Interdisciplinary Conservation Projects – The Role of the Anthropologist

The following postings first appeared on the Eanth-l listserv in February 2005. For more information about joining this listserv please visit the “Anthropology and the Environment” section (http://dizzy.library.arizona.edu/ej/jpe/anthenv/) of the American Anthropological Association.

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Anyone interested in organizing a session on "The Role of Anthropologists in Interdisciplinary Projects" for the 2005 AAA meeting in Washington? I have in mind a session devoted to the pros and cons of the idea, expressed, for example, in Conrad Kottak's March 1999 AA article, that anthropologists in such projects have the obligation to serve, first and foremost, as representatives of their discipline and "to place people ahead of plants, animals, and soil."

I myself do not have the time or resources to organize a session right now. However, I would be pleased to take part by presenting a paper using research on the causes of tropical forest fires to argue against Kottak's view.

Or should we wait until 2006 to try to do this? I've already talked with a number of EANTHers who would be interested in doing it then.

Regards,
Pete

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I'm interested in this topic as I've spent the last 2.5 years working with an interdisciplinary team of scientists to assess the effects of federal forest management policy in the Pacific Northwest on old growth forest habitat, spotted owls, marbled murrelets, watersheds, and people. It's been a challenge, looking at the amount of resources that get devoted to worrying about "plants, animals, and soil" vs. local forest-based communities. Not to mention that many of the agency managers reviewing my work have no understanding of the validity or value of qualitative data, ethnographic research, and nonprobability sampling approaches. I'd be willing to try co-
organizing a session with someone if there is interest - but I think it would be important to make this a session where people share insights about what role we can play in such situations, rather than have it be a session devoted to complaining about how anthropology and social science are often undervalued in interdisciplinary research efforts.

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Greetings, As much as I admire Conrad Kottak's opinions, I too would have to disagree on this point. Having participated in numerous projects with ecologists, earth scientists, and many other biophysical types, as well as other human-oriented researchers, I have concluded that fruitful engagement requires one to suspend judgments (at least temporarily) that derive from one’s own disciplinary biases in order to identify points of collaboration, as well as critique our own disciplinary assumptions. It’s not about people over plants (or spotted owls as the first President Bush admonished on the eve of his defeat). It’s about solving problems. The anthropological desire to "push" our values on others results in further marginalization within academia and policy. This is not to say we should abandon our values, but to use them creatively as we engage with people who have been trained to think differently than us. (See the May 2003 Anthropology News A&E section column for a more detailed example). I’d be happy to participate in the session. There may be enough interest in this subject to spread over both years.

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I wonder about this, with all due respect to David.
A few thoughts:

First, I've worked on interdisciplinary teams and often find that I spend much of my time making the social "legible" for conservation ecologists, economists, and others. I'm asked to explain why "The Gimi" or other people in PNG do things, why some event happened, or some seemingly odd (to outsiders) custom. Then after dutiful anthropological explanation, the people I've just explained things to go ahead and believe the image / idea / myth they already had in their head. So, for instance people in PNG, for the most part, make self, other, and in the Gimi case, the environment, through transactional relationships. One comes into being through gifts and exchange. Old stuff anthropologically. Have explained it 56,000 times to biologists (all friends and good people) and they still, when confronted with Gimi asking them for things or giving them things in attempts to establish social relationships with them, attribute this to people...
being "greedy" and "cargo hungry" and say things like "they are just like us, its just human nature to want more."

BUT last December in PNG I explained it AGAIN to a friend in Goroka who works with birds, and low-and-behold he got it. It was concerning school fees and constantly being asked to help pay them and how it annoys him and after talking it through, and me be super anthropological, so not trying to simplify it, he said something like, "so it is not about the thing really, it is about it meaning that we have a bond." YES! so not perfect, but much better than "greedy"!

