No Roads, Only Directions

Kent H. Redford and Steven E. Sanderson

AN OLD SAYING about Russia says that it is a country with no roads, only directions. This punch line is uncomfortably apt for the most recent dilemma facing protected areas. Born to save nature as a public good these expressions of humanity's desire have become truly contested terrain in fact as well as in the latest of a set of critiques. This situation, laid out in the thoughtful review by Rangarajan and Shahabuddin (this issue), hinges on the competing moral positions of those defending the nature found in protected areas and those defending the rights of people living in the same areas. The truly tortured nature of the current situation is that there is no obvious, global solution and little positive experience on which to base even local solutions. There is no scarcity of those who would impose their own particular solutions on the willing and the unwilling – that is, to propose a new set of directions into areas that have no roads. The predictable result is to discourage or overwhelm those trying to develop maps and build roads, or, even worse, to build detours around the routes that have yet to be tested.

The situation described by Rangarajan and Shahabuddin (this issue) for India is found throughout the world – even in the US, where recent coverage of a case in North Carolina, documents the complaints of former residents of a National Park required to leave, currently seeking redress. A growing chorus of concern surrounds the pattern of forcible removal of people from areas gazetted as protected areas in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as in many parts of the more developed world. Despite the flowering concern and reporting about these cases, however, little energy seems to be devoted to systematic treatment or even documentation of the extent and nature of dis-

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placement of people by protected areas (Brockington et al. 2006). So, despite many declarations about the relationship between people and wildlife, little systematic evidence is brought to bear. The vicissitudes of history are invoked instead, as are political positions for or against local communities, tribal peoples, government agents, development practitioners and conservationists.

There is no doubt that displacement caused by park establishment has taken place, but there is less evidence that this is a systematic and widespread problem. Even in those cases of protected areas which are not supposed to have human inhabitants, it is not clear to what extent effective enforcement has caused their displacement. Zealots who oppose protected areas politically have used the issue of displacement to amplify their critiques, attempting to buttress value-based arguments with suspect data and ill-founded extrapolation. This has only served to cause some protected area advocates to harden their positions against human intrusion on strict protection, while simultaneously, and paradoxically, dismissing the entire argument developed by their critics based on the easily-identified flaws in their arguments. This is unfortunate, especially since conservationists and social advocates alike must share concern for human rights and well-being in pursuit of conservation.

Part of the power of the current argument is the dramatic reversal of the origin myth of national parks on which it is built. There is little argument that the modern antecedent for national parks is Yellowstone National Park in the US. Many have proudly pointed to the important role this park has played in inspiring and empowering the creation of the modern park system throughout the world. However, in recent years, some authors have pointed out that indigenous people were expelled in order to create Yellowstone, turning this creation myth into a powerful critique of the extent to which parks designed to protect nature were built on the backs of people evicted from those areas said to be natural.

Notwithstanding the current trend towards justifying conservation in economic terms, the durable power of nature conservation is built on arguments concerning the responsibilities and ethical obligations of the human species towards nature. By taking a moral high ground, conservation sets for itself a high standard for behaviour, lest it be vulnerable to charges of immoral behaviour – just the charges that are brought about when displacement occurs. By virtue of the fact that poor people are more likely to be displaced from protected areas, ignoring their economic well-being brings conservationists into a particularly harsh light.

In their review, Rangarajan and Shahabuddin (this issue) lay out a variety of important questions currently being faced in India, the rural settings of which are ideally configured to highlight the contrasting claims of nature and rural people. As the authors point out, the current argument marks a new and vitally important mixing zone between the social and natural sciences and the entities valued by each. Government officials disparage local peoples and know little about their lives or hopes. Relocation programmes are usually nei-

ther consultative nor well-justified by experience or design (though there are a few exceptions). The poor often find themselves to be poorer, additionally burdened by accusations of having degraded landscapes that have borne the weight of global transformations far more than the poor gleanings of park dwellers.

