment in Lao PDR has a relatively short history. A systematic search for areas with high conservation value began in 1988 under the Lao Forestry Department and the Conservation Sub-Programme (LSFCP) of the Lao-Swedish Forestry Programme. In 1993, the Lao Government declared 18 National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NBCA) covering over 10% of the country's land area (Lao Government, 1993). Two additional areas declared in the following years raised the coverage by 2% (Southammakoth, 1999; Robichaud et al., 2001). While

these had the essential attributes of a protected area under IUCN categories I and II (Strict Nature Reserve or National Park), they were then unmanaged Multiple Use Areas. Having been declared at the national level, the NBCAs came under the authority of the Division of Forest Resource Conservation in the Lao PDR Department of Forestry.

As a follow-up to the formal protected area declaration, an appropriate and sustainable management system had to be developed. The first management trial involved the small and degraded forest reserve of Houei Nhang (FRCP, 1988), close to the capital Vientiane. Other areas followed from 1993 onward until, by the year 2000, sixteen NBCAs had come under

some form of management (Robichaud et al., 2001).

To be appropriate, the management system had to take account of the following:

- Laos lacked trained personnel in all sectors and the capacity for conservation management in the civil service was low (Sawathvong, 1997). Training had to impart basic skills that had to be sufficiently practised in order to attain acceptable standards. Technical assistance was necessary in devising a management system. Guidelines for basic staffing and essential training had been proposed in the 1995 Protected Area System Status Report (Berkmüller & Southammakoth, 1995).



Photo by Klaus Berk Müller

- Most Lao people live in a subsistence economy where forest products gathered in open access wildland provide a significant proportion of the family income and are part of the fabric of rural life and culture (Raintree & Sodyara, undated). Participatory management structures and consideration of people's dependency on protected area resources are therefore essential for effective management. At any rate, the low staffing levels of Laos would be insufficient for adequate protection through law enforcement alone.
- Government funding for protected areas is minimal and bound to remain low for the foreseeable future. For any management system to be sustainable, it has to co-exist with low inputs in investment and personnel while drawing reliable funding from an external source for an extended period of time.

Virtually, donors supported all of the protected area management trials. The Lao government assigned different regions of the country to different donors to avoid conflict and overlap. All projects (and donors) acknowledged, with varying emphasis, the need for participatory management structures. Projects differed considerably in design, ranging from management support embedded in a larger forestry sector programme, to the small project focused on one area. There were significant differences in the amounts spent on investment, the available advisor time for each protected area, and the administrative/bureaucratic procedures, most notably the operating cost disbursement policy. For several years, a Technical Advisory Group for Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation had met at three- to six month-intervals to facilitate information exchange between projects

and to establish an *esprit de corps*' among protected area personnel (CPAWM, 1998). However, projects tended to focus on their internal problems thus limiting intra-agency coordination. This was true also for capacity building although projects sometimes delegated staff to participate in training events organised by other programmes. The major projects and donors supporting protected area management included the:

- Conservation Sub-Programme of the Lao-Swedish Forestry Cooperation Programme (LSFCP) funded by the Swedish government,
- Global Environment Facility (GEF)-financed conservation component of the Forest Management and Conservation Project (FOMACOP) funded by the World Bank and the Finnish government, and
- Biodiversity Conservation Project (BCP) funded by the Netherlands government.

The World Conservation Union (IUCN), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) provided significant inputs to protected area management. The private sector contributed in hydropower project planning and implementation.

Training

Training needs had been anticipated early on although no formal training needs assessment had been carried out then. In 1988, the LSFCP commissioned the design of a 10-week course covering essential topics on protected area management (Berkmüller, 1989). Beginning in 1989, Huay Nhang offered the course for three consecutive years. An evaluation (Ebutt, 1991) found the course structure and content appropriate but noted shortcomings in the delivery, which had almost totally omitted fieldwork. The problem was traced to the instructors who were not full time trainers, but offi-

cial in what was then the Bureau for Wildlife and Fisheries Conservation, and who - once a year - put on the 'trainer's hat'. The evident lack of Lao trainers specialising in protected areas continues to hamper protected area management to this day.

