

Storytelling as a medium for balanced dialogue on conservation in Cameroon

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SUMMARY

In conservation efforts where genuine community involvement is aimed at, communication should be a two-way affair in which the local voice can be truly heard. In developing countries especially, however, this voice tends to be smothered by the power and prestige that usually lies with the supra-local conservation agencies. This paper explores how fictional storytelling, a communication medium as old as mankind, may enable local people to respond in freedom to the issue of conservation. Stories that end by posing a dilemma to the audience are generally used in Cameroon to initiate discussion. First trials in Cameroon used this format to tell a story of animals that found themselves at risk of extinction and sent out a delegation to the human world to plea for a 'last home'. Although enjoyed by researchers and audience alike, this story appeared to suffer from several technical and structural shortcomings. In order to overcome these, empirical research (for example the gathering of some 600 stories in the field) and theoretical considerations led to the design of a second-generation story that retained the dilemma format but carried fewer implicit messages and introduced a third, adjudicating party. This story was tried out in 13 villages in Central and North Cameroon with full success, both in terms of process (the elicitation of focused and rich debate) and in terms of content (the clarity of arguments and underlying assumptions). If led by the principles developed in this paper, fictional storytelling is a worthy addition to the methodological repertoire of all conservation professionals who wish to communicate conservation to local communities in a manner that is structurally balanced and substantively open.

Keywords: Cameroon, co-management, community, conservation, entertainment-education, narratology, natural resources, storytelling

INTRODUCTION

Environmental conservation usually involves both local and supra-local parties. Communities or user groups have their particular motivations and capacities, and often rights as well, to use and protect the natural resources to which they have access. However, supra-local parties such as government agencies or global non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often have a natural role to play in the defence of larger-scale management rationalities (for example whole river basins), the expression of larger-scale values of species such as their global status as endangered species, and the facilitation of conservation through funding and research. In this general scheme, practices of co-management (or 'collaborative', 'joint' or 'cross-scale' management) have evolved, where local and supra-local actors share visions, responsibilities and benefits of the resource in question in locally negotiated arrangements. Outcomes depend on the nature of the resource (such as the scale of its ecology, its vulnerability, global status and local functions) and the management capacities of the local and supra-local actors (Wilson *et al.* 2003; Napier *et al.* 2005). The success of co-management arrangements depends on technical, economic, leadership and scale factors and also on 'softer' elements such as trust (Pinkerton 1989; Ostrom 1999) which, as the Maoris say concerning the co-management of nature in New Zealand, 'is a two-way path' (Taiepa *et al.* 1997). Such a path, in turn, can only be walked if co-management arrangements rest on a foundation of sharing not only power, functions and benefits, but also underlying visions on the resource and conservation. With that, communication of visions becomes a key issue in co-management.

For words and images to become communication, senders and recipients should share a basic understanding of the involved concepts and the underlying world views (Aarts 1998). Therefore, any situation of co-management invokes a cross-cultural encounter. Within a single overarching culture (say, fisheries management in the USA), co-management needs to bridge the gap between the visions prevailing in the worlds of bureaucrats and biologists on the one hand, and of communities and their 'folk biology' on the other (Ward & Weeks 1994; Clay 1996). An additional factor comes into play in co-management in developing countries, where the conservation initiative usually comes to communities not only from above, but also from the West, with concepts and values of Western culture inscribed in all its messages (for example

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Zwaal 1998). Local communities in developing countries are confronted with conservation concepts and values that are not only culturally alien but also loaded with the power that comes from a scientific base, international funding and government backing. How then may communication in settings with an aim of co-management be established? How may communication here become a *gewaltfreie Diskussion* (Habermas 1987)?

One advance is that Western conservationists find better ways to listen. In direct meetings with communities, for instance, this implies a better mastery of the difficult art of being actively silent (for example Cheney & Weston 1999). A more indirect route is to do more and better research on local attitudes and visions, from which may be learnt, for instance, that local people may appreciate a protected area not only for economic reasons but also for enjoyment of the diversity of wildlife (for example Bauer 2003), or that opinions of the conservation idea as such may be much more favourable than those of the actual behaviour of conservation authorities (Picard 2003), or that local people view elephants not only as dangerous crop-raiders but also as 'God's beauty' and 'sons of Uganda' (Hill 1998).

