The Politics of Specificity and Generalisation in Conservation Matters

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In their article, 'Conservation as if Biological Diversity Matters,' the authors ask a question that has plagued conservation and development activists and scholars for decades now: 'How . . . can [the conflict between sustainable use and preservationist approaches to conservation] be eliminated, or at least minimised to enable a more effective conservation?' And, in the time-honoured way of people committed to a particular solution who try to tackle this thorny question, they never deliver any realisable answers. Their own arguments, not to mention the general tone of the analysis, reveal the article as less a balanced examination of two perspectives and more a plea for the preservationist side.

As a political ecologist with a bias towards more inclusive solutions to 'the conservation problem', I attempt a partial response here to what I see as some of the major flaws in the authors' discussion. It is noteworthy that these authors, unlike many others who have preceded them in similar efforts, have a greater grasp on some critiques of conservation that focus on resource conflict. Their ignorance of other parts of this literature, however, is particularly surprising in that Indian historians, environmental social scientists and activist-scholars have been in the forefront of global efforts to address these problems in interdisciplinary ways. This large body of literature which covers a wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary training and political viewpoints, has profoundly transformed the ways people all over the world think about forests and forestry, conservation, environmental history and the very concept of nature. Amongst its greats are such names as Ramachandra Guha, Bina Agarwal, Madhav Gadgil, Ashish Kothari, Arun Agrawal, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Nandini Sundar, Amita Baviskar, Sumit Guha, Ajay Skaria, Vandana Shiva, Smitu Kothari, Vasant Saberwal, Vinay Gidwani, Haripriya Rangan, Mahesh Rangarajan, Sharad Lele, Ravi Rajan, not to mention Richard Grove, Richard Tucker, John Richards, David Arnold and Paul Greenough. Few of these writers are included in the authors' bibliography and their major findings on the social dynamics of conservation and resource use are largely ignored in the text. Thus, while the authors show some knowledge of the

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critique of sustainable use arguments, their omissions amount to a highly selective—and cripplingly biased—reading of Indian writings on conservation and sustainable use debates.

I will also posit some reasons why, despite their intentions, the authors' arguments and analysis do not provide real options for improving conservation in the future. Part of my argument lies in the authors' failure to account for the origins of resource-based conflict in specific situations. This results in a failure to either discuss or understand the ways power relations are expressed and how they evolve and change. Finally, and perhaps predictably, I end this short piece by promoting more truly interdisciplinary ways of thinking about these problems. This call is directed primarily to the more powerful actors in the conservation world–most of whom were trained as biological scientists (including ecologists, wildlife scientists, etc.).

As mentioned above, the authors start out by providing an interesting 'summary' of reasons why conservation conflicts have increased over the years. Though they do not break them down exactly in this way, they argue that four things have led to more conflict in wildlife reserves: (*i*) heightened reservation and more stringently enforced 'protection'; (*ii*) the extension of these protections to more areas of India, including more densely populated areas; (*iii*) the greater visibility of people displaced by reserves, which they attribute to an increase in their 'voice' and more 'advocates' than previously; and (*iv*) the increased human populations (both from reproduction and in-migration) living within the reserves.

Even a simple application of a political ecological approach illustrates that each of these 'reasons' is either poorly understood or blatantly misrepresented, and thus obfuscates the problems and their causes. By this political ecological approach, I mean here one that asks, what are the origins of the problem, how do the state and other powerful actors constitute the 'problems' and their 'solutions' and how are the various sorts of claims expressed, negotiated and realised? These guiding ideas would thus lead us to ask why more and more reservation was taking place, and what are its historical origins? Who benefits and loses from these arrangements in ways beyond the obvious changes in direct access to the animals under discussion? How and why are power relations shifting in ways that enable 'local people' to express their claims through national and international actors? And how have these allegedly 'new' voices acquired legitimacy? These questions are at the heart of the analysis the authors attempt, and yet they are hardly considered. Space limitations preclude my answering these questions here, but a closer read of the critical conservation literature, many of whose key Indian voices are listed above, will suggest many of the answers or theoretical starting points.

The authors also fail to mention some of the key contradictions that emerge repeatedly in generalist, pro-preservation positions and debates. Arguments that are more specific to the variety of situations (their political–ecological diversity, if you will) would produce more fruitful possible solutions.