I guess what I am saying with this is that one of our disciplinary assumptions is that we should not try to smuggle in our (usually Western) categories in explanation and that often by bringing the history of our disciple to interactions with non-anthropologists we can make sense out of things for them in a way that forces them to let go of their pre-existing ideas and images.

Second, on these interdisciplinary teams, if we "suspend judgments that derive from ones own disciplinary biases" we will be the only one on the team to do so. I would argue that we come to see the world through our disciplines - that biology is a way of knowing as is anthropology - and that the "hard" science people will not (and can not) put that way of knowing aside.

Third, I disagree with Kottak's assertion that we have to "put the people first" in that I don't exactly separate the people from the ecological processes that they take part in, create, alter....or the plants and animals that they use and value. Again, in terms of smuggling ones own categories into explanation and research, this stark line between people and ecology is very specific to a particular history.

Fourth, I don't think we are marginalized because we "push our values on others." I think we are marginalized because of the structures of research funding. "Hard Science" gets the cash - buckets of it. Social research does not.

Finally, I also think we are marginalized because of economists. Recently a very famous economist at Columbia said to a group of our graduate students who study "development" that Anthropology is not a social science. When asked to say what the social sciences are he said economics and political science.

Thanks to David and others, this is interesting.
Susan, Pete, Norbert, Katja, and other interested folks, Susan, I'd be interested in co-chairing the session with you and I agree that it would be important to push the discussion well beyond the "We are underappreciated" comments to consider the ethics of anthropologists' involvement, human rights, and environmental implications of a complex issue. It sounds as if there are several takers who might contest the idea that: > "anthropologists in (interdisciplinary) projects have the obligation to serve, first and foremost, as representatives of their discipline and "to place people ahead of plants, animals, and soil." Is there any interest from people who support the above statement? Representing varying viewpoints could make for an interesting debate.

Best,  
Becky  

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Anthropologists in (interdisciplinary) projects have the obligation to serve, first and foremost, as representatives of their discipline and "to place people ahead of plants, animals, and soil." Yes, I do support that statement and want to add that I am totally convinced that social justice and environmental conservation HAVE to go hand in hand for any of the two causes to be successful in any significant global/regional scale.

As a anthropologist in several interdisciplinary projects I have sometimes experienced that the expectation of my work is to help resolve the 'Human Dimension Problem', that is, to help understand/predict humans' behavior so they can cease to be an obstacle for conservation; when what I want to do and what I feel I should be doing is very different: to help achieve socially-just conservation for the benefit of humans who make a living in that environment (myself included, of course). That's why I don't like the Human Dimensions label....
Regarding Kottak's 1999 article "The New Ecological Anthropology" (?), I don't presently have access to it, but I read it a few years ago. My take on his statement that anthropologists should side with people over environment is that he was interested in the environmentalist debate concerning ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, and what implications this might have for anthropology. I can't recall if he mentions these two approaches. Perhaps I just read this into the article because I was particularly interested in the debate at the time. Since "anthro"-pology is about people, there is good reason to consider its fit with anthropocentric environmentalism (although anthropocentrism has a bad name given its association with the failures of classic conservationism - an association emphasized within polemic critiques of "modern" society). The debate over these two environmental ethics approaches can get pretty abstract, but maybe worth addressing more explicitly in anthropology. If we have the tools to build better understandings of what people do, and if we agree that a lot of problems in the world, including environmental problems, are mainly people problems, then our focus on the anthro side may be worth something. In particular situations this abstract level will be no where near sufficient for sorting all issues and potential roles. A possible benefit from addressing the anthro/eco question is that this duality can serve (at least as a preliminary model) for gaining insight into various assumptions about environments and environmental relations held among various groups of people involved in particular environmental situations - our own assumptions included.