Second, and parallel to better listening, ways should be found to get the practitioner's own voice right, that is, to learn to speak without dominating the dialogue. The objective of the present paper is to present the development and result of storytelling as a method to reach that aim. Our specific question is: how may conservationists, in spite of the imbalance of power and prestige vis-à-vis local communities, use storytelling to communicate the issue of conservation such that they may elicit free, authentic and creative thinking? We focus the question at a relatively 'deep' world-view level (Neuhauser 1993) of the conservation concept that could be called 'visions of nature' (Van den Born *et al.* 2001), and contains issues such as on the intrinsic value and vulnerability of nature.

Storytelling is a medium of communication probably as old as mankind itself. Humans have a remarkable and universal capacity to create, tell and process stories (Sugiyama 2001). Stories can be swapped; stories can be created in a game of everyone adding a new line; stories can be created to discuss local sensitive issues as if they were issues of 'Once upon a time, in a village far away,'; stories can be used to tell of the terrible fate of people who break the rules (or the reverse), or they may construct a dilemma and end in a question for the audience to discuss. As founding myths and hero tales, stories create identities of ethnic groups and corporations. Forefather stories give meaning to landscape features. Hunting stories give information about behaviours of animals. They are a medium of endless flexibility.

For our purposes particularly, it is significant that storytelling is still commonly practised in many rural areas in the developing world. The narrative is a medium that everyone has access to and is apt to use. Entering this medium, the outsider-conservationist becomes a simple participant, a storyteller amongst the storytellers. Using

storytelling rather than direct questioning or direct initiation of discussion, the outsider-conservationist can offer his audience the opportunity to respond to the story instead of directly to him, thus greatly reducing the effect of the power difference between the local community and the outside world the conservationist represents. Moreover, good stories are entertaining. They not only contain tensions but also fun and feelings that may involve the outsiders and locals in many other ways than merely intellectual exchange.

The stories told in politics, science and daily life, and about the world, others and the narrator's own group, have become such popular objects of present-day studies that a brief note on the concept is necessary here, especially on the distinction between stories with and without truth claim. If someone narrates the story of his or her life, a truth claim is essential even though parts of the story may be recognized as highly stylized. The same holds for the stories of popularized science, the stories that conservation NGOs and environmental educators tell about nature, the stories about the mysterious workings of 'the economy', the founding myths of the university department, the 'environmental narratives' used to legitimize development projects (Fairhead & Leach 1995) and so on. All these may be distinguished from true fiction. Fictional stories may carry strong implicit messages or even an explicit moral, but the narrator and the listener know that truth is no issue. Traditional fictional stories are often linguistically marked as such ('Once upon a time . . .') or it is made clear otherwise to the audience, explicitly or by conventional means, that what follows is 'not true'. For the purpose of initiating free discussion on conservation between conservationists and local people in developing countries, fictional stories are superior to the non-fictional; any truth claim would load the story with the weight of Western science, funding and political power, making it just like any other message from the Western world, only now packed in story form.

As will be discussed later, the social sciences do not offer references on the design of fictional stories. The humanities, on the other hand, contain many compendia of fictional stories from cultures around the world as well as traditions on their interpretation, albeit not environment-oriented (for example Schipper 1990; Van Londen 1994). The discipline of 'narratology' supplies theory of stories and storytelling (see Fludernik 1996; Bal 1997), guidelines on story construction and the art of storytelling in general (see Baker & Greene 1987). The field of 'entertainment-education' uses fictional stories, often staged as street theatre or soap opera, to address issues such as literacy, AIDS or gender relations (Coleman & Meyer 1990; Singhal 1990; Bouman 1998). Elements of this knowledge have been applied in the design and telling of the stories to be exemplified in this paper, but we will not review them here.

The method of storytelling here has been developed in two steps. The results of the first step, though partly a failure, are still relevant for the full understanding of the final

result. The paper is therefore organized as follows. The next section summarizes and discusses the first trials in Cameroon. Triggered by these first results, a study was undertaken which is first described and we then elucidate how this enabled improvement of the technical aspects, structure and content of the first story. The resulting new dilemma tale and the experiences gathered with it in the field are then reported. In the General Discussion section, we summarize and discuss the findings particularly in terms of story structure, such as the need to address only one issue at the time and to introduce an adjudicating party within the story in order to enable the narrator to later play the role of discussion facilitator.