Protected areas training remains essentially project driven. Projects generally contract out their training needs to NGOs or consultants, but some are conducted in-house. The training of trainers is frequently emphasised but rarely sustained to produce competent resources. Furthermore, there are no institutional homes that would absorb protected area training specialists once a project has ended. Contracting out is complicated by the almost complete absence of local NGOs and compounded by lengthy and unpredictable approval procedures for foreign consultancies. An accredited local NGO providing development extension training, was in great demand to train project staffs. Variable emphasis was placed on study tours and short or long-term training or degree studies abroad.

Unfortunately, there was no evaluation of the effectiveness of the approaches taken by various projects. Most projects published several training manuals. FOMACOP produced two highly detailed and comprehensive documents (Bonita & Payuan, 2001) on village forestry, parts of which have application in protected area management. LSFCP generated two protected area manuals; one on land use planning (Jones, 2001) and another on eco-tourism (Craig, 2001). Both manuals also appeared in a protected area manager's guide (DoF, 2001), a collaborative effort between BCP, LSFCP, and IUCN. Protected area management training should thus be reviewed to find out the extent these documents are used in formal training or in self-directed learning.

Claridge (1998) assessed the training needs in the overall context

of conservation and human resources management. Several of his recommendations addressed the problems inherent in project driven training, such as (i) maintaining a central register for planned project training and records of completed training, (ii) and establishing a clearing house for all training materials. To increase training capacity, Claridge stressed the need for an appropriate institutional home especially for the participatory management aspects of training, and the importance of motivation of staff and working environment.

Training under the Biodiversity Conservation Project

Among the protected area management projects, the 5-year 'Biodiversity Conservation Project' (BCP) in Champassak Province of southern Laos, funded by the Dutch government and implemented with technical assistance by IUCN was provided adequate and timely funding. A full time advisor also provided a favourable working environment that included quarterly evaluations of progress participated in by all staffs. The project supported management implementation in two NBCAs involving 14 staffs in each

area, of which two thirds were assigned to monitoring and patrolling, and one-third to extension. About two thirds of the staff were delegated civil servants with a forestry background. The project hired several female extension workers and villagers that included ethnic minorities, for monitoring and patrolling. All staff were literate and a few had participated in vocational training courses in agriculture.

The training approach

Training for both the resource protection and the extension staffs differed but the approach was identical.

- Each training was short term, conducted on site with field practice, and aimed at the immediate application of skills resulting in concrete outputs that were clearly relevant to management.
- The number of trainees per training event was kept below 20 to allow adequate individual attention and minimise logistical problems in the field.
- Management application and outputs were frequently supervised and regularly evaluated. Good performance was

- recognised and rewarded.
 - There was a deliberate progression in the complexity and focus of the training. Each training course reinforced and built on the previous one. The first training concentrated on data gathering techniques and the underlying purpose. The second training reviewed the work done so far, to improve skills, and to present information in graphs and on maps. The third training compiled the existing information and discussed insights and experiences in a structured way. All this has led to the formulation of a monitoring system and its use for work planning and problem solving.
 - Outputs were regularly evaluated. Each extension and resource protection staff shared his or her experiences. Good performance was rewarded. Evaluations clearly showed whether shortcomings were caused by a lack of skills and understanding or were unrelated to training.
 - All staffs were eligible for study tours to enhance motivation.
- The above training approach was adhered to although the timing was not always optimal. Staff transfers and unrealistic expectations by local and central government with respect to project and staff capacity for providing development assistance complicated matters. The training content (see **Box 1**) is largely reflected in 'A Manager's Guide to Protected Area Management in Lao PDR' (DoF, 2000).



