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Insight

Rethinking Partnerships with the Aim of Producing Knowledge with Practical Relevance: a Case Study in the Field of Ecological Restoration

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ABSTRACT. Researchers in conservation biology and restoration ecology often work in partnership with local actors to increase the practical relevance of the knowledge they produce. Although an academic mode of knowledge production is essential in research for a better understanding of biological systems, it often fails to produce frameworks and methodologies having practical relevance that can be used in conservation and restoration programs. The involvement of researchers in collective plans of action is supposed to contribute to the production of a more contextualized form of knowledge. In this paper, we report our experience of partnership research in an ecological restoration project. We show that changing our mode of knowledge production to one that produces knowledge having more practical relevance requires a particular spectrum of partners and reflexive communication between all the partners. We advocate the need for participatory approaches that favor collective and reflexive processes of problem finding and problem solving in conservation and restoration projects. Putting such processes into practice is not only a challenge for researchers but also for their partners, and presupposes a profound transformation of their roles.

Key Words: *conservation biology; genetic resources; local seeds; mode of knowledge production; native species; problem-finding; Pyrenees; seed transfer zones; stakeholders*

INTRODUCTION

The conservation and restoration of threatened biological systems has emerged as a major scientific and societal issue during the last decade. The challenge for conservation biologists and restoration ecologists is to produce knowledge that can be effectively implemented when dealing with this issue (Higgs 2005, Robinson 2006). Although the use of an academic mode of knowledge production in research is essential for a better understanding of biological systems, it often fails to produce frameworks and methodologies of practical relevance that can be used in conservation and restoration programs (Geist and Galatowitsch 1999, Gobster and Hull 1999, Robinson 2006, Cabin 2007). Using Rhoades' (1989) example, most scientists may know how potatoes grow but they fail to earn their living growing them as a farmer does. Even when research programs are designed to guide conservation or restoration actions, real-world complexities often limit the operational

relevance of the academic mode of knowledge production (Gobster and Hull 1999, Robinson 2006, Cabin 2007). To increase the practical relevance of their research, more and more conservation biologists and restoration ecologists are collaborating with local actors who know the field. Without this partnership, scientists often fail to grasp the complexity and the specificity of a problem occurring at a given site (Higgs 1997, 2005, Chan et al. 2007). By collaborating with local partners, they can first collectively identify the local problems and then look for pertinent solutions for this given context. Paraphrasing Rhoades (1989), the research questions shift from the academic type—"how do potatoes grow?"—to more complex and transdisciplinary types—"how do we grow potatoes?" Conservation biology (CB) and restoration ecology (RE) paradigms acknowledge this real-world complexity (for CB, see Robinson 2006; for ER, see Choi 2007, Temperton 2007), in which human factors must be explicitly considered (Robertson and Hull 2001).

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