The first round of field trials took place in villages close to Waza National Park in north Cameroon in 1994 (De Groot *et al.* 1995). The second round was staged in north and central Cameroon in 2001. In the Sahelian drylands of the North, urgent conservation issues concern the dryland forests and pastures and a number of important protected areas where much of the last wildlife of the region has taken refuge. In central Cameroon, lower population densities and a wetter climate allow for a more relaxed conservation situation, logging in the savannah/forest mosaic and decreasing wildlife densities being the most pressing problems.

FIRST EXPERIENCES IN CAMEROON

Method

The storytellers were a racially mixed group of male academics. The setting was informal, relaxed, by the fire, at night and with a mixed audience of men, women and children. The story was told in French, translated line by line in the local language. It began as follows (full text in De Groot *et al.* 1995): ‘In the beginning of the earth, God created people, and He also created the animals.’

The story continued on the theme of human advancement in numbers and technology and the worries of the animals in their ever-decreasing space. The animals then call a big meeting and finally decide to go to the human world to discuss the problem. The turtle is first sent out to go to the village secretly, in order to listen in the dark and learn what people are saying about the animals. The turtle then acts as a spokesman of the delegation of the animals to the village, backed up by the looming presence of the elephant and the rabbit ready to run away and report back if things would go awry. The story text here was: ‘The turtle began to speak . . . It explained to the people: ‘You have a law that says that man is higher than the animal. But you also have a second law, a law that says that God also cares about the animals. Now there are so few of us left. Now we have come to you to beg. We no longer have any other place to go. Please do not make more cropland. Please do not hunt us anymore. Please do not bring your cattle to our forest.’

After these words there is a discussion between the people and the animals. One issue in the discussion is, for instance,

if the animals would give something in return, for example preventing the hyena from entering the village by night and stealing goats. The story ended with a dilemma posed to the audience. Should the people in the story have decided to leave the animals their last home, even though that would have meant less space for cropland and cattle, and the threat of the hyena?

Results

In all cases the story was much enjoyed by the audience to which it was told, enlivened by details from daily village life with an amusing ‘Just So’ sub-story included. The intended effect of the story, namely the intensity of the discussion with regard to the dilemma, was however highly variable. In one village there was no discussion at all. People quickly agreed with the animals’ point of view and went on telling another good story of their own.

Discussion

This variability of results was also reported by De Wit and Van Est (2000) (both female), who told the same story in other villages in the same region in later years. This raised questions concerning the validity of the storytelling as a means to elicit discussion. Could people’s eagerness to discuss the issue really be so variable? And if people agreed with the animals’ point of view, were they really serious or only saying this to diplomatically avoid discussion with the storytellers? Other questions were related less fundamentally to elements of story content. For instance, being unaware of the characters that animals are conventionally assigned in local stories, the researchers could have given confusing roles to the animals in their story. It was also noted that after the storytelling sessions, people said they had been confused by the presence of God in the story. The villagers felt uneasy with the combination of God and dilemma; the presence of God blocked free discussion, so to speak. Finally and most seriously for our purpose, the story in its context had not in fact been ‘power-free’. It was structured as people versus the animals, while at the same time, it was clear to the audience that the storytellers, as conservationists, were on the side of the animals. In other words, the turtle’s words were not only backed up by the looming presence of the elephant but also by the storytellers, and opposing the animals’ point of view would have meant opposing the storytellers too, which would certainly have been quite impolite and possibly risky. In sum, the power imbalance between local people and storytellers had been structured into the story.

These considerations gave rise to the further study of storytelling for nature conservation in Cameroon. This project consisted in part of only listening, in other words the gathering of Cameroonian stories that contained nature elements. Secondly it contained further theoretical explorations, and

thirdly, on that basis, the construction and testing of a number of 'second generation' stories in the field.

