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Overarching research question: Under what conditions are community-based biodiversity sanctuaries socially and operationally sustainable?

My research takes as its broad context two global trends. The first is a growing concern about human-induced losses of biodiversity. The second is a growing recognition of the rights and the potential contribution of non-government, community-based groups in the management of biodiversity.

Community-based natural resource management is described in the international literature as a new paradigm, the key features of which include the devolution of protected area management, a greater emphasis on bottom-up or community-driven conservation, and a growing interest in the active restoration of biodiversity. Research shows that the implementation of this paradigm in both developed and developing countries has had mixed success in achieving its social and environmental promise. One of the major challenges is the achievement of long-term sustainability, a challenge that has ecological, social and economic components.

The specific context for my research is New Zealand, where the past decade has seen a rapid growth in the number of significant New Zealand biodiversity projects that entail high levels of community involvement. I am particularly interested in the social and operational sustainability of fenced, pest-free sanctuaries that are aiming to protect and restore indigenous forest ecosystems.

My social science research takes a case study approach and will be entirely qualitative, the primary source of data being interviews with key personnel. I have chosen six case study sites; all are fenced sanctuaries of at least 100 hectares in size and managed (solely or within a co-management agreement) by charitable community organisations formed specifically for that purpose. Initial scoping visits have been made to all six sites; gathering of data through in-depth interviews has just commenced. I have completed the first year of a three-year project.