Cheers,
Ed Koenig

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Everybody--if there are no plants, animals, or soil, there will very soon no people. We (most of us) are concerned about the environment because people depend on it! Unless I misunderstand Dr. Kottak badly, he was saying that. He was just saying (further) that we can't stand for the all-too-common attitude among conservation biologists that we have to push the people off the land in order to "save" it. We anthropologists have a moral duty to oppose that. But, even more basic: If anthropologists don't stand up for protecting the environments that impoverished, rural, and indigenous peoples depend on, we are complicit in their destruction.

Sincerely,
Gene Anderson
I'm interested in participating in a panel on the role of anthropologists in interdisciplinary research.

I'm an environmentalist who chose anthropology over biology/ecology because I thought anthropology offered the best tools to deal with environmental problems caused by humans. You can count critters all day but that's not going to prevent environment degradation, that just lets us know the shape we're in. I chose anthropology over other social sciences (not because I wanted to spend 40 years in graduate school) because I thought it offered the best toolkit to get both micro and macro perspectives through space and time.

What I've learned through several interdisciplinary projects is that anthropological insights make a huge difference in the depth, accuracy and relevance of the research....and I'm a pretty average anthropologist. I only wish there were more anthropologists to go around for there are truly a mountain of problems that would benefit from our work.

Is this what they mean by anthropocentrism? (apologies to other disciplines)

ej

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I'm on Katja's side in thinking (and knowing from experience) that insisting on maintaining disciplinary perspectives or foci while participating in interdisciplinary projects can seriously obstruct research, analysis, and explanation. At the same time, I recognize the need in projects to give voice to the issues of justice and equity that some in the discussion here have raised. If there are considerations pulling us in different directions in response to the Kottak exhortation cited in my post yesterday, that's all the more reason for discussing the issues in the AAA session(s) I suggested in the first place.

Pete

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One of the biggest challenges that anthropologists face in working on interdisciplinary teams is methodological. It takes quite a lot of work to convince biological and physical scientists that understanding people requires the same sort of rigor as understanding plants, animals, and soils. It is a challenge to teach scientists who are not familiar with the views of anthropologists that, to
make claims about people's resource management practices and perceptions of the environment, you have to do formal research. In other words, claims about communities of people cannot be based on conventional knowledge, fashionable politics, or broad generalizations. Instead, they have to be documented with long-term, intensive research which requires time, money, and personnel just like solid ecophysiology, zoology, or restoration ecology research does. Mail-out surveys are good for quickly collecting shallow data that can be reported using statistics. Anthropologists have to make the effort to convince scientists who are unfamiliar with our field that there is more nuance, diversity, and complexity to human-environment relationships than can be revealed by survey results.

Revealing the mysteries of anthropology takes time and patience. We may be doing ourselves a disservice if we dive head first into conversations with our non-anthropologist colleagues, telling them about the culturally-constructed nature:culture dichotomy. Many people will resist this information and we may be labeled as 'tree-huggers', 'environmentalists', 'leftists', or as a member of the 'conflict industry' (a label one of my colleagues at the U.S. Forest Service uses to refer to anyone who is opposed to timber harvesting) which unfortunately can discredit us. There are a lot of people who don't want to hear a lot of the stuff that we love to talk about, they won't tolerate 'Marxist' rants about the political economic causes of disease and illness, the validity of the property rights claims of semi-mobile indigenous people, or the logic of local decisions. The preconceptions that non-anthropologists might have about these types of people (tree huggers) and these issues (healthcare disparities) can be difficult barriers to anthropologists who want to convince other people to think like we do -- to put human rights first or at least recognize that people are as important as plants, animals, and soils. Nonetheless, the reality is that we will face these barriers and need to find ways to voice our points of view and have our approach be considered, not only valid, but a necessary component of resource management projects.