STORYTELLING AND THE NATURE ELEMENT IN STORIES

Method

Between 1997 and 2000, Zwaal (2003) gathered 600 local stories that contained elements of nature (such as animals and mountains) in three villages in the Far North Province of Cameroon and three villages in Central Province. The gathering took place by inviting informal collective storytelling sessions, which usually did not require more than bringing enough firewood and a good pot of tea. The stories were taped, translated and typed *verbatim* in French. We will not enter into an analysis of all this material here but only take out some aspects of direct import for the present paper. We first focus on storytelling settings and story form, and then discuss story content.

Results

All over Cameroon stories are told and retold every day. Although usually taking place after sunset and in small family settings, there appeared to be no strict rules for place and time of storytelling. The same counted for the storyteller. Men and women, young and old, all knew stories, were allowed to tell them and usually did so in quite a lively style, supported by entertaining body language. Stories were considered to have entertainment as well as educational value. Educational elements concerned factual folk biology (cf. Medin & Atran 1999) such as when a story related how the squirrel got rid of the hyena by using the resin of a certain plant species to suggest it was bleeding, or focused on more general visions and values. Animals appeared in many stories, usually with more or less fixed human characters, for instance with the turtle either as a rebel or a trickster. Supernatural spirits showed up in many stories as well, but God played a role in only a small number of special stories, such as that in which God 'un-creates' all He has made, quite like Genesis 1 in reverse, and then rolls up the world like a sleeping mat and puts it away in a corner of His hut (Zwaal 2001). Dilemma stories made up *c.* 4% of the stories gathered, which made them not the most common story type but certainly within the range of what was normal for Cameroonian audiences.

In stories where natural elements played a role (different from the fables in which animals only stand in for human characters), a strong link was often depicted between the social and the natural order in the sense that social wrongs (for example disobeying the elders) caused natural disorders such as drought; there was a strong 'metaphysical causality' running from humans to nature. In all this, nature was usually depicted as powerful, something that humans could not change fundamentally by any concrete physical action

such as hunting or agriculture. In other words, there was only a weak 'concrete causality' running from humans to nature.

Conclusions for story design

The 'first generation' story of the preceding section had been successful in terms of storytelling setting and story form, having been designed to address a moral ('world-view') issue and having been of the dilemma type. Technically less successful elements, which clearly needed to be redressed in the next generation, were the style of narration (which was too solemn owing to the line-by-line translation from French into the local language), the presence of God in the story and the choice of the turtle (conventionally the rebel or the trickster) as spokesman for the animals.

In terms of story content, many strong differences were noted between the Cameroonian stories and the researchers' first-generation story. Contrary to the former, for instance, the researchers' story depicted nature as weaker than humans and fundamentally influenced by concrete human actions such as hunting.

IMPROVING THE FIRST-GENERATION STORY

The stories and experiences gathered were used as the basis for the design and trial of improved stories. Elements addressed in this process were technical aspects, and the story structure and content.

Improving the technical aspects

The liveliness of style and the characters of the stories needed to be brought closer to local traditions, and attention paid to 'focalization', denoting from whose point of view a story was told (Brinkman 1996; Fludernik 1996; Rimmon-Kenan 1996; Bal 1997). Focalization may have an important influence on how an audience receives a story, and it was felt that our first-generation story had not been focalized in a balanced manner, with too much room for the animals' point of view.

Improving story structure

For the improved story, it was felt that the power imbalance between storytellers and audience should not be structured into the story itself. One way to contain any kind of discussion between parties (as our second-generation story required) would be to introduce a third party (such as a judge or a king) that is set to adjudicate between the two, as for example in the 10th century story from Basra (Anonymous 1978), where a conflict between mankind (the 'Adamites') and the crawling animals is brought before the king of the *Jinn* (the spirits). Once freed of any strong association with one of the two parties, the storyteller may assume a new role during the discussion induced by the story, namely that of the catalyst who may keep the discussion as balanced as possible and who may bring the discussion back to the story's central point or, alternatively, follow the audience into a discussion that people find

central even if unintended by the story. Thus the storyteller is free to use the great flexibility of storytelling as an oral face-to-face medium (Finnegan 1988; Epskamp 1995). One technique is to refocalize parts of the story during the discussion.

