

Emerging Trends in Biodiversity Conservation

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Photo: Bram Büscher

Despite much recent attention, biodiversity conservation and protected area management remain, in large part, subservient issues in the world today: they need to continuously adapt themselves to 'larger' issues of the global political economy to remain politically acceptable.

Based on this assumption, we argue that it is possible to identify three major trends in conservation and protected area management that are likely to influence policy and practice for a long time to come. We have termed these 'neoliberal conservation,' 'bioregional conservation,' and 'hijacked conservation.'

Neoliberal conservation is based on the major political-economic trend of the fall of communism and the subsequent ideological hegemony of neoliberalism. Since the beginning of the 1990s, more and more facets of human life have been brought under the influence of market thinking, and conservation is no exception. Several consequences can be noted. The

first obvious one is the marketisation of nature: the management of biodiversity according to the economic principles of demand and supply. A second and related – yet farther reaching – consequence is the commodification of nature. This entails changing the inherent value of nature into monetary value. Nature thus becomes an 'environmental service' whereby its existence is legitimised by market demand. A last consequence is the increasing private sector involvement in nature conservation. One example is private companies buying up park land and running parks as businesses.

The second trend we have identified is 'bioregional conservation,' which is influenced by globalisation and the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution. Bioregional conservation is, first, characterised by the decreasing importance of boundaries for conservation. Bioregional, ecosystem, landscape, and transfrontier approaches to conservation have all seen a steep rise in popularity over the past decade. A second development under this

trend is the increasing impact that outside agents are having on local environments. Due to the possibilities offered by the ICT revolution, it has become easier for resource-rich agents to intervene in far-away natural settings; and an increasing number, especially rich western philanthropists, even feel entitled to do so. Yet, while they do so with the aim of conservation, they often have great impact on local power dynamics. A last tendency under the trend of bioregional conservation is the issue of localisation, without which globalisation cannot be understood. Nature can be interpreted in multiple ways and the global-local dialectic will have a clear impact on this struggle for the foreseeable future.

The third and last trend we have identified is 'hijacked conservation,' a consequence of the recent international emphasis on security. Paradoxically, this has led to a re-emphasis on borders, making the implementation of transfrontier and bioregional conservation approaches more difficult. A significant development that is more worrying, however, is that nature is

further marginalised by being made a strategic pawn in the 'war on terror', and in international security discussions. Thus, besides the commodification of nature, its value has further been co-opted for security reasons rather than for the conservation of biodiversity.

Although the influence of these large-scale global political and economic trends on biodiversity conservation and protected area management is not a new phenomenon, participants in the conservation debate tend to lose sight of this bigger picture. By calling attention to these trends, we aim to enhance the understanding and appreciation of macro-social, economic, and political dynamics – both constraints and opportunities – that impinge on conservation and development. Such an understanding could, in turn, enhance the success of initiatives that aim to improve conservation of biodiversity and protected areas management.

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Madagascar: Where Community-based Water Resource Management Has Gone Too Far

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Since coming to power in 2002 President Marc Ravalomanana has both reformed and accelerated the path to decentralisation in Madagascar, granting new roles and responsibilities to regional and community leadership. We thus see the role of the national government diminishing in favor of resource management at the community level. This sort of decentralisation is intended to empower the local population to improve accountability, civic engagement, and equity. It addresses the greater capacity of local authorities for responsiveness to local population needs, while improving efficiency, equity and local "ownership" of the governing process.

I have explored the impact of increased responsibility for water management and decision-making in the communes within Madagascar's southern district of Ambovombe-Androy. Ambovombe-Androy is a semi-arid district that comprises 17 communes with marked levels of poverty. Limited water supply, extreme demand, and predatory operators drive water prices up to unaffordable levels. Decentralisation has served to exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the problem.

Donors have attempted to alleviate

– or at least mitigate – the Ambovombe water crisis. Despite certain differences in approach, they have all focused on the community level to manage a micro-level water facility. While a conceptually strong effort, in practice the amount of water obtained has been limited and the community-based organisations have often been troubled by their own inefficiencies or corruption. The one significant macro-effort, in which Japan funded two dozen water trucks and a pumping facility in neighboring Amboasary, and in which a government agency was put in charge of managing and maintaining the new equipment and intervening in the Ambovombe water market, was an ill-conceived design. Water delivery by truck is necessarily inefficient. In this case, offering a limited quantity of the resource exacerbated existing class cleavages as water became a commodity for those who could afford to pay for it in large quantities. Supply challenges have led to the rise of private water markets with a seasonal variation of as much as 1500 percent in rates.

A finer optic needs to be employed for determining the relationship between state and local