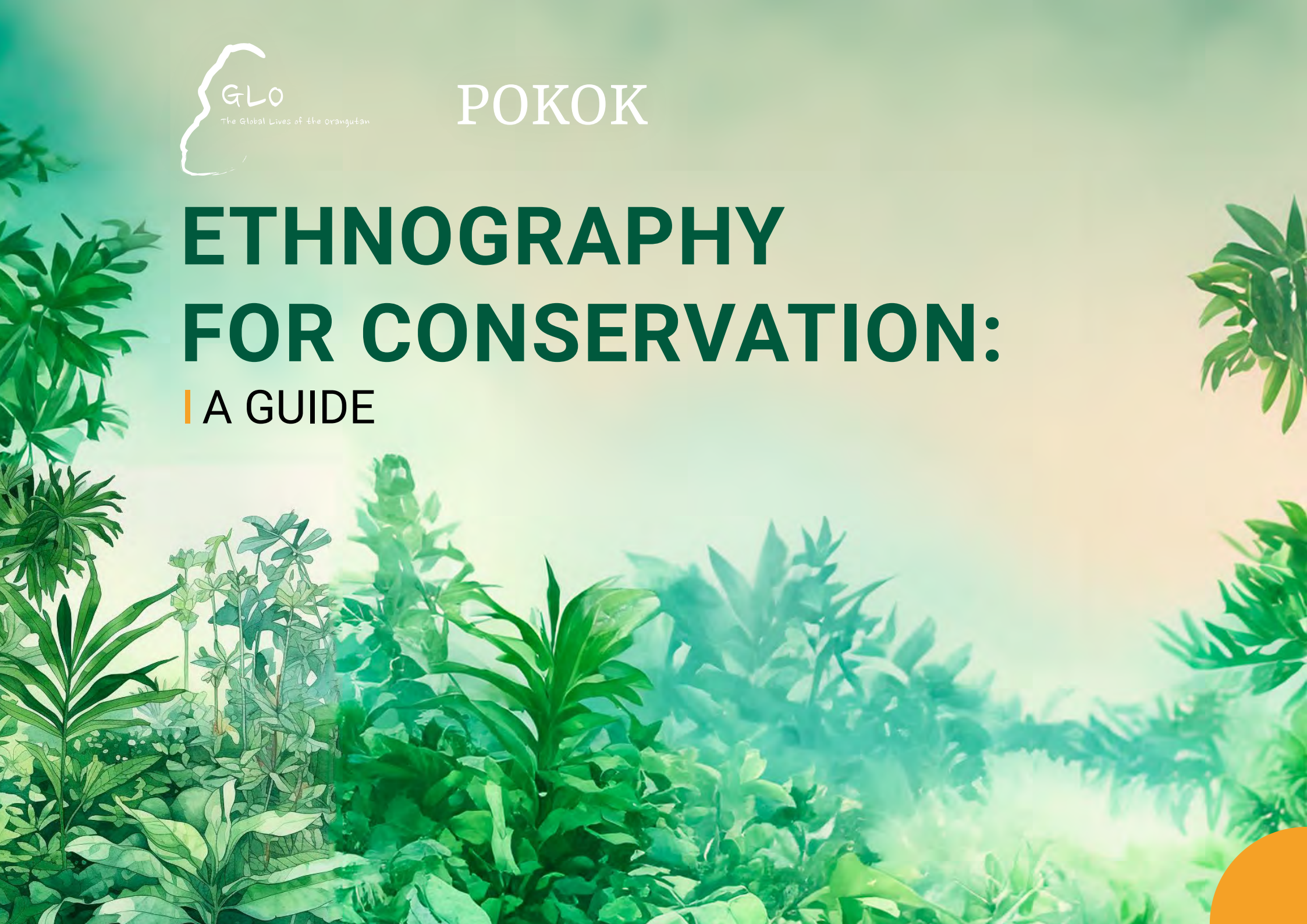




POKOK

ETHNOGRAPHY FOR CONSERVATION: | A GUIDE



This guide is designed as an easy-to-use interactive reference.