Photo by Klaus Bernkuller

Initial orientation for all staff

Since all staffs were beginners in protected area work, they were first oriented on protected areas and their

Box 1. Manager's Guide: Summary of Contents

The guide has six chapters. Chapter 1 contains general information. The other chapters mainly contain advice on specific tasks and activities.

Chapter 1: Getting started

This chapter provides an introduction to protected area management. It explains their functions and benefits and the basic strategies for management. It also strongly emphasises a participatory approach. Other basic topics covered include sources of information, laws applying to Lao protected areas and the institutional setting.

Chapter 2: Staffing and organisation

This chapter discusses organisational matters that lay the foundation for all management activities. It contains advice on how to allocate responsibilities and suggests ways to avoid problems by agreeing on rules for attendance, vehicle use, per diem payments, etc.

Chapter 3: Planning and reporting

This chapter goes through the steps of preparing an annual workplan. It provides details on tasks ranging from logbook maintenance to monthly summaries and progress reports. It also explains how to prepare for management performance evaluations and suggests methods for problem solving.

Chapter 4: Participatory land use planning and management

This chapter focuses on the tasks of staff dealing mainly with villages. It describes the sequence of activities necessary for developing partnerships with villagers in managing protected areas. The key lies in developing agreements on boundaries between neighbouring villages and the protected area, and on local rights and responsibilities. Villagers usually welcome assistance in zoning their own lands and recognise the need for local rules that are consistent with the law, provide protection to key species and habitats, and also confer rights for the sustainable use of some wildlife and non-timber forest products. Activities described here are closely linked to the on-going national process of Land Allocation.

Chapter 5: Resource inventory, monitoring and protection

This chapter focuses on the tasks of each staff and villagers and deals mainly with habitat and wildlife. It starts off with a task overview as well as the training required. Specific activities include trail surveys, violation reports, and patrolling records. Also discussed are files, maps, and statistics that need to be kept for monitoring.

Chapter 6: Livelihood development and conservation education

The last chapter introduces approaches for improving village livelihoods that would reduce dependence on natural resources from the protected area. It does not attempt to describe the technical interventions that may be involved - there are other sources of information on this - but rather how to design a programme that links development to conservation objectives. Education plays a key role in this, so some ideas on how to promote conservation awareness among villagers and in local schools have been included.

purpose. The trainers stressed the problem-solving nature of management but avoided discussions of the causes of problems and the complex solutions so as not to discourage or confuse the trainees.

The trainees were also briefed about their responsibilities, the rules and procedures to be followed, the purpose and process of evaluations, field allowance entitlements, vehicle use, and work planning and reporting. These seemingly mundane 'housekeeping' issues are essential for a good working environment.

The topics were not exhaustively dealt with in one session. Internal rules and procedures evolved and

relevant topics were frequently brought up in evaluation sessions.

The evaluations started with a review of the daily logbook and the monthly summary reports. A report and discussion of activities by both the resource protection and the extension sections followed. Actions to be taken were recorded and discussed at the next session. The orientation combined with subsequent evaluations and structured monthly reporting achieved its dual purpose, namely: creating a basic understanding of project area management tasks, and establishing a functional working environment with acceptable standards of accountability.

Resource protection staff

The foresters among the staff at first thought their role focused on law enforcement alone although they felt inadequate for it. Trainers did not cover topics on weapons training, arrest, or tactical approaches to apprehending suspects, for two reasons. Rigorous law enforcement was not feasible then, and the participatory management approach implied that law enforcement was to be low-key especially during the initial years of management. This is not to say that law enforcement is superfluous. On the contrary, staff morale quickly declines if serious offences are allowed to go on despite their best effort in detecting and reporting these. Instead, the trainers stressed the importance of building a credible monitoring system.

Initial instructions in field orientation and trail mapping were conducted in-house, and each staff was obliged to do fieldwork immediately. The resulting map of foot trails and vehicle tracks was widely recognised to be helpful in other management activities, notably wildlife survey and patrolling. Detailed knowledge of the trails helps in drawing boundaries of protected area sub-divisions (blocks) for which monitoring data are collected and filed.