Improving story content

The most crucial element of the design of the second-generation story concerned the story's content. As shown in the preceding section, the stories gathered in Cameroon revealed conceptualizations of the relationship between the natural and the human world that differed in many more aspects from the Western view than only the point addressed by the first-generation story. Milton (1996, p. 136) distinguished a number of general differences between Western and non-Western views in this relationship, some of which overlap with the differences we found in Cameroon. In combination, they form the following six contrasting 'world-view dichotomies' (with the characteristically Western view mentioned first):

- (1) Balance of power: is nature weaker or stronger than humanity?
- (2) Concrete causality: is nature vulnerable or relatively unaffected by concrete human actions?
- (3) Metaphysical causality: is the natural order unaffected or influenced by the human order?
- (4) Intrinsic value of nature: is intrinsic value acknowledged or is the value of nature merely functional?
- (5) Intergenerational duty: is sustainability a moral issue or can future generations be assumed to be able to take care of their own problems?
- (6) Flow of time: is time seen as linear or cyclical (see Leach 1961; Wallman 1992; Persoon & van Est 2000)? The Western conservationist view that extinction is final is contrary to cyclical visions in which things somehow always return.

This set of dichotomies does not exhaust the variations in Western and non-Western visions of nature. For the indigenous inhabitants of Siberut (Indonesia), for instance, the forest is the land shared by human and spiritual societies in a complex interplay that cannot be captured in a simple scheme like this (Schefold 2004). Moreover, we cannot assume that cultures, Western or non-Western, are consistent in terms of these dichotomies. Many Africans have a view of time that is more cyclical than the characteristically Western notion, but the story of God de-creating the world is for instance quite linear. On the basis of Milton (1996) and our own experiences, however, we felt that this list was good enough for the relatively limited purpose of constructing stories for communication on conservation that were considered to be significantly better than in our first trials.

In terms of the dichotomies, the key to adequate story design is that a story should focus on only one dichotomy (for example acted out in a dilemma) while on the others, its position should

be as neutral as possible. The reason is that the positions that the story adopts in terms of these other dichotomies are not made explicit in the story. With that, they are not opened up for discussion and hence forced upon the audience by the storyteller. We may now note that the story of the first trial was less than ideal in this sense. The story focused on the intrinsic value dichotomy (4) but it also took a non-neutral position in that the animals were weaker than humans (dichotomy 1), the concrete causality was strong (dichotomy 2) and that time was linear (dichotomy 6). These positions were reinforced by the rather solemn, line-by-line storytelling style. The second-generation story should obviously perform better.

A new dilemma story

Based on the insights described above, a second generation of dilemma tales was designed. An example is in Box 1. The story focused on the issue of sustainability (dichotomy 5) and was inspired by local stories that were gathered. Many stories in Cameroon begin with two animals being the best of friends. Other themes taken from local stories involved loving the same woman and the secret of hunting. The story was a fable where animals represented human characters. The structure involved a judge before whom the conflict was brought. This enabled the storyteller to become a discussion catalyst after the story was told, for example advocating the viewpoint of the party (lion or dog) that happened to be weakest in the discussion, then possibly siding with the other and possibly advancing new ideas, until all arguments appeared to be discussed and exhausted. The story placed itself within dichotomies 2 (overhunting results in severely reduced animal populations) and 6 (time is linear), which was necessary to build up the argument. Contrary to the first-generation story these positions remain relatively subdued however, and moreover, the story gave explicit space to doubt the overhunting position.

TESTING THE NEW DILEMMA STORY

Method

The story was tested in nine villages in the far North and four villages in the Central Province of Cameroon in 2001. The story was told with the aid of a local animator who had been trained for several days in order to fully master the story, understand the purpose of the debate (i.e. not to choose sides for personal reasons) and be prepared for the possible arguments. The entire debates were taped and fully transcribed the following day. Most storytelling sessions were conducted in a natural setting, starting with a mixed group of at least 20 people except in two villages where the groups were composed of only 10 elders or women exclusively. During all but two of these sessions, other people joined the group during the session, meaning that at the end there were up to 150 people attending. We will describe the results first with a focus on the process and then on the substance of the debates.

Box 1 Example of a dilemma story

The dog and the lion were the best of friends, inseparable friends. They always went together. One day they decided to go to a village to look for a girl. Just before arriving at the village the dog said to the lion: 'Well my friend, we now go to look for the same woman, but you already have a woman, and I am still alone. You should give me that woman and I will give you a surprise.' You should know that the dog was a great hunter; it could always see buffalo from a great distance; it could smell them; it could hear their noise from far away. It could steal up on its prey in perfect silence. So the dog had decided to give this secret of hunting to the lion, as a present for not taking the girl.

