

## **ACTION LEARNING AND PROTECTED AREA GOVERNANCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

Action Learning changes our world view. It prompts us to work together, expands into new contexts and provides solutions in the most unexpected places. This was Mat's on ground recent experience working in Papua New Guinea.

This magnificent country contains a very significant portion of the world's biodiversity, most of which is on customarily owned land and sea. The people are legal custodians, responsible for social, economic and environmental sustainability – goals that are often in tension with each other.

In a predominantly oral culture, it's striking that most of the national government rules and laws are written in hard to read legalese, inaccessible to much of the population. This also applies to managing protected areas. It's no wonder that mainstreaming conservation at the customary level has been tough going.



*Figure 1 Action Learning group held in in Papua New Guinea in April 2019, Morobe Province.*

To counter this problem, the Papua New Guinea Conservation and Environment Protection Authority (CEPA) recently adopted an action learning approach as exemplified by the World Institute for Action Learning.

Four action learning sessions were held with government representatives and community members from three provinces. The task was to clarify the real barriers to effective conservation, establish a locally relevant governance structure for a national protected area system and assist provincial officers to lead.

The group respectfully explored established processes and norms in a safe team environment without being constrained by tomes of written rules and procedures. Deep issues associated with oral culture, tradition and lore surfaced and appropriate actions were identified. It seemed amazing nobody had thought of these actions before.



Figure 2 Action Learning poster presentation in London, July/August 2019. From left to right is Ross Rowe (WIAL Australia), Mohamed Bakarr (Lead Environmental Specialist, Global Environment Facility USA) and Mat Wolnicki (Protected Area Solutions Australia).

Mr James Sabi from CEPA said,

*'Action learning identifies the real problem and action to address it.'*

Another participant said,

*'I am normally a quiet person. Action learning gave me a strong voice to ask important questions and I felt that people were listening.'*

Several months later, the actions from the sessions have been implemented. This has had a positive impact on the way government agencies approach collaborative conservation, is building leadership at the community level and, perhaps, goes some way to neutralizing post-colonial administrative norms.

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