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Dear Colleagues, My apologies for a simplistic view, given all the raging debates about interdisciplinary work. I have a simple proposition. Why not lead our own projects? Then, all these complaints about being a marginalized minority may actually abate. We can design, implement, and monitor our own conservation projects in a way that integrate and protect all stakeholder rights (while protecting the environment naturally). Of course, many will feel uncomfortable with direct intervention, but after reading many of the emails on the list, it seems that some of you already work in interdisciplinary teams with biologists for resource management and conservation purposes. My apologies for the self-promotion, but let me briefly talk about our projects. I lead a team of several biologists in implementing a network of marine
protected areas in the Western Pacific and we do not have many of the problems that I hear in this list. We have implemented 18 MPAs since 1999 and during the process we have not had any confrontations (either in the social or biological baseline studies, monitoring, or evaluation processes). We speak a common language and know that conservation and empowerment of people cannot occur without true participation of all stakeholders and the integration of social and natural science in designing and implementing conservation schemes. The fact that I am a social scientists has resulted in a stakeholder-driven project rather than a science-driven one, although we place a lot of importance on biological work. Perhaps the problem is that ecological anthropology has veered off so much to the left, right, or you figure it out! (or at least a considerable fraction) that we no longer share epistemological ties with the natural sciences. It is about time that we stop victimizing ourselves and begin to find funding to design and implement stake-holder driven projects. Then, we may finally be able to show biologists the merits of designing conservation with an understanding of the social, cultural, political, economic, historical, and, of course, the ecological.

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RESPONDING TO Shankar Aswani-Canela:

I have a simple proposition. Why not lead our own projects? Then, all these complaints about being a marginalized minority may actually abate. We can design, implement, and monitor our own conservation projects in a way that integrate and protect all stakeholder rights (while protecting the environment naturally).

I THINK:

I think we can go even further than this, by spearheading new types of learning and action networks to generate new kinds of knowledge and new ways of doing conservation, development and governance. That's vague. I have more specific ideas on the matter, but lack the time to expand on this at the moment - so I'll leave it at that for now.

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Hello All, As a biologist I have found this thread to be quite interesting. I have an on-going collaborative research project with an anthropologist in Fiji, and have found her insight to be critical to the success of the project. We are looking at how perceptions of what is natural have changed over time, and tapping into historical knowledge to set up priorities and conservation goals for marine protected areas. This kind of work requires expertise in both biological and
anthropological sciences and thus is a good example of multi-disciplinary research. I have found working with anthropologists to be an extremely rewarding endeavor. The insight they can bring and their access to different bodies of knowledge has allowed me to better understand the cultural impacts of my own work. I have written more extensively on the benefits of working with environmental anthropologists and perhaps why we have not seen as many of these relationships, in the upcoming issue of Ecological and Environmental Anthropology (http://www.uga.edu/eea). It should be available by the end of this month. I invite you all to check it out to see more of a biologist’s view of this debate.

Cheers, -Josh

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Dear Jim I agree with you (with additional ideas below) and I also thank Paige for her perspective, so precious to me struggling within the CGIAR system dominated by biophysical scientists and economists. After many years in being on interdisciplinary teams I have come to believe that we need actually a five-pronged strategy: 1. Design and manage our own projects into which we can invite scientists of other disciplines. Money talks, as they say, and if we are not getting funding others are. Innovative approaches are needed because "business as usual" approaches to conservation are clearly not working. We can then choose good people of other disciplines to work with. 2. Become donors, managers, head up institutions (case of Joacim Voss at CIAT and some anthropologists who are managers at USAID). Network with donors who are anthropologists or interested in anthropological approaches. Then help design and fund truly interdisciplinary projects. 3. If on an interdisciplinary team of any initiative, come in at the design phase so that you shape the project or research objectives, methodologies and "results" expected. Don't waste time being a "data-grubber" in a (research or development) project with poor design and conceptualization. 4. Don't waste time trying to convince people. To use another overused phrase, actions speak louder than words. When I was a "women in development" specialist, I never tried to convince people about the need to work with women or to work for obtaining more benefits for women. I just did it and then others saw the positive results. 5. Write high-level articles outside of mainstream anthropological journals. Mac Chapin's article stimulated a lot of discussion and may contribute to some changes in business as usual (with of course lots of backlash and then lip-service to change). It is important not just to challenge but to put forward alternatives. I would very much like to be on a panel discussing these issues and could present cases from both agricultural R&D (in the CGIAR) and working within conservation organizations.