They came to the village and spent the night at the chief's house. The next day, they went back home together with the girl. Arriving home, the lion said: 'I leave the girl to you. You give me my present.' The dog took the bottle of special medicine out of its bag, rubbed it and put three drops in the right eye and three drops in the left eye of the lion. The lion opened its eyes, and suddenly it could see and hear a long way. The lion said: 'Really, you have given me the secret of hunting!'

From that day on, they were even better friends. They always went hunting together and every day they returned home with buffalo, elephants and hippos. Both the dog and the lion had a lot of children. Always when they went hunting it was in the territory of the lion. In the beginning the lion did not care because he was so grateful for the dog's present. One day, however, the lion was tired of always receiving the dog. So it said to the dog: 'Listen, dog, from the first day that we are together, we always hunt at my place, what is this all about?' The dog answered: 'Well my friend, since I have learned how to hunt a long time ago, me and my children have almost finished all the animals in our own place. You know that our medicine is very effective, don't you? And now that we are talking about this, in order to avoid that you and me are going to finish all animals in your territory too, it is better you give me the medicine back.'

'What???' said the lion, 'given once is given forever!' The dog said: 'Yes I know, but what else can we do? We cannot go on and finally both die.'

They quarrelled and quarrelled and quarrelled. Finally they decided to go to the court of justice. Arriving there, the judge appeared to be the son of the lion.

The dog said: 'Sir, the lion is finishing everything; he is stupid, he does not know how to control himself.' The lion said: 'The dog wants to keep everything for himself, he has first finished everything in his own place and now he comes to put limits on me.' The judge, who was a lion himself, first wanted to kill the dog but then he realized that this could mean the end of the secret and the medicine. That solution was bad. So what to do? Should he believe what the dog had told him about the risk of finishing all animals? If the lion gave back the medicine it would die of hunger. If it kept the remedy, however, all the animals would be gone and finally the lion would die too. So what should he do?

The debating process

In all sessions the story elicited lively debates, though with varying intensity. Debate started spontaneously after telling the story in all cases but one in which the animator had to personally address some individuals in the audience to elicit a discussion. The latter occurred in a village where people were not used to foreigners and even less to participatory sessions. None of the sessions resulted in consensus except the one session involving only elders. In all other cases, the debate was finally wound up by the animator asking the participants to vote. In some cases the debates restarted after the session. In one village, after finishing the session in the night, a group of young men asked the animator to resume the debate after most participants had left since they 'had not finished yet'. Another village was revisited by the researcher three days after the session for other purposes, only to find that a group of elders was still discussing the story.

In most villages, the opinions expressed at the end of the debate were different from those expressed in the beginning. Apparently, the debate offered a process through which people could learn from each other.

A characteristic moment was, for instance, when a young man said: 'In the beginning we all thought that the lion was right, but after I have listened to what he [another participant] just said, I begin to see that it is rather the dog that is right.'

The role of the animator was important for facilitating the debates. He was often asked, for instance, to give his opinion at various points, which he always refused. Active intervention was sometimes necessary as well. One example was that in most debates, people proposed that if the lion had had to give back the secret of hunting, the dog would have had to give the girl back. This idea then tended to work as a quick-fit solution bypassing the dilemma that the story was designed for. The animator could prevent this by explaining that this solution was impossible because the girl had already grown old. Another pseudo-solution people sometimes came up with was to kill the dog. The animator then stated that this was impossible since the secret of hunting would then also be lost. Many other sideline discussions occurred without the animator being needed to refocus the debate. For instance, one remark was: 'The dog and the gorilla had the same problem in another story, always with marrying a woman. What is this kind of woman two men always fight for?' After discussing

this issue, the debate was brought back to the main focus by the audience itself. In none of these interactions did the silent presence of the (white) researcher appear to play a role.

In all sessions, both the young and old responded to the story and to each other without apparent restrictions, although gender differed in this respect. In the predominantly Islamic groups in the Far North province, women hardly participated in the debates even though usually present in substantial numbers in the audience. In Central Province, which is mainly inhabited by Christians, women participated without restriction. In all villages, people agreed that they had enjoyed the sessions, often asking when the researcher would be coming back again with new stories.