The **menu** at the top of the pages can be used to navigate, as well as the **left** and **right arrows** at the bottom of the page.



About this guide

This guide is a practical and quick resource for conservation practitioners in both orangutan and general conservation. It aims to provide a better understanding of the principles and basic methods of ethnographic research, which is a way of understanding people's everyday lives, their perspectives on important issues and their experiences of conservation programmes.

The user can refer to this guide often as they plan, carry out and report on ethnographic research.

Guide sections

1. Why ethnography and how it can help conservation projects
2. Guiding principles for planning social research and community engagement programmes
3. Ethnography overview including:
 - 3.1 Participant observation
 - 3.2 Semi-structured interviews
 - 3.3 Visual or sensory elicitation
 - 3.4 Advice on the analysis of ethnographic data
4. Sharing findings with local communities and funders
5. Resources with links

This guide draws on the experiences of its authors, who are social anthropologists and have carried out fieldwork in Borneo with indigenous communities and orangutan conservation. It includes fictionalised examples and advice based on real-life experiences.

i This guide is a summary of a more detailed toolkit: L. Chua, V. Schreer & P. H. Thung (2022). **Using Ethnographic Research for Social Engagement: A toolkit for orangutan (and other) conservationists.**

1

Why ethnography

Ethnographic research methods can build in-depth understandings of local contexts

Ethnography emphasises the importance of listening, direct experience and building relationships when trying to understand local contexts. This makes for more ethical and constructive engagement with communities and other stakeholders.

Tailoring conservation programmes to the local contexts can boost success

A successful conservation programme balances the demands of local communities, governments and funders. Learning about local cultures, relationships, concerns, politics and worldviews informs bespoke conservation programmes. This leads to greater local support and better outcomes.



Ethnography as a practical tool

Ethnographic research can be applied in several ways to improve a conservation project. These include:



Building up a body of knowledge about an area including local histories, social and political structures, livelihoods, and religious beliefs and practices.



Using this knowledge to design programmes and outreach.



Avoiding misunderstandings or damaging interventions.



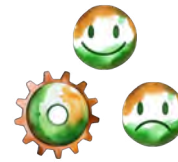
Working through the most appropriate channels and networks to get local buy-in.



Establishing good relationships, maintaining a regular local presence and responding quickly to community needs.

Ethnography as a reflective tool

Ethnography can help conservationists reflect on their own approaches and practices, and provide valuable information for evaluation, monitoring and learning. Examples of questions include:



How do people react to your conservation programmes? What can this tell you about their past experiences and expectations? What might you need to change to address their concerns?



Can you change the conservation project to fit the local context rather than vice versa? Do you need to change or train your conservation team to adapt to local contexts?



What happens after your programme ends? What successes were there? What failures? What changes happened over time? How did your assumptions or constraints shape the outcome? What feedback can you get from participants? What would you do differently next time?



2

Guiding principles

The key to success in any research project or fieldwork is preparation and careful consideration of how to work with different stakeholders in ethical, effective and appropriate ways. This is especially important if the local context is different to the researcher's or if a community has previously had a bad experience with 'outsiders'.

Even villages a few kilometers apart can speak different languages and have very different livelihood strategies, religious practices and internal politics.



Begin with some reflection and planning

- What ethical considerations do you need to think about?
- Who will be your points of contact in the local community?
- How will you introduce yourself and what you are doing?
- What activities do you want to observe or participate in?
- What can you contribute to the local community?
- What are you unable to do?

Start small and focus on process over outcomes

- Recognise that low-key, consistent engagement can be more effective and ethical in the long term.
- Be transparent about your activities and, where possible, align them with local concerns.
- Expect the unexpected.
- Take a flexible and open-ended approach.