For example, rather than focusing on the excessive bureaucratisation of management and the problems with such, it might be useful to consider some of the

radical changes engendered by new management approaches. As they briefly mention, the strategy for conservation of large mammal species has shifted over the years from a species protection approach to a more territorial one: 'habitat protection'. This move to a territorial approach has had significant implications for both the foresters and other wildlife managers in terms of a significantly expanded jurisdiction and, in this world of territorialised state power, a major change in the potential for resource managers to exercise power over the activities of people in those zones. Obviously, territorial restriction has had major implications for the increasing numbers of people in the vicinity of these parks and reserves who are dependent on the land for their livelihoods, but lack legal access. Yet, simply bemoaning the fact of increasing populations—local expansions as well as in-migrations—provides no understanding of *why* people are there. Nor does it shed much light on the potential for conservation-based alliances with people. It has been shown time and again that smallholders often view industrial timber concessions and wildlife reserves in the same way: both amount to a denial of access to critical resources. Structural restrictions on territorial access give the perception (at the very least) of an alliance between large-scale resource extractors and resource preservers. Both are glad to exclude the smallholders and other less powerful small 'fry', who are often simultaneously blamed for both previous and subsequent degradation. This is a concept basic to any social analysis of this kind of natural resource conflict; it is truly puzzling that the authors take no account of it. The prevalence of such a global pattern makes the author's undifferentiated conflation of 'industry's' interests with those of local people a rather egregious analytical and political error.

Second, the authors' failure to differentiate between the various preservation strategies for flora as opposed to fauna, and the very different histories of biodiversity creation and preservation in these two realms of non-human life, is disturbing. Like many preservationists writing in public fora, they conflate the term 'biodiversity' with the more narrow (however valid) concern for wildlife conservation. The appropriation of the term biodiversity as a code for large mammal conservation is nothing less than a political slight of hand that allows, again, the blaming of the weakest actors. It also obscures the history of flora biodiversity. Practices such as saving unusual species, protecting species by keeping them in situ and ex situ, and creating varieties through agriculture and other management practices predates the invention of the term. The trumpeteers of preserving biodiversity might reluctantly relegate these past achievements of mere farmers to the realm of what Harold Brookfield and Christine Padoch have coined as, 'agrobiodiversity'. Nevertheless, they would likely not be willing to provide opportunities to smallholders to create biodiversity for future generations. As the authors point out, not all local people engage in these practices, nor do they hope for the same ends, nor do they live in static communities. But they do suggest that people only destroy rather than create biodiversity, and that both the problems and the solutions are local rather than highly integrated into global systems of trade and politics. If the authors' concern is complexity, however, it seems odd to have to

point out that the social dimensions of conservation are much more complex. They also require much more difficult to enforce solutions than increased reserve protection and coercive management. What to do about wildlife? It remains a puzzle.

The authors' point of view demonstrates a critical contradiction within the preservationist's strategy: it hasn't changed much since something called 'environmentalism' was actually in the role of the underdog. This self-image and its tactical politics were constructed decades ago; they no longer fit today's world (that they helped shape), let alone some unforeseen future. One of the most significant changes at the beginning of this new century is the great rationalised power of the conservation community, its normalisation within government, the foundation world, as a 'scientific endeavour' and in much everyday practice. This sort of power and legitimacy no longer fits the conservation community's earlier identity as the morally driven challengers of overdevelopment and modernisation. The leaders of the conservation community, who operate as much out of big offices and dressed in three-piece suits as in jeans and tee-shirts, still have not dealt with the ambiguities of battles on different terrains of power. Their failures on the ground in some places highlight the inappropriateness of their strategies to legally enclose nature. At the same time, they need to recognise and acknowledge their successes (and, in some cases, their overachievements) rather than depending on tired discourses of impending global doom and disaster. It's time to move on, to construct a new approach to the future.

This future will require more compromise and alliances with those who promote forms of resource use other than those which enable only scientists and their armed guards access to certain lands. This future will require more specificity in understanding particular conservation contexts. This future means not only attending to the cultural and resource management practices of so-called 'local, traditional' communities but the circumstances of people and places constantly changing and producing local and global histories, local and global political economies, and localised and globalised natures. This future requires more site-specific answers to conservation challenges that emerge from the intersections of national and global forces within particular sites; generalist answers like enclosure and criminalisation of subsistence activities have been revealed as non-solutions. This future, like the present and past, is dynamic; it will have its successes and failures. But ultimately, our ability to better conserve biological diversity will depend on a more sophisticated engagement with the political, economic and ecological complexities that define the environments we live in.