

Working with Indigenous Peoples to Conserve Nature: Examples from Latin America

Avecita Chicchón

Latin America and Caribbean Program, The Wildlife Conservation Society,
2300 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, New York, NY 10460, USA

E-mail: achicchon@wcs.org

Abstract

In some cases, the creation of protected areas to conserve nature has resulted in the displacement of indigenous peoples away from their original territories in Latin America. In this context, conservation organizations are developing alliances with indigenous peoples in different parts of the continent to find ways to jointly address conservation and livelihood issues with equity to avoid displacement and to empower decision-making at the grassroots level. This article illustrates the establishment of partnerships between conservation organizations and indigenous peoples that have yielded concrete results. While it is hard to generalize from a high diversity of cases, the common thread is the realization that the main solution would be to implement a comprehensive land/resource use reform that would avoid the destruction of wild habitats and promote the recuperation of degraded lands. Additionally, the management of protected areas must include the voices of those most directly affected by the establishment of those areas; one solution is the participation of indigenous peoples and other local stakeholders in protected areas management committees.

Keywords: indigenous peoples, management, protected areas, displacement, partnerships, Latin America

DOI: 10.4103/0972-4923.54792

Despite many years of trying to promote informed participation of indigenous peoples in the management of protected areas, there is still a large gap between conservationists and indigenous peoples in Latin America. To a large extent, this gap is due to different values and cultural and social characteristics that guide how conservationists and indigenous peoples engage with each other. The history of physical displacement of local people and/or curtailment of their participation in the decision-making process regarding the land and natural resources contribute to this gap in understanding. In recent years, some critics (Chapin 2004; Dowie 2005) have sought to explain this gap by blaming large international NGOs and their funders for not establishing responsible relationships with indigenous peoples and promoting their displacement, particularly from protected areas. While there is some truth in their statements for some situations, it is important both to understand events in their correct historical context and to avoid simplifications of time and space. Not all large international conservation NGOs have the same missions, approaches, and impacts and also they do not respond to the same local cultural conditions. In response to these allegations, some analytical studies (e.g., Bray & Anderson n/d) have emphasized the need to

establish formal mechanisms to monitor the performance of conservation NGOs to avoid negative impacts on vulnerable peoples who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods.

People have been forcefully displaced from their land of origin as a result of wars and resource scarcity throughout history. For example, the Incas forced the resettlement of local people that could rebel against them through the establishment of the *mitimaq*, or permanently resettled worker groups (Rostorowski 2001). When the Incas—who were originally Quechuas from Cusco in Peru—took over Cochabamba in Bolivia, local people were displaced and *mitimaq* established in the town. The Saraguros from Ecuador were originally *mitimaq* from Southern Peru. As the Spanish consolidated their rule in the 1600s, indigenous peoples who lived in scattered areas were concentrated in *reducciones*, or settlements that became the basis of modern peasant communities. These *reducciones* were mainly run by Catholic missionaries who very early translated local indigenous beliefs into Christian images to control their behavior. This resulted in rich ideological manifestations that are valid to this day; a process called religious syncretism (Marzal 1989). Indigenous peoples lost confidence on their own cultural identity and they also lost

access to the most fertile valley resources that sustained them. These rich resources were awarded to the new Spanish elite, religious and secular. The properties were handed over from one generation to the next for centuries even after countries became independent from Spain and Portugal in the 1800s.

It was only in the early 1900s that social movements began to succeed claiming land reforms and promoting the separation of church and state. The Mexican Revolution in 1910 focused on the redistribution of land from the wealthy to the poor and became an example for the rest of Latin America (Sanderson 1981). This was coupled with the rise of a movement to recognize indigenous values and traditions that had long been ridiculed and associated with backward thinking by the dominant white elite. After 1917, *ejidos* (collective farms) became the basis of agricultural development for the rural poor. The process of land redistribution intensified in Latin America between the 1950s and 1970s as a response to social unrest and recommendations from multilateral agencies and financial institutions. Agrarian reforms transformed the access to and control of natural resources, but because they were generally top-down, local people did not necessarily benefit from these changes permanently (Stavenhagen 1973). Another signal of indigenous cultural recognition and revitalization was the creation of the *Instituto Indigenista Interamericano* (III) in 1940 in Mexico with affiliated agencies in six Latin American countries with large indigenous populations. The III was charged with making sure that indigenous peoples' culture and rights were properly addressed, a very difficult concept to implement at the time especially because it was a top-down mandate. However, this was a leap forward after centuries of considering indigenous peoples as second-class citizens.