Build relationships, mutual respect and trust

- Prioritise good relationships and treat people with respect, not as conservation targets.
- Arrange for the same researcher(s) to stay for a long time or to return frequently to build familiarity.
- Learn some of the local language.
- Work with your community contacts to identify people to talk to and assist with communication/translation.
- Be genuinely curious about people, how they live, and differences of opinion or worldview.
- Take their hopes, concerns and ideas seriously.

Don't underestimate the power of simply 'being there'.



Give something back

- Consider hiring local people as staff or peer researchers (but also consider how the status of these people might influence your interactions).
- Compensate people for their time. Seek local advice on appropriate kinds and rates of compensation.
- Offer practical help, e.g., building, farming, cleaning or teaching English, to give something tangible to the community.

3

Ethnography overview

Ethnography is a qualitative social science research method commonly used in anthropology. It aims to generate an in-depth understanding of people's everyday lives, thoughts and practices.

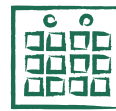


Ethnographic research:



Open-ended

Instead of asking a fixed set of questions or testing a hypothesis, ethnographers are guided by what they discover as their work progresses.



Immersive

Researchers spend long periods of time (sometimes years) with the community, listening, learning, and interacting with a wide range of people.



About depth and engagement

Researchers prioritise detailed, small-scale research to gain insights that would not be captured through survey-based methods.



Emphasises context

Researchers seek to understand how specific social or political pressures, cultural/moral/religious values, past experiences and economic considerations influence actions and decision-making.



Acknowledges interpersonal relationships

Ethnographers accept that the researcher's personal characteristics and how they are perceived matter. For example, a female researcher may have better access to women's conversations than a male.



Reflexive

Fieldwork and analysis lack a clear distinction; researchers continually reflect on their progress and adjust their methods accordingly.

Deciding on the right research method

This guide covers **three ethnographic research methods** with advice on how and when to use them.



Participant observation



What it is

Observing and participating in activities

When it's useful

Getting a picture of people's daily lives, hopes, fears, beliefs and decision-making processes.

Semi-structured interviews



What it is

Planned conversations with individuals or groups.

When it's useful

Initiating conversations or relationships with specific people, or gaining detailed information on a specific topic.

Visual or sensory elicitation



What it is

Asking people to do specific tasks.

When it's useful

Understanding things which are not easily verbalised like feelings, relationships, skills and learned behaviours.

3.1

Ethnography overview: participant observation

This technique involves both observing and participating in everyday life over time. By immersing yourself in daily life, you meet different people and experience a wide variety of activities. This leads to a fuller picture of people's lives, hopes, fears and decision-making processes than that which can be revealed by surveys or focus groups.

Learn about the local community and conventions

- With permission, shadow your host.
- Ask for introductions to neighbours or colleagues, or for permission to walk around.
- Make a rough map of the area.
- Follow people or objects as they move through different contexts, e.g., from village to plantation to forest.
- Document specific aspects of local life such as handicrafts or rituals.

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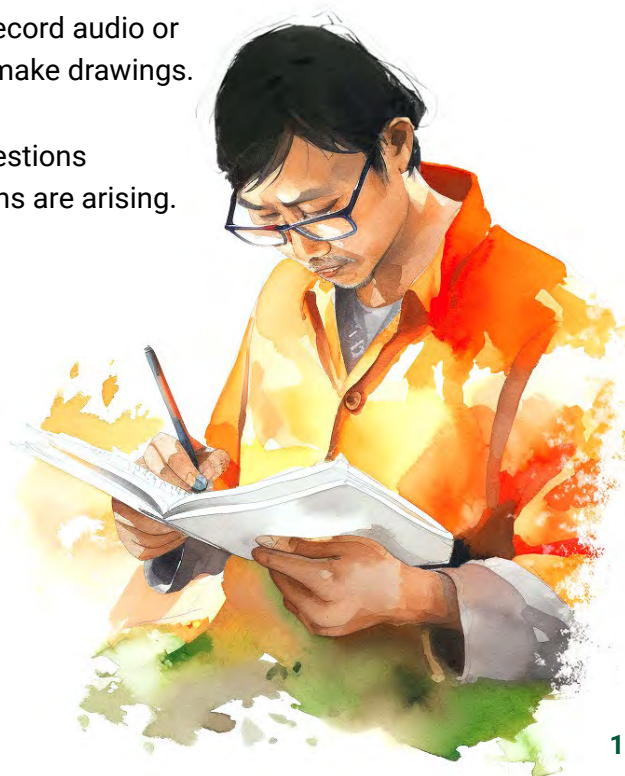


