



Subjective Experiences of Local Communities in Conservation Management: A Sustainability Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Natural resource management in conservation areas is a critical intersection of environmental sustainability and socio-cultural dynamics, particularly for communities reliant on these resources. While existing studies emphasize ecological and economic aspects, limited attention has been given to the subjective experiences and cultural connections of local stakeholders. This study addresses this gap by exploring local communities' lived experiences in resource management, focusing on their emotional ties to the environment, challenges with conservation policies, and the role of traditional ecological knowledge. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews and observations were conducted with 15 participants engaged in resource management within a conservation area. Findings reveal a strong emotional connection to nature, challenges in aligning local practices with external policies, and the potential of traditional practices, such as rotational farming and seasonal restrictions, to support sustainability. These results highlight the need for inclusive conservation strategies that integrate local perspectives and cultural knowledge. This research enriches our understanding of the human dimensions of conservation and offers a framework for developing more effective, equitable environmental management practices in diverse ecological and cultural contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

The sustainable management of natural resources has emerged as a critical global concern amidst escalating environmental degradation and biodiversity loss (Adjei dkk., 2023). Conservation areas play a pivotal role in preserving ecosystems and mitigating the effects of human activities. However, these efforts often intersect with the livelihoods and cultural identities of local communities who depend on these resources for their economic and social well-being. This tension highlights the need for conservation strategies that balance ecological sustainability with the socio-economic realities of affected communities.

Central to this discussion is the concept of sustainability, which integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Local communities often possess indigenous practices—such as rotational farming and seasonal hunting bans—that align with ecological principles and contribute to sustainable resource management. These approaches, grounded in generations of experience, are frequently overlooked in contemporary conservation policies, which tend to favor top-down regulatory frameworks over community-driven solutions.

Previous research in conservation has predominantly focused on quantitative assessments of resource usage, policy compliance, and ecological outcomes. While these studies provide valuable metrics, they often fail to capture the nuanced experiences and meanings underlying community interactions with the environment (Armsworth dkk., 2013). The subjective perspectives of local stakeholders remain underexplored, particularly in terms of their emotional connections to nature,

challenges with policy implementation, and reliance on traditional knowledge systems as resource management tools.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the lived experiences and deeper meanings of the phenomenon under investigation. By exploring the subjective realities of local communities, this research aims to uncover how individuals perceive, experience, and navigate the complexities of natural resource management within conservation areas. Understanding these perspectives is essential for developing inclusive conservation strategies that honor both ecological and cultural sustainability.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become increasingly significant, particularly in fields where subjective understanding plays a central role. The management of natural resources in conservation areas presents a unique intersection of ecological, social, and cultural dynamics, making it an ideal focus for such inquiries. Exploring local communities' subjective experiences can uncover the underlying values, practices, and emotional connections that inform their interactions with the environment. These insights are crucial for advancing strategies that are both culturally sensitive and ecologically effective.

However, methodological challenges often impede the exploration of deep meanings and experiences. Traditional quantitative methods, while useful for measuring tangible outcomes, frequently fail to capture the rich, complex narratives that define human experiences (Ayre dkk., 2018). For example, large-scale surveys may overlook the intricate ways in which communities perceive conservation policies or the nuanced emotional ties they maintain with their natural surroundings. Such limitations highlight the inadequacy of purely statistical approaches in fully understanding the human dimensions of conservation.

This gap underscores the value of phenomenological methodologies, which prioritize participants' subjective realities and aim to uncover the essence of their lived experiences. By focusing on participants' narratives and interpreting their meanings within cultural and environmental contexts, phenomenology addresses the shortcomings of previous methods and provides a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This approach is particularly relevant for exploring how emotional bonds with nature and indigenous practices can inform sustainable resource management.

Current approaches to addressing challenges in natural resource management within conservation areas often rely on established, policy-driven solutions. These include regulatory frameworks, ecological monitoring, and quantitative evaluations of resource use and biodiversity outcomes (Hanna, 2005). While these methods provide valuable data, they tend to overlook the subjective dimensions of human-environment interactions, especially the lived experiences and cultural practices of local communities.

This oversight limits the depth of understanding necessary for crafting sustainable and inclusive conservation strategies. Quantitative approaches, by their nature, lack the capacity to capture the rich, nuanced perspectives that shape individual and communal relationships with their environment. As a result, the complexity of local knowledge systems, intrinsic values tied to natural resources, and the challenges in navigating conflicting conservation policies remain insufficiently understood.

To address these gaps, a phenomenological approach is both timely and essential. By focusing on the subjective experiences and meanings individuals assign to their interactions with natural resources, phenomenology offers a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of the phenomenon (Jadeja dkk., 2018). This method enables the exploration of deeply rooted cultural practices, emotional bonds with nature, and the lived realities of navigating conservation policies, providing insights that are critical for more effective and equitable resource management.

