

Personal Reflections on the IUCN and World Conservation Congress

by Lauren Baker, MEM 2005

The TRI and IUCN partnership

The past two years has seen a growing partnership between the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (F&ES) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The IUCN is a unique member organization that includes 77 nations, 114 governmental agencies, and over 800 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as over 10,000 experts that advise the union on its policies and programs. Efforts to strengthen ties between these organizations were jumpstarted in the spring of 2003, when Aban Kabraji, the IUCN Asia Regional Director, came to F&ES as the Dorothy McCluskey visiting lecturer. The partnership was affirmed through the signing of a memorandum of understanding in January 2004 and has subsequently given rise to a variety of opportunities. As a student who has been the beneficiary of this partnership in several aspects, I will reflect below both on my own experiences and on the role of the IUCN as an international conservation organization.

Courses at F&ES

As an initial step, a course titled “Current Issues in Conservation: Toward the World Conservation Congress and Beyond” was taught in spring 2004 by Gordon Geballe, the

F&ES Associate Dean. The course examined top environmental issues through the lens of the IUCN in anticipation of the World Conservation Congress, a major international environmental conference hosted by the IUCN. This course also provided the basis for a group of students to travel to the Congress in Bangkok in November 2004. In order to prepare for this event, my classmates and I worked outside of class to develop a presentation on the issue of increasing opportunities for young environmental professionals (18-35 years of age), a topic that had been raised initially by F&ES students at the 2003 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. One half of our class wrote and submitted a motion that promoted the “professional and meaningful contribution of young people to conservation efforts at local, regional, and/or global levels,” to be voted on at the Congress. The other half of the class wrote and distributed an online survey in English, Spanish, and French to young environmental professionals worldwide in order to assess which skills or experiences have been helpful for young professionals thus far in their careers and to garner their thoughts on emergent environmental issues.

IUCN internships

A second major manifestation of the F&ES-IUCN partnerships has been through the facilitation of internships. This past year, I went to Thailand to work on a community-based water conservation and management project in the Mekong river basin, while another student went to work in the Sri Lanka regional office on a medicinal plant conservation project.

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It is hoped that the partnership will bring mutual benefits to F&ES and IUCN. It has already provided unique and valuable opportunities for students to apply knowledge learned in our classrooms and to network with environmental professionals worldwide. Furthermore, the IUCN is able to benefit from the influx of highly competent individuals bringing new thoughts and energy into the organization and its projects.

The partnership also creates a vantage point for students to understand the role that large international environmental organizations play in conservation and development. There are, increasingly, questions and criticisms of larger environmental organizations and large international conferences. These organizations have been criticized, notably by Mac Chapin in his 2004 *WorldWatch* article, "A Challenge to Conservationists," as failing to engage seriously with local people due to unequal power relationships, and for promoting preservationist policies or projects that curtail the access rights of resource users (ibid.). In addition, large global conferences have been questioned with respect to their productivity or effectiveness, as well as critiqued for being out of touch with on-the-ground realities since they often exclude the participation of local 'subjects' of conservation and development. My time as an intern and as a participant in the World Conservation Congress has allowed insight into the role of this particular international environmental organization and event.

Seeing multiple aspects of IUCN's work in the Mekong river basin left me impressed with the role the organization could play. My internship was at the field/demonstration site in northeast Thailand with the US\$30 million, four-country Mekong Wetlands and Biodiversity Programme (MWBP). I observed and wrote reflections and analyses of the Thai Baan Research approach, which was carried out by village members in four villages. This participatory research project had been operating for a year and was part of the preparatory phase of the

MWBP; it was done in cooperation with a Thai NGO and involved a high degree of participation and an equal partner basis with local people during the planning and implementation phase. I also attended the MWBP signing ceremony, which officially initiated the project and was a high profile event in which the government ministries from Thailand, Lao PDR, and Cambodia, as well as the heads of the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and IUCN Asia offices, were present.