Substance of the debates

Most of the debates started out in favour of the lion and gradually shifted to a more balanced distribution in the final voting. The main argument to support the lion was that it had given the girl in confidence and that the dog was only looking for its own profit. It was simply perceived as unfair that the lion had to give back the secret of hunting. The main argument for supporting the dog was that the dog was much more intelligent than the lion since it understood that something had to be done to avoid problems in the future. In most debates it was stated that it was precisely the experience the dog had had in its own territory that had made it wise.

One argument was sometimes used to support both characters. For instance, the fact that the dog had waited until the lion started to ask questions instead of discussing the problem up front was most often seen as proof that the dog was looking only for its own profit. In two villages however, someone explained that the dog did not have a choice; it was living in an impasse since it had discovered the problem too late. The dog was risking its life when raising the problem, since the lion might become very angry and even kill it. Each time this idea was expressed it evoked compassion and sympathy for the dog. As a result, the debate changed substantially.

The debates not only revealed the arguments for people's opinions, but also several assumptions underlying these arguments. One prominent issue was whether the dog told the truth when suggesting that overhunting would really lead to no animals being left, or whether it was lying in order to reclaim the secret of hunting for its own exclusive use. In general, everybody accepted the idea that animals could disappear in a particular area. However, this did not necessarily imply an irreversible process. Some people came up with the idea that the animals had previously fled to the territory of the lion. Therefore, if the lion and the dog kept on hunting in the lion's territory, the animals would return to the region of the dog. Contrary to this notion of reversibility, an old man stated that he considered it to be inevitable that the world would deteriorate, including the animals decreasing in number, since this was written in the Koran. Consequently, it was no use for people to try to change the course of events.

The idea that the animals would never disappear completely was much more prevalent in Central Province, possibly connected to the somewhat better biodiversity situation there, or to the fact that there had been less influence of conservation NGOs in these villages. In one village, the majority of the audience was of the opinion that it was impossible to exterminate animals since within each species, there are two categories: the 'animals from beneath' and the 'animals from above'. The dog was only able to kill the 'animals from beneath' and could thus never finish them all. Consequently, there was no need to worry about the words of the dog.

In eight of the 13 villages, the debates remained limited to the analysis of the intentions and truths of the positions taken by the two parties, and the people then voted according to their interpretation of justice. In five villages however, the debate went beyond this point and included possible solutions to the problem. In one village, the analysis of intentions was criticized following the remark of an old man that 'It is no coincidence that the dog and the lion are friends. The situation is more complex. There is more to say about the problem although it is just a little story.' To this a younger man responded that 'That is precisely why we have to stop talking like this. We have to find solutions for the future of the animals.' In another village, a young man initiated the search for solutions by cutting short the analysis of intentions, saying that 'We do not know whether the dog is a liar who wants to abuse the lion or whether he is really having the best intentions but anyway we have to solve the problem. If the lion and the dog do not find a solution, they will both die in the end.'

The story itself did not suggest any solution to the dilemma. The alternatives that people came up with as a result of the solution-oriented remarks were therefore all their own. The alternatives were: (1) let the dog and the lion hunt more moderately or more intelligently (four villages), (2) let the chief divide the week: three days for the lion and three days for the dog (four villages), (3) let the chief manage the territory and give part to the lion and part to the dog (two villages), (4) let the lion give back part of his secret instead of the whole secret (one village), (5) let the dog hunt but he has to give part of the revenues to the lion (one village), and (6) let the chief isolate a small area where he can breed the animals (two villages).

These proposals did not differ fundamentally from standard solutions of Western-style conservation. The three days of the week are equivalent to the 'days at sea' of fisheries management (Clay 1996) or the grass gathering days in many protected areas (Straede & Helles 2000). The dog giving part of the revenues to the lion was equivalent to benefit sharing arrangements such as those in CAMPFIRE (Balint & Mashinya 2006). The chief setting aside a small area 'to breed the animals' was related to the idea of protected areas.

