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International researchers partner to look at global issues locally

Five year, \$3 million study will join Canada, Tanzania and Ghana to look at protected areas and issues of poverty and sustainability, in part, on the West Coast

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A group of international researchers are turning their attention to protected areas on the West Coast to look at the linked problems of rural poverty and environmental sustainability.

The Canada-Africa Research and Learning Alliance's five year project was publicly launched at the end of September in Tofino and focuses on protected areas in Tanzania, Ghana and Canada and their impact on adjacent communities.

Vancouver Island University professor Grant Murray is the Canadian lead for the project and said the questions the alliance's research will address are meant to make a difference on the ground.

"We want to understand the justice and equity issues around protected areas," Murray told a group gathered at the Tofino Botanical Gardens. "For whom are things beneficial and for whom are they not?"

Protected areas can marginalize local communities, increase conflicts between humans and wildlife and be economically inequitable, according to Murray. The study is aimed at finding ways to change those circumstances.

In looking at the models of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve and the Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks, as well as parks in Tanzania (like Serengeti National Park) and Ghana (like Moie National Park), the group will compile comparative research on best practices and areas of improvement.

Murray said the project involves four main research questions: how to maximize the flow of benefits from protected areas to local communities, how best to manage human-wildlife interactions, how to mobilize the knowledge gained from research to all interested parties and how to re-conceptualize and improve the way protected areas are managed.

Phil Dearden, head of the geography department at the University of Victoria and researcher with the project, said models for the management of protected areas have been evolving around the world for the last 15 to 20 years.

"They are becoming more focused on local communities and indigenous peoples," Dearden said.

He also said they have changed from the "hard fencing" and "guns and bullets" approach to enforcement toward "social fencing."

"Where the area is recognized so highly for its value to the local people, they in fact provide the protective barrier themselves," Dearden explained. "It's in their own best interest to protect that area."

He said the goal of the research is to cross-fertilize ideas from Africa with ideas from Canada to introduce new practices that will benefit both communities and conservation -- interests that don't have to be at odds.

"There's a lot of inertia and the world's changing very, very quickly. Communities are going to have to change; conservation is going to have to change," he added. "Every scientific report we read tells us it's going much quicker than we thought."

The Canadian government announced in June the project was among four others to receive \$2 million each to research global issues. Another \$1 million was added to the project budget through contributions and in-kind donations.

Murray said about 75 per cent of their resources will go toward the education and training of 11 graduate students who will undertake research in the subject area. Six of the 11 will be from Tanzania and Ghana.

Seventeen senior researchers will also be employed with the project. Kwasi Nsiah Gyabaah from Sunyani Polytechnic in Ghana and Ladislaus Kahana from the College of African Wildlife Management in Tanzania join Murray as the two other project leads.

Other Canadian partners involved with the project include the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), the Tofino Botanical Gardens, the University of Guelph and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO).

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