I found that the IUCN played an important and unique role in this project. Using Thai Baan participatory research as a foundation, they were able to work on the local scale in an engaged and meaningful way that had strong promise in benefiting the livelihoods of the locals involved. As Rattaphon Pitaktapsombut, the IUCN Sri Songkhram Project Manager reflected,

this research is simple, is clear in itself: how livelihood links with the social and natural. . . From the research made simple we have a process for learning, and at the end of the research the people not only have the information but they also have learned how to work together and they know about the role of organization. The process is dynamic – it does not stop, it keeps going, and in the future they have a plan.

As an international environmental institution, the IUCN is also able to work on large-scale projects, engaging the governments of multiple countries, a task that would be almost impossible to achieve for smaller, national NGOs. Using a mosaic of approaches and encouraging cooperation is necessary to address complex environmental issues, and to my mind IUCN had the ability and promise to foster cooperation and effective work on multiple scales.

The World Conservation Congress

The global Congress was also a thought-provoking experience, although I had mixed feelings about its output and value. The event was both a forum that featured plenary sessions and workshops on an enormous variety of topics and, during its second half, a business meeting

during which IUCN member organizations voted on sponsored motions and on the new IUCN leadership. There were 5,000 participants from around the world in attendance; the Yale delegation, with 23 people, was one of the larger delegations from a single organization.

The conference functions, in part, to publicly and symbolically display the growing power of the environmental movement on a global scale. The opening ceremony, which featured royalty such as the Queen of Thailand, the Princess of Japan, and the former prime minister of Thailand, highlighted the prominence of environmental awareness and concern among high-level government officials. Keynote speakers during plenary sessions – who included Nelson Mandela and Wangari Maathai by video message, and other powerful figures like Jeffrey Sachs – demonstrated that the Congress warranted the attention of the most influential people in our field. It also provided a sense of coming together as a global environmental community – and it seemed like the IUCN Congress was in a special position to do this, since it is an organization with members that include governments, academia, and non-governmental organizations worldwide. Further, the IUCN Congress is broad in scope, rather than built around one particular issue like most international conferences.

Was the WCC “productive”? There certainly seemed to be new connections forged, to an extent, within existing circles of interest and work, but there seemed to be less meaningful engagement between different focal areas. One of the themes stressed at the Congress was the need for multiple approaches and cooperation with new partners, including, in particular, the importance of working with the private sector more than we have in the past. Despite this encouragement for cooperation and new partnerships, the Congress seemed to maintain a sense of segmentation, perhaps partly because of its size. There were, for example, approximately 250 sponsored workshops offered during the 3-day forum, each

of which tended to be very small (15-20 people on average in the ones that I attended). People, I sense, tended to go to the workshops about issues in which they were already involved, knowledgeable, or interested; while this may have led to new connections between people already working on similar issues, the format did not encourage people to learn about and embrace new ideas or approaches.

The submitted motions, such as our own addressing young professionals, were another way that IUCN members could expand their vision of environmental issues and approaches. Motions highlighted new areas or issues of concern to be noticed and voted upon by all of the IUCN members. Their wording and intent was hammered out in contact groups for two days prior to the voting, and once on the floor for general voting virtually all of the motions were passed. This seemed to be a productive way to push the agenda forward – 80 resolutions and 38 recommendations were adopted, and will be followed up upon by the IUCN.

Was the WCC inclusive? Without having done any systematic observation, I would say that there seemed to be some groups of people less represented at the Congress, presumably because the expense of travel limited who could attend. Many organizations could send only a few representatives and often these were the more experienced or senior people, with younger people less represented. Small-budget NGOs were undoubtedly less represented; some representatives of smaller, developing country-based NGOs were present but they were certainly in a minority. Furthermore, English was the major language of the conference, both formally and informally. Although plenary sessions and some of the larger workshops had headphones with translation, language barriers limited meaningful participation by all people.

International environmental institutions are fallible, and global conferences are not without limitations. That said, I come away from

my coursework, internship, and conference participation impressed, on the whole, with both the IUCN and the World Conservation Congress. I am delighted that I have been able to benefit personally and professionally through my interactions with and insights about the IUCN, and I hope that this burgeoning partnership will continue to benefit the next generation of F&ES students.

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