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# Conservation, Human Rights, and Poverty Reduction

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Recent exchanges in *Oryx* and *Conservation Biology* reveal considerable discomfort about the relationships between conservation, human rights, and development needs (Sanderson & Redford 2003; Brockington & Schmidt-Soltau 2004; Price et al. 2004; Romero & Andrade 2004). The former concerned the problems of combining poverty reduction with conservation priorities. The latter, anticipating an angrier exchange in *World Watch* (Chapin 2004; Seligmann et al. 2005), revolved around the potential of international conservation NGOs to neglect local people's needs.

This discomfort is unproductive because of its disconnections. Compare, for example, Brosius and Terborgh's perceptions of the World Parks Congress (Brosius 2004; Terborgh 2004). Or try to find arenas for constructive engagement between the writings of Brandon et al. (1998) and those of Brechin et al. (2003). Conversely, attempts to find common ground can result in platitudes that fail to confront real problems facing protected areas (e.g., Scherl et al. 2004). Fortunately, an impasse has not been reached, but conservation does need some new directions. Here we make three observations that may generate productive discussion.

First, there is an extraordinary dearth of good information about the social impacts of protected areas. Protected areas have expanded threefold in recent years, and the stricter category 1–4 protected areas now number some 49,000 and cover 6% of the land surface of the planet. One should expect this to have involved some evictions. Yet when two of us recently reviewed as much literature on protected-area displacements as we could, we found just under 250 books and papers containing information on just over 150 protected areas (D.B. & J.I., unpublished data). Most reports merely mentioned displacement, exploring none of the details. This dearth of information is

at the heart of the current controversies surrounding conservation evictions because different sides are frequently generalizing from only a handful of cases.

The importance of this issue is recognized, with the last Conference of the Parties of the Convention of Biodiversity calling for an assessment of “the economic and sociocultural costs and impacts arising from the establishment and maintenance of protected areas” (CBD COP 7 2004). But the conservation community has yet to find the political will to pursue it. Assessing protected areas' social impacts is perceived as hostile to conservation. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) secretary general observed in a meeting at the 2004 World Conservation Congress that a proposed global assessment of the social impacts of conservation was unlikely to receive support within IUCN programs because powerful groups within the IUCN feared that “the results might be used against conservation itself.”

Understanding conservation-induced displacement is an important concern, not because of what has happened but because of what will. Many protected areas are yet to be cleared of human residents. Available reports suggest that between 50% and 100% of stricter protected areas in South America and Asia are used or occupied by people (Kothari et al. 1989; Amend & Amend 1995; Bruner et al. 2001; Rao et al. 2002; Bedunah & Schmidt 2004). Much of the occupancy and use of resources is illegal, which means that as legislation and enforcement tightens, millions of environmental refugees could be created (Geisler & de Sousa 2001). Recent reports from India, for example, suggest that nearly 4 million people face eviction following amendments to protected-area policy (Kothari 2004). One of conservation's severest forthcoming challenges is how to deal with this *portending* displacement to be carried out in nature's name.

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Second, conservationists need to be wary of an exclusive focus on indigenous peoples. We thoroughly support policies that advance indigenous peoples' rights and needs. Indigenous people have experienced the brunt of modernity's misfortunes. They have been particularly hard hit by the impacts of protected areas and conservation policy. Support for indigenous peoples' rights is fundamental for advancing human rights. Conservationists, however, must not allow their concern for indigenous rights to obscure the experiences of nonindigenous peoples, which can be just as serious. Reports that focus only on indigenous people are not representative of the broader concerns, especially in countries where nonindigenous groups are as impoverished as indigenous ones (cf. Nelson & Hossack 2003; Chapin 2004).

We also need to be mindful of the politics of indigeneity. Nongovernmental organizations, local and international, can represent indigenous peoples in problematic ways while consuming funds as overheads. It is difficult for indigenous groups to acquire the requisite official recognition. Recognition requires access to passports, political patronage, and the policy-making elite, which only a few can acquire (Conklin & Graham 1995; Igoe 2004). Attention to indigenous peoples can marginalize the nonindigenous. For example, popular concern for pastoralists evicted from the Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania has focused on the indigenous Maasai and Parakuyo peoples to the exclusion of nonindigenous groups, who have a longer history of residence in the area (Brockington 2002).

This problem is part of a deeper difficulty in current and future conflicts over protected areas. Whether these disputes result in stronger conservation fortresses or devolved collaborations, one can be sure that they will contain a "myriad of marginalizations and inequalities enforced on smaller and smaller scales" (Brockington 2003). Understanding of how protected areas or community conservation works depends on understanding the ways differences in gender, class, ethnicity, and identity structure the distribution of costs and benefits.

Finally, it will be vital to understand the ecologies of coexistence, or what Rosenzweig (2003) refers to as "reconciliation ecology." Decisions to evict people, or restrict their access to resources, should be governed by pragmatic ecological considerations rather than ideals of wilderness. Yet for some conservationists it is the wilderness ideal that really matters. Strictly protected areas containing people are anathema. In many countries national parks are envisaged as places where rural livelihoods do not belong. In these contexts, people in parks are a category error. But it is an invidious one. It fosters antagonisms: there are several cases of animals and forests being deliberately destroyed to avert planned protection (Brandon 1998). The category error also threatens degradation because displaced rural livelihoods can cause considerable environmental problems (Schmidt-Soltau 2005). Fi-

nally, it ignores local conservation initiatives; rural groups all over the world set aside places in which they restrict their own resource use and residence.

If we deny this category error by accepting that people and nature can coexist in ways that are worth protecting, then we need to answer the following questions: What are the impacts of current human use on the landscape and different taxa? What are the long-term trends of patterns of human resource use? Will currently benign forms of use continue? How can coexistence with diverse aspects of nature be promoted?

Ecologists and social scientists both need to contribute answers here, the former because coexistence is fundamentally an ecological question and the latter because the complexities of human society demand a thorough understanding of local politics, economics, and society. We suspect, however, that assessments of ecology are more urgently needed, particularly at smaller scales. A great many assessments of community conservation schemes have analyzed the distribution of benefits to people, but relatively few also analyze their impact on nature and biodiversity (Magome & Fabricius 2004). Success for people does not necessarily mean success for nature.

Some of the most interesting examples of the kind of science we are talking about have been published in the pages of this journal. Studies of the American West (Curtin 2002; Maestas et al. 2003), Amazonian agroforestry (Anderson et al. 1995), the conservation of Central Asian snow leopards (Mishra et al. 2003), and community forestry in Mexico (Bray et al. 2003) are but a few of the valuable contributions in this field. If these types of studies are coupled with research into the social, economic, and institutional dynamics of coexistence, then conservationists would be in a much stronger position to understand how coexistence can be promoted. For example, Bray et al.'s writings on Mexican forestry are powerfully elucidated by Klooster's work on the same (Klooster 2000), and the conservation of Mongolian snow leopards needs to consider the dynamics of Mongolian pastoralism (Bedunah & Schmidt 2004).

The ecologies and social impacts of coexistence are most important because this is an issue that extends far beyond the boundaries of protected areas. Six percent of the world is, after all, not very much from the perspective of conservation on a global scale. The ultimate challenge facing conservationists today is not only to reconcile errors of the past but also to determine how to shape human interactions with nature in landscapes of which people are a part.

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