Recognising, recording, and filing evidence of wildlife and extractive use impacts followed. Trip preparation, field craft, the process of recognising and observing signs and evidence were discussed during several theory classes, and then practised in two one-week field camps with daily discussions around the campfire. Activities were closely supervised to ensure that the data obtained was adequate for monitoring. The third training reinforced the first and second by checking individual staff's competence in producing adequate field records and improving capacity in compiling, analysing, and presenting data. The main training output at this stage was a monitoring report compiled and

tabulated from the existing data, quarterly data summaries, thematic maps, and finally, the presentation of findings on impact types and distribution, key species records and extent of coverage.

Foreign consultants closely supervised the wildlife survey work. They were required to provide daily instructions for the assigned local staffs; make structured observations about staff motivation, interest, and competence; and conduct daily debriefings.

A regional Thai/Lao-speaking consultant with extensive field experience conducted the training. Used to university student-trainees, the consultant had to adjust the teaching style and content. The experience showed that village-hired staff and government officials could train together and complement each other.

The training of resource protection staffs succeeded in imparting basic monitoring skills, a prerequisite for effective management. Data collected by local staff permitted the mapping of encroached areas. These were corroborated later by satellite imagery and constituted a persuasive argument in briefings for local decision makers.

Extension staff

A foreign NGO conducted a Participatory Rural Appraisal that focused on methods and approaches and identified those staff most suitable for extension work.

Lao trainers carried out the second training for the extension staff. It was a learning experience for the trainees, as they had no prior exposure to protected area management needs. Their terms of reference were therefore spelled out. A major output was a guiding document for the first year of extension work. It detailed the information to be obtained from all user villages, which would determine whether a village is a potential ally or a potential threat, or both a threat and ally, to the protected area. Selected villages

were to receive development assistance in line with a participatory management approach.

The third training consequently dealt with land use assessment and development planning at the village level. A fourth training focused on teamwork, village organisation, and small project planning and supervision.

Information from the initial village contacts yielded a better understanding of people's dependency on protected area resources and the likely locations of conflict with protected area interests. Some staff were able to facilitate a debate on land use rules to be adopted by village clusters. This debate underlined the participatory nature of management. The rules formalised by district government had increased village control over and responsibility for wildland resources. However, both activities were highly structured and, occasionally, showed little evidence that staff would develop their abilities beyond strictly following a series of instructions.

This was true also for development extension. Noting the generally disappointing results, the trainers tried seeking out opportunities where tangible incentives could be tied to conditions that would yield demonstrable conservation benefits. The resulting consultancy report (Flint, 2000) noted several concrete options for high priority villages.

The incentives identified were improvements in indigenous rice irrigation systems, village control over, and increased returns from forest products, and investments for village-operated ecotourism. The conditions included abandoning of clearings in sensitive areas and protecting use forest formally allocated to village control. Although not conceived as training, discussions at the villages and district offices provided a great deal of learning.

Lessons learned

The systematic collection and compilation by local staff of infor-

mation on key species and impacts was a major achievement of the Biodiversity Conservation Project. However, maintaining acceptable quality standards, the drafting of regular summary reports, and the transfer of data to maps required frequent if not constant supervision. The training was evidently unable to convey the intellectual curiosity and critical thought needed for the proper treatment and analysis of the data. The effectiveness of the training thus depends on the presence of strong and competent leadership and consistent supervision and evaluation.

Protected area extension tends to be vaguely associated with rural development or community forestry in a buffer zone. High government expectations for the project to provide development assistance meant that relevant topics were prominent in the training of extension staff. The distinction between protected area extension and development extension was blurred, a problem that is probably not unique to Laos.

Protected area extension workers should help set the priorities for and devise the framework for integrating conservation and development. Competent state organisations or NGOs should then take over the development aspects while protected area staffs monitor the implementation and verify the anticipated conservation benefits. Development extension is best left to the professional services of the government or a competent NGO. Where these do not exist, a crash course in development extension would not be the answer, as drawn from BCP's experience.