Have a flexible and creative approach

- Follow your host's lead and, if it feels safe and appropriate, accept invitations to do unexpected things.
- Listen to conversations around you for valuable insights or ideas.
- If you come across practices like hunting endangered animals, try not to judge, and instead focus on understanding why it happens and what it means to local people.

Record and reflect

- Set aside some time every day to reflect on what you have experienced.
- Write down key words and sentences, conversations and patterns.
- Collect stories, anecdotes and jokes as they may provide more candid insights.
- If it's acceptable and safe, record audio or video, take photographs or make drawings.
- Reflect on your research questions and consider if new questions are arising.



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Questions to reflect on



Who lives here? Does this change over time (e.g., seasonally)? What are the gender and age patterns?



How do people relate to each other? How do they deal with disputes, good news, uncertainty, etc?



What styles of communication are used? How does information travel? Who is most influential?



Is there a gap between what people say and what they do? Are there conventions which are not easily spoken about?



Things that don't quite fit can tell us a lot about 'normal' life in a place and how locals might react to change.



3.2

Ethnography overview: semi-structured interviews

This technique involves having conversations with individuals or groups around a specific topic with a combination of structure, fluidity and improvisation. This is especially useful for obtaining detailed information about specific topics and for building up relations with specific people.

Be clear about consent

- Tell your interviewee how you plan to use the material.
- If it is not possible to get written consent, record verbal consent or make a note.
- If a sensitive topic comes up or the interviewee seems upset, check they are happy for you to continue and/or refer to that part of the conversation.
- Remember interviewees can withdraw consent at any time, even after the interview is finished.

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Preparing for your conversation

- Get the setting right – meet in a suitable space.
- Consider confidentiality, especially for sensitive topics, and if you might need to meet privately.
- Allow enough time, even if that means meeting multiple times.
- Prepare your questions in advance. Your own research questions will guide your thinking, but you probably won't ask these directly. Articulate your questions in a way that makes sense to the interviewee.
- Plan some prompts and pickups, such as: What do you mean? Are your crops ripe yet? Did you hear about...? I saw...in the village this morning.
- Adapt your style to the context of the interview which may be relaxed or more formal.