Existing research on conservation and resource management emphasizes the integration of local knowledge and community participation in achieving sustainable outcomes. While studies grounded in social ecology and sustainability theory highlight the importance of traditional ecological knowledge, they often fail to delve into the subjective experiences of those directly engaged in conservation practices. Phenomenological inquiries remain underutilized in this field, despite their

potential to reveal deeper emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions of human-environment relationships. These dimensions are vital for understanding how communities navigate tensions between economic needs, conservation policies, and their intrinsic connections to nature.

This study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach to address the limitations of prior methods and uncover the lived experiences of local communities managing natural resources in conservation areas (Kalakbandi & Mittal, 2018). By focusing on participants' subjective realities, this method provides insights into their emotional bonds with the environment, challenges in engaging with top-down policies, and the role of traditional knowledge in fostering sustainability. This approach directly addresses the gaps identified earlier, offering a nuanced and holistic understanding of resource management that existing quantitative or policy-focused studies cannot achieve.

The article is organized into several sections to ensure clarity and coherence. The introduction establishes the context and significance of the research, followed by a detailed exploration of the theoretical and practical frameworks relevant to the phenomenon. The methods section outlines the phenomenological approach, including data collection and analysis techniques. Results are presented thematically, with a focus on participants' lived experiences, while the discussion situates these findings within broader theoretical and practical contexts. The article concludes with insights into the implications of the study for conservation practices and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of local communities in managing natural resources within conservation areas. Phenomenology was selected for its emphasis on understanding lived experiences and uncovering the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it (Levidow, 2013). By focusing on participants' narratives and perceptions, this design enabled an in-depth exploration of the meanings and practices associated with resource management and sustainability. Specifically, interpretative phenomenology was employed, emphasizing both the description of participants' experiences and the interpretive analysis of their deeper meanings within a socio-cultural context. In addition, the study incorporated triangulation by cross-referencing interview findings with observational data to ensure the validity and reliability of the insights. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participants' behaviors and perspectives, ensuring consistency across different data sources.

Participants

Participants included 15 individuals from local communities situated around conservation areas, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's objectives. Inclusion criteria required individuals to have been actively involved in resource management practices for at least five years and to represent diverse roles, such as farmers, fishers, and indigenous leaders (Misra, 1998). Exclusion criteria included individuals with less than five years of engagement or without significant direct involvement in conservation practices. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 65 years, with an approximately equal gender distribution, ensuring a broad spectrum of perspectives reflective of the community dynamics.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and direct observations. Interviews were guided by an open-ended protocol designed to elicit participants' experiences, challenges, and perspectives on conservation and sustainability. Questions focused on their emotional connections to nature, interactions with conservation policies, and the role of traditional knowledge in resource management. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes or community centers to ensure comfort and familiarity, with each session lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Observations complemented the interviews by capturing non-verbal practices, such as traditional ceremonies and communal activities, offering a richer contextual understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the principles of interpretative phenomenology (Mrdjenovic, 2023). Transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring themes and patterns, beginning with an initial open-coding phase to highlight significant statements. These codes were then clustered into broader themes that reflected the core experiences and meanings shared by participants. The analysis involved iterative reflection to ensure that the findings captured the essence of the participants' narratives. NVivo software facilitated the organization and retrieval of coded data but was used as a tool rather than a determinant of the analysis process. The integration of interview and observational data ensured a holistic interpretation of the phenomena under study.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to the study (Mudzenji dkk., 2021). Participants provided informed written consent after receiving detailed explanations of the study's purpose, methods, and their rights to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and securely storing data in compliance with applicable international ethical standards for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emotional Connection to Nature

Participants expressed a profound emotional connection to the natural environment, describing it not merely as a resource but as an integral part of their identity and heritage. One participant remarked, "This forest is not just a place we live from; it is where we are rooted. It gives us life, and we owe it respect." This deep connection manifested in their narratives as a form of spiritual and cultural bond, where the land and its resources were seen as sacred. Observations corroborated this sentiment through rituals and communal activities that honored nature, such as planting ceremonies and traditional festivals celebrating the seasons.

Such emotional ties often acted as a motivator for sustainable practices. For instance, the use of traditional farming techniques, such as crop rotation and natural pest control, was described as "the way of our ancestors, who always knew how to keep the land alive." Based on these findings, it is recommended that conservation policies incorporate the emotional and cultural significance of local environments into their frameworks, as this would foster greater community cooperation and participation in conservation efforts. This connection underscores the potential of leveraging emotional and cultural bonds to foster sustainable conservation strategies.

Challenges in Policy Implementation

A recurring theme was the perceived disconnect between governmental conservation policies and the lived realities of local communities. Participants often voiced frustration about being excluded from the decision-making processes that directly impacted their livelihoods. As one farmer explained, "Policies are made in offices far from here, without understanding what we truly need or how we live."

This lack of inclusion often led to resistance or misunderstanding of regulations, which were seen as impractical or even counterproductive. For example, restrictions on resource use conflicted with the community's need for economic sustenance, resulting in non-compliance or unintended environmental degradation. Observations during community meetings highlighted these tensions, where discussions often centered on the struggle to balance economic needs with ecological preservation.