Discussion between the local people, protected area staff, and district officials about concrete 'opportunities' for integrating conservation and development, generated considerably more interest than previous attempts at overall village land use planning and development. Facilitating the latter process proved too complex for an extension worker.



Photo by Klaus Berk Müller

On hindsight, the expectations placed on extension staff were unrealistic, as the qualities of a skilled facilitator could evidently not be conveyed in a series of short trainings. Grooming effective extension workers from scratch would be difficult during a project's lifespan. This underlines the need for permanent local training institutions that would provide experienced protected area professionals who can function as both trainers and training consultants.

Projects that have a weak extension capacity should start to seek out and focus extension efforts on 'opportunities', and 'learn while doing' under the guidance of an experienced resource person. To be on the safe side, extension capacity should be assumed weak if it has to be created by the project. An alternative would be for government or NGO partners with the necessary extension capacity to be included in the project design of integrated conservation and development in buffer zones.

Quarterly evaluations demonstrated that the newly acquired skills of trainees should be practised under close supervision and reinforced by refresher training. As such, the short term training as described could ably impart the necessary knowledge and skills required for gathering useful field data. On the other hand, the commitment necessary to produce better than acceptable results could not be taught.

The evaluations also showed that motivation is perhaps a more decisive factor in generating results than training. Most of the government staff could not stay overnight in the field. Village-hired and a few exceptionally motivated government staffs collected most of the field records. This suggests that an effective team could consist of dedicated government staffs assisted by part- or full time staff hired in local villages.

Attendance was at times erratic and, at one stage, the average number of days spent in the field

dropped to as low as two days per month. Lack of motivation and resulting absences were largely due to low pay as evident from substantial differences between staff. To boost morale and increase commitment and accountability, BCP developed a simple and effective system for recording individual attendance and the amount of fieldwork done. It also provided modest material incentives for overnight stays in the field by individuals. Public recognition of good work, especially from high-level officials, was another powerful motivating force.

An aerial inspection of hot spots arranged for high officials and key staff was highly successful and cost-effective in generating interest and action in protected area monitoring. A teaching package and a teacher's training in using it soon spread to numerous schools at a minimal investment of time and effort by protected area extension workers. Such innovative ways to keep manage-

ment issues in the public eye were probably more effective motivators than organising study tours for a few selected participants.

Conclusions: Variables that Determine the Effectiveness of Training

The trainee himself or herself is the main variable in the effectiveness of training. Thus the more influence one can bear on trainee selection, the better.

The manner of delivery and appropriateness of the training content are also essential to a successful training. It is appropriate if it concentrates on the skills that are needed at the time and are within the ability of the trainees to learn. The manner of delivery is suitable if it avoids abstractions and incorporates immediate field application.

New skills need time to be absorbed and experience needs time to grow. Supervision, reinforcement, and evaluations are essential for a working environment with acceptable accountability standards. Without accountability, systematic management is not possible and any training will be in vain.

Perhaps most important of all is motivation. Recognising individual accomplishments or good work increases staff morale, especially when occasionally combined with material or financial incentives. Not the least, staffs become motivated when they know that they are making an important contribution to overall management.

The forestry schools financed by forestry sector programmes for the training of technicians and middle level foresters could become institutional homes for conservation-related training.

Project driven training has a limited lifespan and a short institutional memory except where international conservation NGOs and inter-government organisations employ instructors and document course outlines and materials. Generally, it is

tailored to meet project needs rather than standardised to meet general protected area requirements. In the process, wheels are re-invented several times over, while existing course outlines and materials are rarely considered or totally unknown. Modest but long-term protected area training would achieve more for management implementation and full time trainers would be more competent in all aspects of protected area training. Projects would then have access to a reliable training institution, which could be partially financed from services provided. ■

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