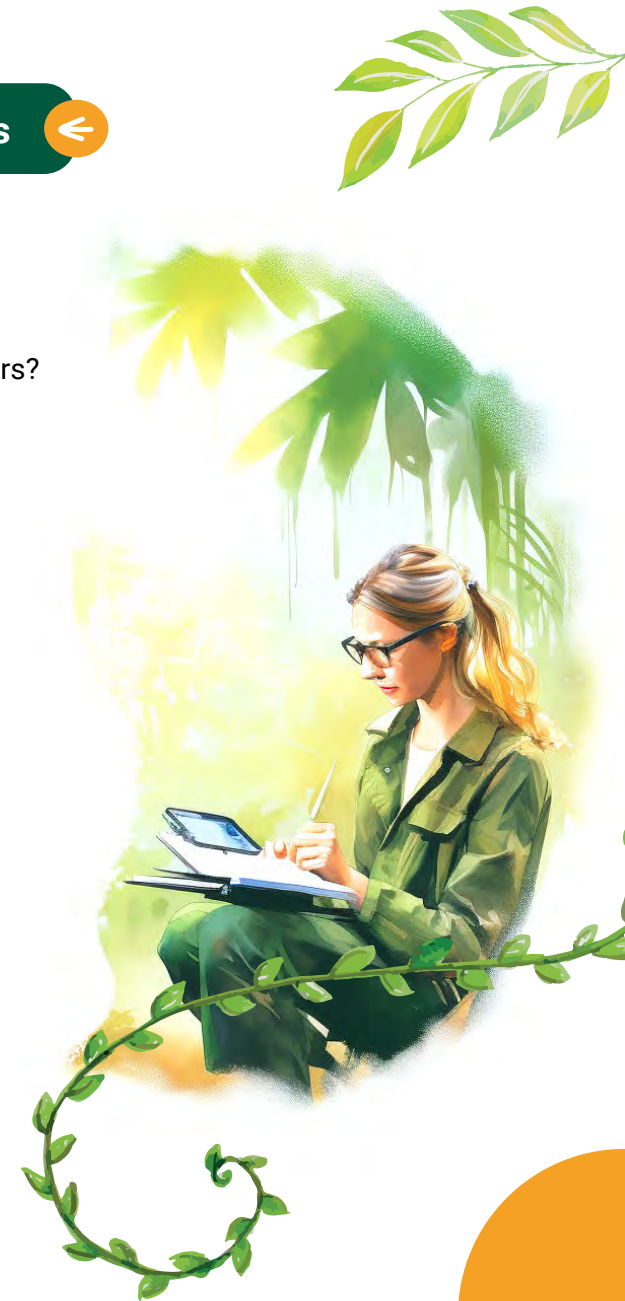
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Listen and learn

- Start your conversation with simple general questions.
- Remember some people will need more prompting to talk.
- Be an active listener.
- If your interviewee says something you disagree with, ask them follow-up questions.
- Be prepared to improvise if interesting new topics are introduced by your interviewee.
- Don't take everything at face value. Consider that there might be a hidden meaning or motive.
- If the interview goes off track perhaps allow the conversation to unfold rather than trying to get it back on track.

Ideas for questions

- How have things changed in recent years?
- Has anything affected your livelihood?
- How does this make you feel?
- Why do you do it this way?
- What do you mean?
- Did you hear about...?
- Tell me about the history of the village.
- Why is this important to you?



3.3

Ethnography overview: visual or sensory elicitation

Visual or sensory elicitation helps us to understand things which are not easily verbalised, including feelings, relationships, skills and learned behaviours. This is more directed than observation as the researcher will ask the participant to do something specific. However, it gives the participant more autonomy and may be less intimidating than an interview.

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Some types of elicitation exercises:

Commentators



Description

Give participants images or objects and ask them to comment on or sort them, with or without further questions.

Examples

Sorting photographs of animals or plants, discussing maps and land boundaries.

Creators



Description

Give participants prompts or stimuli and ask them to draw, record or enact their understanding of it.

Examples

Drawing maps or illustrations, taking photographs, making something, gathering objects.

Collaborators



Description

Do a specific task together, with you asking questions or giving prompts.

Examples

Farming, fishing, crafts, walking around the village or to an ancestral site.

Planning for elicitation

- Exercises can be done with individuals or groups or both. Group dynamics can reveal interesting information or stories.
- Exercises should have clear instructions, goals, start and end points. Consider providing an example of what you hope the final product will be.
- Be ready to adapt the exercise to the participants' responses as you may get unexpected insights.

Making the invisible visible

- Be alert for previously unnoticed details, patterns, stories and memories.
- Notice participants' body language. The way they handle certain objects or images can reveal unspoken emotions.
- The differences between the ways participants draw, discuss or classify information and official maps, narratives or taxonomies may help explain tensions.

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Acting with integrity

- Consider whether the exercises could be mutually beneficial, e.g., compiling stories to create a local history or displaying drawings in an exhibition.
- Be mindful of ethical or practical problems, e.g., photographing ritual objects may be considered taboo, or land disputes may underpin reluctance to discuss maps.



3.4

Analysis

Analysing ethnographic data involves simultaneously representing existing realities whilst also suggesting new connections, comparisons and interpretations.