The situation for indigenous peoples in Amazonian countries was sharply different than that of indigenous peoples in other parts of the continent because they have traditionally occupied vast tropical forest areas removed from the centers of power. In these countries, agrarian reforms were coupled with colonization of wilderness areas, particularly in Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador in the 1970s and 1980s (Schmink & Wood 1984). Land conversion policies were based on the notion that lowland wilderness areas were vacant spaces with natural resources that could provide a development opportunity for the poor and dispossessed from coastal and montane areas. These policies ignored the presence of traditional peoples who lived in the forested lowlands. This was a time of military nationalistic regimes that sought to build penetration roads and to establish '*fronteras vivas*' (living frontiers), i.e., new settlements with 'true' national citizens in remote frontier areas to firmly claim territory to stop the influence of neighboring countries. This was particularly clear in Brazil through the *Plano de Integração Nacional* and President Belaúnde's national integration plan in Peru. New settlements pushed indigenous Amazonian peoples away from their original territories and constricted them in smaller, less productive areas. In Peru and Ecuador, native communities were established in the Amazon and included relatively small agricultural areas but not large traditional hunting or fishing territories. In Bolivia and Brazil,

larger collective territories were established as 'nations' within a larger nation causing management challenges for the central government, but better opportunities for self-determination.

To this day, there are an undetermined number of indigenous peoples in the vast Amazon that are isolated from the Western society by choice or by force. These so-called 'uncontacted' people are believed to live away from regular contact with national society by choice, in order to avoid the impact of disease, separation from one another, and to maintain their traditional way of life avoiding external influences. They may have become isolated by force as they are believed to be the descendants of those indigenous peoples that escaped enslavement during the rubber boom era in the early 1900s (Huertas 2002). At any rate, the displacement of isolated indigenous peoples in the Amazon into remote areas has lasted several decades, if not centuries, but is gradually coming to an end. The penetration of natural resource extraction operations such as logging companies, mining and oil/gas enterprises in remote areas is encroaching the livelihoods of these isolated peoples. Indigenous organizations have succeeded in recent years to have national governments recognize the existence of their isolated relatives but they have yet to secure the permanent protection of their territories from disruption. This is an issue in which conservationists and indigenous peoples have similar purposes and a strong alliance needs to be made for urgent action.

When the indigenous Yora came into contact with Western society in Peru in the late 1980s, many of them died as they contracted diseases to which they had no immunity, and those who survived became dependent on the charity of others to survive in the semi-urban center of Sepahua (Shepard 1999). The cultural and psychological impact of contact should not be overlooked (see Shepard in Huertas 2002). In more recent years, protected areas such as Manu National Park and Los Amigos Conservation Concession in southeastern Peru became refuges for isolated peoples as they were displaced from their territories by illegal loggers and gas exploitation operations in Camisea. It is imperative that conservation advocates and indigenous peoples work together to establish a mosaic of land tenure that would guarantee the protection of biodiversity and the livelihood of those that live in isolation.

As newcomers expanded the agricultural frontier into wilderness areas, they displaced indigenous peoples. In Latin America, the creation of protected areas was a relative minor problem for indigenous people faced with ineffective land and natural resource use reform, and governments that favored logging, mineral and gas/oil concessions. As a result, the late 1980s and early 1990s became a critical time for alliances between indigenous peoples and conservation advocates as both groups were interested in maintaining wilderness areas, albeit for different long-term purposes. One seminal effort to promote dialog was the one that took place in Iquitos in 1990 which resulted in the eventual creation of the Amazon Alliance (www.amazonalliance.org). In the Amazonian context, the pan-regional indigenous organization *Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica* (COICA)

became a key ally for conservationists but also a much needed critic when appropriate. The COICA, national, and local indigenous organizations are undergoing a resurgence in recent years as they represent indigenous groups whose numbers are growing because of better health and lower mortality (Sweeney & Arps 2005). This is coupled with a larger number of people who no longer feel the need to hide their indigenous identity, at least in Brazil (Perz *et al.* 2008). In this context, conservationists should recognize the opportunity of tighter alliances with indigenous peoples as they share the common objective of conserving natural resources while seeking for solutions that will address the development concerns of improved health, shelter, cultural revitalization, and income-generating activities that do not destroy the environment.

While this is not the right forum to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of indigenous organizations, it is important to say that they are also in a process of transformation at different levels (international, national, sub-national, and grassroots), so alliances have to be carefully developed from the bottom up to ensure that the most vulnerable people who are directly affected by the creation of conservation areas are consulted and have their needs addressed and problems solved. Vulnerable people in remote areas with no representation in indigenous organizations are the most likely to be affected by displacement for conservation reasons.