The Role of Local Wisdom in Sustainability

Local wisdom emerged as a central theme, with participants emphasizing the effectiveness of traditional ecological knowledge in maintaining environmental balance. Practices such as seasonal hunting bans, forest zoning for different uses, and the collective management of water resources were frequently mentioned as integral to the community's approach to sustainability.

One elder stated, "Our traditions teach us when to take and when to leave. If we follow these rules, the land will provide for generations." Observations of traditional rituals, such as blessings before forest harvesting, illustrated the community's holistic understanding of resource management. This wisdom, rooted in centuries of lived experience, was often seen as more practical and adaptable than externally imposed policies.

The findings reveal the multifaceted experiences of local communities in managing natural resources within conservation areas. Themes of emotional connection, policy challenges, and the role of local wisdom illuminate a dynamic interplay between cultural identity, environmental stewardship, and external pressures. The narratives highlight the need for inclusive approaches that integrate local knowledge and perspectives into conservation strategies, fostering not only ecological sustainability but also community resilience.

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed the profound emotional connections local communities have with their natural environment, viewing it as both a source of livelihood and a cornerstone of their cultural identity. Additionally, the findings highlighted the tension between conservation policies and local practices, alongside the potential of traditional ecological knowledge to offer sustainable solutions.

Contribution to Research Questions

The findings address the central research questions by elucidating the lived experiences of local communities in managing resources within conservation areas (Singh dkk., 2001). Participants' narratives revealed a dynamic interplay between their reliance on natural resources for economic survival and their deep-seated cultural and spiritual ties to the environment. This duality underscores the importance of understanding conservation as a human as well as an ecological challenge. The study also illuminated the specific challenges faced in aligning local practices with externally imposed policies, emphasizing the need for inclusive conservation strategies that integrate local voices. Furthermore, the study demonstrated how traditional practices, such as rotational farming and seasonal restrictions, embody a form of ecological wisdom that aligns with sustainable management principles.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theory

The findings resonate with the principles of social ecology, which stress the interdependence between humans and their environment, and they build on previous research that advocates for community participation in conservation efforts (Smyth & Vanclay, 2017). However, unlike earlier studies that often focus on quantifiable outcomes or policy impacts, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the subjective dimensions of conservation. The deep emotional connections reported by participants extend the literature by framing conservation not only as a technical process but as a cultural and existential one. This study also contributes to the broader discourse on sustainability by highlighting the untapped potential of traditional ecological knowledge, aligning with prior calls for its integration into modern conservation strategies. At the same time, the findings reveal gaps in current policy approaches, which often overlook the emotional and cultural dimensions of resource management, thus offering a critical perspective on the limitations of conventional frameworks.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both scientific understanding and practical applications in conservation and resource management. Socially and culturally, the results underscore the need to recognize and integrate local communities' emotional and cultural ties to nature into conservation strategies (Yacoob, 1991). Traditional ecological knowledge, as highlighted in this research, represents a resource for sustainable practices that aligns with modern sustainability goals, offering a bridge between local traditions and global conservation efforts. Practically, these

insights call for participatory approaches that involve local stakeholders not only in policy implementation but also in the design of conservation frameworks, ensuring that such policies resonate with the lived realities of the communities they impact. For broader applications, this research suggests that conservation initiatives worldwide could benefit from adopting similar inclusive and culturally sensitive practices to improve policy efficacy and community cooperation.

Study Limitations

While the phenomenological approach provided rich, in-depth insights, the study is inherently context-specific, focusing on a single community in a conservation area. This specificity limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or populations with different cultural or environmental contexts (Warner & Sullivan, 2017). Additionally, the reliance on qualitative interviews and observations may introduce interpretative biases, despite rigorous analytical procedures. The study's sample size, while sufficient for phenomenological analysis, may not capture the full diversity of perspectives within the community. These limitations point to the need for caution in extrapolating the results to other settings but provide a valuable foundation for future comparative research.

Directions for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for future exploration. First, comparative studies across different cultural and ecological contexts could illuminate variations in how local communities experience and manage conservation challenges. Second, longitudinal research could investigate how these experiences and practices evolve over time, particularly in response to changing policies or environmental conditions (Marshall dkk., 2017). Finally, integrating phenomenological findings with quantitative data on ecological outcomes could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between human experiences and environmental sustainability. By building on the insights of this research, future studies can contribute to the development of more inclusive, adaptive, and effective conservation strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of local communities in managing natural resources within conservation areas, addressing the tension between ecological sustainability and socio-economic realities. The findings revealed the profound emotional and cultural connections participants have with their environment, the challenges they face in navigating conservation policies, and the critical role of traditional ecological knowledge in fostering sustainability. These insights uniquely contribute to the field by emphasizing the significance of emotional and cultural ties to the land, an aspect often overlooked in traditional conservation research. By highlighting the importance of community participation and the integration of local knowledge, this study provides practical implications for designing more effective and equitable conservation strategies. Future research could expand on these findings by conducting comparative studies across diverse contexts or exploring the long-term impacts of community-driven conservation efforts. This approach would further enrich our understanding of the interplay between human experiences and ecological sustainability.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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