Best regards,
Diane Russell
As I mentioned in an earlier posting, I am interested in joining this session. It seems to me that rather than serving the discipline or "people" rather than plants and animals, anthropologists have a mandate to bring our expertise and knowledge to address complex problems involving the many dimensions of people and how they use, exploit and nurture natural resources, as well as how they use, exploit and nurture each other. Caring about plants, animals and soil are life-or-death struggles for some people when for others they are resources to be exploited. Our nuanced and historical views on these struggles are needed by those who want to find simplistic solutions.

Diane

We should keep in mind in our discussions of the challenges of interdisciplinarity that this is not just a problem of natural-social science integration (or lack thereof). Barriers between the social science disciplines are huge; for that matter, they are enormous even among different sub-fields and theoretical orientations within anthropology. I and colleagues have a paper in press in Forest Ecology & Management that directly engages these concerns as they apply to research on forest silviculture practices and the diffusion of rural innovations, more generally (see abstract below).

On a related point, it seems ironic that many of those who are most ardent advocates of "interdisciplinary" engagements are also ardent champions of their respective disciplines. There appears some contradiction here. In many such cases, the motivation would appear to be about raising the profile and influence of said disciplines in the world, rather than about promoting interdisciplinary thinking and research, which to be effective (in my opinion) requires a conscious shedding of disciplinary baggage: a moving AWAY from one's disciplinary theoretical biases and methodological predispositions. On this point, especially as it applies to the role of anthropologists and anthropological thinking in interdisciplinary research on problems of environment & development, see:


Abstract
Barriers to successful adoption of novel silvicultural practices are rarely just technical in nature. Simply put, why do some forest users practice better silviculture than others? Diverse perspectives in the social sciences have been brought to bear on this question, but most efforts suffer from theoretical or methodological biases which undermine their utility for answering questions of interest to forest managers and policy-makers. We argue that research on silviculture practice can better serve the needs of policy-makers if it is approached more holistically and with the intention of answering clear questions about why particular users have, or have not adopted desired practices in particular situations. To illustrate this approach, we present three case studies of research on tropical silviculture practice from each of the Philippines, Brazilian Amazon and Mexico. Findings from these studies indicate that a variety of factors may influence whether or not silvicultural practices are adopted. These range from characteristics of the local environment and individual users (knowledge, motivation, etc.) to wider geographical, economic and political influences. Forest researchers and policy-makers will better identify key constraints and opportunities for the adoption of silvicultural practices in particular contexts if they approach research with clear questions and an interdisciplinary approach.

Key words: Silviculture, diffusion of innovations, research methods, community forestry, natural forest management, tropical forests, mangroves, mahogany.

Cheers,

Brad Walters

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Hello all, If this panel pulls together I could see several themes. I have three that come to mind reasonably quickly. One that I would greatly appreciate would be a series of case studies from the point of view of what works, what doesn't, and a discussion of theories as to why and how. Also, a second perspective would be to address Brad Walters' recent post; how do we, as anthropologists, see ourselves and our fit on the team? From my own point of view, I used to work as an archaeologist for a contracting firm. We didn't have problems of who had priority on the studies because we hired faunal specialists, palynologists, lithics specialist, and radiocarbon specialists. On the other hand, I've recently graduated from an institution of marine science, and at this institution the scientists feel beleaguered in general and social sciences of any sort are
seen as a drain on funding for "science." I'm curious about the effect of institutional setting and how to determine decisions of participation with these institutions or lack thereof. I look forward to hearing from others and their perspectives, these are just my current thoughts. Thanks for your patience on my thinking aloud (or at least via the keyboard).