The fact that people easily produced these options did not imply automatically that they endorsed them in the final voting, however. Many groups thought it was more important to protect the social order first of all rather than to move to

practical solutions. As one old man said: 'Even if the lion and the dog could divide their hunting time, the dog still has to be punished since he has not treated his friend correctly. So I prefer that the lion keeps his whole territory.'

A final point relates to the 'fable' nature of the story, with the animals representing human characters. In three villages at the end of the discussion, people expressed spontaneously who they thought the lion and the dog stood for. The lion, they all said, represented the Africans. The dog, being the one who had ruined its own territory and was now telling the lion to act otherwise, obviously represented 'the Europeans'. In all cases this observation was used as an argument to support the opinion of the dog.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Storytelling (fictional or non-fictional) is used widely to convey self and group images, values and world views, problems and solutions. In all these cases, the storyteller brings both an issue and a message about that issue to the audience. Our objective, to our knowledge, was unique in that we focused on how to use storytelling to initiate a free discussion, in other words address the question of how to elicit rather than how to convey. In the design of the present story, the storyteller brought an issue to the audience (such as conservation) but not a message. This crucial point implies that further development of storytelling to elicit free discussion on conservation will not profit from existing social scientific literature on storytelling, as in corporate management (see Neuhauser 1993), nursing (see Yoder-Wise & Kowalski 2003) or teaching (see Kainan 1995); in all these fields, the emphasis is on the message. In the more general field of intercultural communication (for instance the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* and the *Journal of Intercultural Communication*) and in intercultural communication courses, no attention is paid to storytelling or conservation (Fantani & Smith 1997). This implies that further development of the method for conservation in co-management settings will have to rely much on the researchers' and practitioners' own experiences. We do not think this is a great hindrance because trials are inexpensive and easy to organize in almost any setting.

As described and discussed in preceding sections, we found that the first-generation story was a success in terms of entertainment value and dilemma form, but also that the power imbalance between conservationists and local people was structured into the story itself. This might have been the cause of the high variability in the intensity of the discussions triggered by the story. Moreover, a number of details needed to be improved, such as the presence of God in the story and the various roles of the animals. Further empirical and theoretical study of storytelling was then used to improve the first-generation story. One aspect was the introduction of an adjudicating third party into the story structure, which largely removed the power imbalance and freed the narrator to also play the role of discussion facilitator. A second aspect was a

greater clarity on what in fact a story was designed to bring into the debate (for example the intrinsic value of nature or the power of nature or the causal linkages between nature and humankind); only one of such issues should be 'opened up' by any story at the time. The resulting new dilemma story elicited more stable and more lively debates than the first-generation story had done. In terms of substance, the need, dilemmas and sometimes the solutions of conservation were debated in depth, without any indication that the conservation point of view was either rejected or endorsed because of the power imbalance between local people and conservation agencies.

The experiences on which the present paper is based are limited. This implies that any researcher or practitioner applying the method will probably encounter surprises and difficulties specific to his/her own region and objectives. One example is that in the present trials, it was only by chance that we discovered that in the Islamic villages, women did not participate as freely as in the Christian ones if the audience was mixed. At the same time, we surmise that many of such difficulties can be surmounted with common sense, for example as here, by organizing separate sessions with women, preferably parallel to those with men, so that intervention of the men is diplomatically prevented.

We conclude that the narration and discussion of fictional dilemma stories potentially enables conservation agencies to elicit free and authentic debate on conservation views and issues with local populations. Field trials have shown that at least in Cameroon, fictional storytelling is a medium that local people (and supra-local researchers) enjoy and easily participate in. The dilemma form of the stories was a natural way to initiate discussion. Improved, second-generation stories addressed a number of minor shortcomings, and most importantly, removed the initial problem that for the initiation of truly open dialogue on conservation issues, stories should make explicit and in dilemma form address only one issue (for example one world-view dichotomy), and other issues should be suppressed rather than positioned implicitly. Moreover, through the introduction of an adjudicating agency in the narrative, the second-generation stories could be formed such that the narrator was liberated to play the role of mediator during the ensuing discussions. In this role, the narrator could help to maintain focus and let all voices be expressed, stimulating free thinking on the problem, and if people desired, on its solutions.

Fictional storytelling appears to be an option worth adding to the repertoire of all conservationists worldwide who desire to discuss conservation issues with communities on a footing that is structurally free of power imbalance and open in substance.

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