Human society, to our regret, is poorly equipped to adjudicate this mix. We do not have an ethical court to evaluate the rights of tigers against the rights of resident peoples. Who in the conversation about the last tiger lost in the Sariska Tiger Reserve assigns the same blame to princely hunters of the twentieth century as to the poacher of the last tiger in the twenty-first?

Nor does our political, economic, or ethical system assign high values to the protection of the biosphere upon which we depend. Not surprising, then, that the blunt instrument of politics is dragged out to hammer away at ideologies and enemies. The most obvious results are bruises and injuries, rather than corrections to bad practice. Social scientists are accused of negligence for not being a more powerful presence in the debate. Biologists are faulted for their preservationist—or at least conservationist—biases. Interdisciplinarity—the eternal will o' the wisp of conservation—is gone missing, though it always is indicted in absentia.

Ultimately, though, the struggles of the poor and the endangered in India or elsewhere are not to be cured by reconciling academic disciplines. The source for addressing our deeply contested differences is directly in front of us: Conservation can help change the current loggerhead. For too long conservationists have failed to identify clearly what they want to achieve at the places where protected areas are created and to build the political and social bases to legitimate those goals. In the absence of a clear articulation of conservation targets and the conditions in which those targets are hoped to be maintained, it is impossible to determine if local human populations are engaged in activities that threaten the achievement of conservation goals – the authors document several of these cases. Fortunately, modern conservation planning has recognised this fact and organisations like the Wildlife Conservation Society are developing conservation planning tools that make explicit the conservation targets, the threats to these targets, and the sources of these threats. These conceptual models create a framework for evaluating the relative importance of the actions of people living in or near a park and for determining to what extent displacement should even be considered.

Another positive fact is the existence of a range of categories of protected areas in which humans and their activities are specifically included, as well as those where they are not. Despite the fact that such human-inclusive areas make up a great share of the total terrestrial area under IUCN classification as protected areas, the current rhetorical debate does not recognise this diversity of categories and the potential it holds to reframe the conversation. Instead, the full richness inherent within the IUCN protected area categories have been

elided to allow for a caricaturised critique of parks (Redford et al. 2006). There is more to protected areas than just parks.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that conservationists now recognise the importance of conservation outside of protected areas, which certainly will make the rural dweller part of the solution for preserving wildlife and ecosystems. Protecting a limited number of no-use protected areas in the face of global environmental change is no strategy at all, a fact that will force the interdisciplinary engagement we all have wanted to see in conservation and human development.

How can we be sure that conservation and resource use choices we make today will not be rued by future generations? In the past people only distantly interacting with dominant cultures were free to be citizens of only one single place – a true homeland. This is no longer the case, as citizenship is now aggressively multiscalar. No one is allowed simply to be part of one place, but is swept up, willing or unwilling, knowing or unknowing, into a world in which forces far away affect life at the most local scale. Whether through horizontal transport of pathogens across continents, the appearance of new urban water users in the remotest countryside, or the harvesting of local wildlife for the global bushmeat trade, local people are buffeted by the processes of globalisation. What has not happened, of course, is for that dependence to be turned into a theory and practice of multiple citizenship.

Displacement of humans has been part of human history since modern humans displaced Neanderthals. It has always been justified by the dominant, and suffered by the weak. But displacement of people by people has also almost always been accompanied by displacement of nature. Both the 'ecosystem people' of today and the large remaining parts of nature have become flotsam and jetsam on the drift line of modern society. What is most tragic about this situation is that these two dependent variables are the backbone of human life: how humans interact with their biotic environment. To relegate that great human question to a contrived battle of ideologies is a disservice to humanity and nature. To remedy this, more careful study is required at the scale where humans and wildlife live out their life courses, not in the abstractions that guide natural and social science disciplines. Such careful analysis must be put in the service of governments and institutions of civil society, and somehow in the course of that transmission, we must secure the guarantees of public servants and private actors alike that they will act with the respect and care due to the world's remaining wildlife and their human cohabitants in the countryside.

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