Examining Conservation and Adaptation: Asociación Ecosistemas Andinos (ECOAN) and the Indigenous Communities of the Vilcanota

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Abstract

Session: Andean communities in the face of climate change
Many of the problems faced by international projects intending to create adaptive social-ecological systems for climate change are lack of stakeholder engagement, limited local knowledge and restricted time. Local organizations focused on conservation and development often have an advantage in creating adaptive social-ecological systems because they understand local power relations, share local discourses and are involved with communities for extended periods of time. Twenty-one comunidades campesinas in the Andean highlands outside of Cusco are involved in a local conservation project aimed at protecting the endangered Polylepis forests (a high mountain forest in the Andes where there are many endemic bird species). A local non-governmental organization, Asociación Ecosistemas Andinos (ECOAN), works with the communities to encourage conservation and economic development. In the face of climate and economic change, communities leverage ECOAN as a tool to adapt (though not always purposefully).

One example is that attitudes and culture within the communities are changing. While the older generation cut down Polylepis for fuel wood and construction materials, the younger generation, specifically men in their teens and twenties, see Polylepis as beneficial both for its ability to hold water in the soil and its aesthetic value. The “water storage” function helps the communities during extended dry periods. The environmental ethic amongst this age group is prevalent and is connected to their role in the ECOAN conservation project (they are involved in planting trees every year and caring for them in nurseries year-round). But conservation is not the only new focus. This young generation is also looking for economic development mainly through tourism. Many of the men have worked as porters for the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu where they were exposed to not only what tourists demand but also the kind of money that can be made. Daily, many communities encounter tourists hiking from nearby tourist hubs like Ollantaytambo to visit “traditional” communities. The younger generation sees this as an opportunity for development and is taking steps to encourage tourism such as building restrooms. The promising conservation ethic and economic diversification efforts are factors that will build resilience for both climactic and economic change. ECOAN is able to play a unique role in encouraging and aiding in this process with their extensive local knowledge of not only the ecological environment but also the culture and their long-term commitment (they’ve been working in the communities for over 12 years). This case study provides a positive example of the potential for local organizations and peoples to take charge of their own adaptation and resiliency efforts where international projects and protocols may otherwise prove ineffective.
**Keywords:** Adaptation to climate change, Development, Conservation, Livelihoods, Andean Communities