

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Conservation Policy and the Commons, by Moira Moeliono

Beyond Conservation: Embedding Parks in Development

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Conservation has come a long way. From the simple ‘fence and fine’ approach of the Yellowstone model of over a century ago, the present state-of-the-art in conservation is much more complex. Whereas the function of protected areas was previously seen as preserving a piece of pristine wilderness from human influence, they are now a means for people to learn to live within nature. Today’s parks are expected to satisfy multiple objectives, including *inter alia* protecting charismatic species, biodiversity, the livelihoods of local people, the flow of ecosystems services. The art and science of conservation has had to evolve. As the Yellowstone model was exported to developing countries, it simply didn’t work. As Moeliono correctly points out, new parks were established without an understanding of how people interact with park resources. By cutting off their *de facto* rights of access and use to such resources, the ‘fence and fine’ approach to conservation undermined existing collective action as people no longer had a vested interest in sustainability. Thus, the great discovery in the latter decades of the 20th century was that people matter, that ecological systems were intimately tied to social systems. This realization inspired alternative models, such as the biosphere reserve, in which different geographic zones are used to create a gradient from controlled use to strict conservation of natural resources. Nonetheless, such models still tend to focus inward and relies on centralized planning, largely ignoring the incentives that shape the people’s actions and wider processes within which parks are embedded.

In the 21st century, protected areas must now be seen as active experiments in sustainable development. Rather than saving part of nature from development, parks should be role models for how development could be elsewhere. Rather than viewing the people who live in or near parks as subjects, to be managed through conservation programs, they can be agents of their own development and partners in management. The geographical space of protected areas must be associated with a social space within which different stakeholders are engaged in a process of deliberative dialogue regarding the future of park, its resources and their individual roles in that future. Rather than parks becoming private property or devolving into an open access, the existence of such a social space opens opportunities for stakeholders to negotiate new arrangements to share power and responsibilities. In Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula, the Actanchuleb reserve on the northern coast was established by local fishers and lies outside the formal government protected areas; meanwhile on the western coast, local people pressured government to accept a consultative council for the Terminos Lagoon Protected Area. Such experiments emerge from a process of dialogue over time regarding values, interests, needs and vision. Rather than institutionalizing a particular arrangement, such as co-management board, what matters is a sustained process of social learning.

To be successful social learning requires unpacking issues of power and representation. As Moeliono states ‘conservation by and for whom?’ Successful parks go beyond the token participation of few indigenous and NGOs representatives. They seek to transform the incentives faced by different stakeholders and the relationships among them. At the heart of protected area management is the question of ‘who has the power to do what, and on behalf of whom?’ The exercise of power is more than property rights. The ability to exercise power also depends on being heard, influencing the vision and mandate of

management, taking on and fulfilling responsibilities, and holding others accountable. Power is defined in comparison to other stakeholders. One stakeholder's power depends on their relationship with others. Park managers thus need to be at least as knowledgeable of the social networks within which parks exist as they are of ecosystems dynamics. Without such knowledge, well intended attempts at participation can simply reproduce existing power inequities rather than empower local people to make their own decisions.

The power of ideas depends on how they are shared. At a basic level, establishing and running a protected area is a matter of implementing policy, of translating the idea of conservation into practice. Social learning requires identifying key stakeholders at an early stage and engaging them over time. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has a five-year corporate plan to describe future actions, not unlike a protected area management plan. In reviewing that planning process, I learned that managers and staff remembered the corporate plan more on the basis their memories of the in person discussions and consultations, rather than viewing the final text of the written document. Whereas I initially perceived the final written document as the key outcome of the planning process, I came to appreciate that the most valuable outcome was how the ideas included in it were shared within the organization. Enhancing practice relied more on in-person learning, than simply assuming staff would read the written document. Conservation is more than capturing expert knowledge in designing rules or writing management plans. Whether in designing policy or conducting research, the practice of protected areas depends on sharing ideas.

Finally, today's parks need to look outwards and connect to the world beyond their boundaries. Protected areas can no longer be seen as isolated islands of conservation in a sea of development. In biophysical and social terms, parks are embedded in wider processes at different scales. Designing parks becomes even more complex when considering the need to 'climate proof' parks and adapt as variability shifts biomes and forces species to migrate. Additionally, wider social and economic processes such as increasing labor migration, regional trade agreements and urbanization all exert additional pressures on protected areas. Once 'protected' by their remote location, today's parks faces pressures such as the emigration of local youth, markets hungry for natural resources, and the demands for water from thirsty cities. Protected areas must be seen not *a part from*, but *as part of* the wider world, embedded in development rather than immune to it.

This does not mean that there is no future for conservation. Instead conservationists must learn new skills and be more creative than ever. Acknowledging that parks are embedded in development opens new opportunities for research. For protected areas to be experiments in sustainable development requires: unpacking issues of power, new strategies for sharing ideas, and looking outwards to the world beyond park boundaries. In such an agenda, there is very much a role for new research that engages questions of how effectively do parks operate? For what purposes? How do they adapt to external pressures? And how can conservation policy be more inclusive? Such critical reflection on the state-of-the-art in conservation can inspire and set an example for future directions protected area policy and practice.

For Further Reading:

Bulkeley, H. and A. Mol (2003) Participation and environmental governance: consensus, ambivalence and debate *Environmental Values* 12:143-154.

Chuenpagdee, R.; J. Fraga and J. Euán-Avila (2002) Progressing Toward Comanagement Through Participatory Research *Society & Natural Resources* 17(2):147-161.

Sithole, B. (2002) *Where the power lies: multiple stakeholder politics over natural resources*. CIFOR, Indonesia.

Wells, M. and K. Brandon. (1992). *People and parks: linking protected area management with local communities*. Washington, DC, World Bank, World Wildlife Fund and US AID.

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