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Rebecca McLain and I wrote an article on interdisciplinary research for the U.S. Forest Service a couple of years ago. It's not written for anthropologists, but it provides a critical analysis of the interdisciplinarity of a project we worked on in 94-95 that had two anthropologists, two biologists, an economist, and several others. I've listed the publication below along with the others mentioned in these recent posts.

The four fields have faced similar divisions/issues as those brought up in this EANTH-L discussion, so one place to look for successful interdisciplinary techniques is within anthropology. One example of many that comes to mind is "Building a New Biocultural Synthesis Political-economic Perspectives on Human Biology" by Alan Goodman and Thomas Leatherman, (abstract below).

I've also added a link where you can download the Kottak article.

ej


U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service scientists are considering the importance to forest management of researching relations between human communities and forests, and the methods for doing so. An emerging theme is that greater integration in the agency is needed for understanding and taking action with complex matters like community forestry. Examples of integration include tailoring inquiry to a broader range of stakeholder needs, fostering greater understanding between management and science, and integrating natural and social sciences through interdisciplinary work. The focus of this paper is on this last example, interdisciplinary science as a necessary component to studying problems like community forestry that are characterized by a pattern of social and ecological complexity. We provide a short historical overview of key arguments for integration and interdisciplinary approaches in science followed by a case study analysis of an interdisciplinary project on sustainable resource use that illustrates challenges likely to be faced in community forestry research. A summary includes lessons learned and a list of points for participants in future interdisciplinary projects to consider.

Older ecologies have been remiss in the narrowness of their spatial and temporal horizons, their functionalist assumptions, and their apolitical character. Suspending functionalist assumptions and an emphasis upon (homeo)stasis, "the new ecological anthropology" is located at the intersection of global, national, regional, and local systems, studying the outcome of the interaction of multiple levels and multiple factors. It blends theoretical and empirical research with applied, policy-directed, and critical work in what Rappaport called an "engaged" anthropology; and it is otherwise attuned to the political aspects and implications of ecological processes. Carefully laying out a critique of previous ecologies by way of announcing newer approaches, the article insists on the need to recognize the importance of culture mediations in ecological processes rather than treating culture as epiphenomenal and as a mere adaptive tool. It closes with a discussion of the methodologies appropriate to the new ecological anthropology.

If you login into AnthroSource you can print the full article:

Joshua A. Drew. Defining Ecological and Environmental Anthropology: An Online Symposium
Ecological and Environmental Anthropology. Volume One, Number One. Submission Date: 18 February 2005 http://www.uga.edu/eea/

"I have written more extensively on the benefits of working with environmental anthropologists and perhaps why we have not seen as many of these relationships, in the upcoming issue of Ecological and Environmental Anthropology (http://www.uga.edu/eea) It should be available by the end of this month. I invite you all to check it out to see more of a biologist’s view of this debate."


Anthropology, with its dual emphasis on biology and culture, is--or should be--the discipline most suited to the study of the complex interactions between these aspects of our lives. Unfortunately, since the early decades of this century, biological and cultural anthropology have grown distinct, and a holistic vision of anthropology has suffered. This book brings culture and biology back together in new and refreshing ways. Directly addressing earlier criticisms of
biological anthropology, Building a New Biocultural Synthesis concerns how culture and political economy affect human biology--e.g., people's nutritional status, the spread of disease, exposure to pollution--and how biological consequences might then have further effects on cultural, social, and economic systems. Contributors to the volume offer case studies on health, nutrition, and violence among prehistoric and historical peoples in the Americas; theoretical chapters on nonracial approaches to human variation and the development of critical, humanistic and political ecological approaches in biocultural anthropology; and explorations of biological conditions in contemporary societies in relationship to global changes. Building a New Biocultural Synthesis will sharpen and enrich the relevance of anthropology for understanding a wide variety of struggles to cope with and combat persistent human suffering. It should appeal to all anthropologists and be of interest to sister disciplines such as nutrition and sociology.

http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=10398