Handling ethnographic data and drawing

Ethnographic research data can include many different formats such as fieldnotes, transcripts, reflections and pictures, and potentially insights from many different researchers.

- Start analysing while you are in the field and use the findings to inform the research as it happens.
- Let the data drive the questions rather than trying to make the information fit a preconceived hypothesis.
- Identify recurring themes. Qualitative data analysis software like NVIVO and MAXQDA can be useful.
- Consider different viewpoints and how these might be shaped by factors such as status, gender, age, etc.

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Triangulation

Comparing evidence from different sources.

Respondent verification

Asking participants for feedback on the validity of your conclusions.



- Compare specific local observations with regional or national trends/contexts to identify similarities and differences.
- Try to place observations within their historical context, drawing on both written sources and things you have seen or heard.
- Use triangulation and respondent verification (see above) to make your conclusions more robust.



4

Sharing findings

Sharing your findings with research participants

Sharing some of your findings with participants acknowledges their time and input. But think carefully before you give participants or their representative (e.g., village leader or community organisation) copies of your official reports, which may contain sensitive information or be irrelevant or hard to understand.

Alternatives to formal reports/publications

1. Create a more accessible report written in simple language with case studies and visual aids.
2. Consider whether another form of output would be more valuable to the community, e.g.:
 - a collection of oral histories, myths or local place names
 - a record of specific skills, e.g., weaving
 - photographs or recordings of special events

? *Could sharing your findings have unintended consequences? For example, there may be different versions of community histories or land boundaries. Presenting one version as 'fact' may exacerbate existing conflicts within the community.*



Sharing your findings with organisations and funders

There is a growing agreement that qualitative data is indispensable for understanding social aspects of conservation and designing conservation projects. But to be valuable, ethnographic insights need to be communicated clearly, accurately and persuasively.



Establish credibility



Ethnographic insights are subjective and partial but that doesn't mean they are not credible. Establishing credibility means showing why your team of researchers are well-positioned to address these subjects and explaining exactly how they acquired their insights.

Differentiate between analysis and evidence



Ethnography often deals with multiple, conflicting interpretations of reality. It is important to distinguish between your own analysis and the views of people you have spoken to.



Include visuals



Diagrams, figures and pictures can make information easier to grasp. They can also help the readers without direct experience visualise the scene and the people involved.

Use stories with context



Evocative descriptions or stories help convey a point, but make sure to analyse and draw out their implications rather than just recounting them. The circumstances of a story are also crucial (e.g., location, participants, intentions, history).

5

Resources

This guide is part of a wider set of resources to help conservationists use ethnographic research methods to enhance their programmes.



Visual summary

A case study from our research that demonstrates the complexities of orangutan conservation and the importance of juggling different perspectives and interests. Based on the academic paper: L. Chua, H. Fair, V. Schreer, A. Stępień & P. H. Thung (2021) [“Only the orangutans get a life jacket” Uncommoning responsibility in a global conservation nexus](#), *American Ethnologist*, Vol 48, Issue 4, pp. 370-385.

Toolkit

This guide is a summary of a toolkit which contains more details and case studies: L. Chua, V. Schreer & P. H. Thung (2022). [Using Ethnographic Research for Social Engagement: A toolkit for orangutan \(and other\) conservationists](#)



Comics

Six fictionalised scenarios based on our research that shed light on the social issues and complications that can arise in conservationists' engagement with local communities:

1. Spectators or collaborators? The forest is home, too
2. Failed snapshots: Adapting to an ever-shifting landscape
3. Eyes and ears: The risks of losing contact
4. Friend or foe: Different views of orangutans
5. Trust is key: Addressing local concerns
6. Hidden expertise: Bridging gaps in conservation

These can be used as talking points in social research/ ethnographic training workshops to help conservationists think ethnographically about their work.

Our research

[The Global Lives of the Orangutan](#) (2018-23) - A Multi-Sited Ethnography of Orangutan Conservation

[POKOK](#) (2017-22) - Mitigating Human-Orangutan Conflict through Ethnography



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