6.2. Human/Community Livelihoods (Alejandro Larriera)

At one time the conservation of wild crocodilians was pursued exclusively through the creation of wildlife refuges or sanctuaries, the imposition of strict bans on wild harvesting, and the belief that closed-cycle captive breeding was the only rational type of use. At that time commercial utilization of wild populations was regarded almost as the first step on the road to extinction. Subsequently, the concept of sustainability came into being, and in the case of many crocodilian species that were historically exploited, it became evident that rational utilization need not affect the status of the population. It was also evident that the real problem was environmental modification through deforestation, drainage of wetlands, or more recently, intensive agriculture. From that moment “the enemy becomes a friend”, and commercial use was recognized as one of the very few effective tools against habitat loss.

The challenge was to change people’s attitudes towards crocodilians, and to give them more “value”. Simply telling the public that crocodilians were “good” for the environment was not enough. People needed more tangible rewards. They got these in several ways. The first step was not to deny simple facts: crocodiles are sometimes dangerous and can be a problem, so extensive educational awareness campaigns encouraged people to treat crocodiles with caution and respect.

It is now evident that sustainable utilization of crocodilians through ranching or hunting, whether alone or combined with other activities, such as ecotourism, does work positively in favour of conservation. Despite the fact that, in general terms, there has always been significant objection to the idea of harvesting wildlife for conservation, and that there are many people who will argue that it doesn't work, actually it has shown to be highly successful in many instances. On the other hand, even those who still harbour hostility towards crocodilians, acknowledge their biological and economic importance, and would not wish to see them disappear. Such is the importance of linking conservation with people (see iied 2011).

Wild product trade involves a set of complex interlinkages between trade, local benefits, and conservation, meaning that knowing how to promote conservation and sustainable livelihoods through trade is often complicated. For example, increasing trade volumes can be positive for conservation where it increases incentives for local people to sustainably manage the resource, or it can be negative for conservation where it drives overexploitation and species decline. Which situation a particular trade context falls into will depend on what management regime and incentives are in place (among other factors). Likewise, regulatory interventions aimed at controlling harvest can be positive for local livelihoods, because they help ensure sustainability and control illegal take, or they can be negative for local benefits because they restrict options for generating income.

Livelihoods is one of the issues on which the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is working [eg CoP16 Doc. 19 (Rev. 1)].