In this context, it is useful to examine some aspects of partnerships with indigenous peoples drawing from cases in Amazonia in order to learn from the past and to build for the future. When developing alliances for conservation, it is critical to begin by understanding the interests and value system of each stakeholder group. Next, it is important to recognize that within each stakeholder group there may be differences and complexities (for example, by age or gender) that would have to be addressed as negotiations develop and specific recommendations are made. At the heart of the relationship is the understanding that no social group wishes to be 'displaced' neither physically excluded from a familiar place nor excluded from the decisions on natural resource allocation. The challenge of achieving biodiversity conservation in tandem with social justice is complex due to the varying meanings of social justice in different contexts. In remote places, where no government agency or development organization is present, conservation organizations have been pressed not only to fulfill their conservation mandate but also to advocate for disadvantaged people. Over the years, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and other conservation organizations have tried different models to achieve conservation, and those that have been more successful and long lasting in remote areas are those that combine local peoples' interests with sound resource use planning efforts. Bonifacio Barrientos, Capitán Grande (maximum leader) of the Guaraní from Isosog in Bolivia, articulated this sentiment when he received the Bartolomé de las Casas Prize in Spain on behalf of CABI (Capitanía del Alto y Bajo Isosog) in 2001: 'It is important to highlight the special value, without precedent, that international cooperation agreements have [to

succeed in conservation] such as the ones written among the CABI, the WCS and the United States Agency for International Development which coupled with the agreement between CABI and the Ministry of Sustainable Development guarantee the effective management and administration of the protected area by CABI' (Translated from Spanish: 'Es necesario resaltar el especial valor, sin precedentes, que tienen los acuerdos de cooperación internacional como los suscritos entre la CABI, WCS y USAID que aunados al convenio entre CABI y el Ministerio de Desarrollo Sostenible garantizan la gestión y administración efectiva del área protegida por la CABI').

CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

From a practical perspective, partnerships with indigenous peoples are essential to succeed in conservation as indigenous peoples are the main stewards of biodiversity in wilderness areas. Also, indigenous peoples are often the most vulnerable social group in a society as they live in remote, marginal places. Latin America, with 15% of the global terrestrial land mass, contains 8.5% of the world's population or about 570 million people. Thirty million of them are indigenous to the American continent, representing about 671 nationalities. Guatemala, Bolivia, Mexico, and Peru contain the highest number of indigenous peoples in the continent.

International conservation organizations have developed partnerships with indigenous peoples in different contexts and with different degrees of commitment around the world. The WCS currently works with indigenous peoples in many projects across Latin America with a varying degree of engagement and impact. For example, WCS works in the small community of Puerto Edén, located within the large Bernardo O'Higgins National Park (3.5 million hectares) in southern Chile, with 240 inhabitants from the Kaweshkar (Alacaluf) and Huilliche-Mapuche indigenous groups. The WCS also works with the Ioseño-Guaraní organization, CABI, which represents 9,000 people and has control of the Kaa-Iya National Park (3.4 million hectares) in Bolivia. In almost every case, the relationships with indigenous groups have developed in the context of mutual respect with an initial stage of mistrust. Historically, indigenous groups have not benefited from negotiations with outsiders as they often resulted in unequal exchanges of land or resources. Mistrust was usually overcome by making the conservation objectives explicit, understanding indigenous objectives clearly, and making sure that the indigenous perspectives were incorporated in biodiversity conservation efforts through land/resource use planning. Often, conservation objectives are incorporated into indigenous organizations' plans as they craft their own development activities. Overcoming mistrust can take a long time or it can happen overnight. It is key to advocate for transparent partnerships and to realize that they have to be nurtured, and often renegotiated. The terms of the partnership need to be reassessed, for instance, when the larger social context changes, or when new indigenous representatives are

elected. The WCS commits to specific landscapes for the long term and our indigenous partners recognize this dedication. One example of this long-term commitment to landscapes and institutions is the one developed with CABI in the Gran Chaco landscape in Bolivia. The WCS provides funding and technical advice to develop sound information and arguments to secure land and resources for the Ioseño-Guaraní.

While at early stages, natural scientists considered indigenous peoples mainly as key informants or guides because of their deep knowledge of the wildlife and wild lands that interest conservationists, the relationships between WCS scientists and indigenous peoples evolved gradually into true partnerships. Small scientific projects grew into comprehensive conservation programs that examined ecological, social, institutional, and political threats to biodiversity, and developed interventions to solve or at least address these threats, while establishing alliances with indigenous people in order for them to be more effective. It became clear that it is not only enough to document biodiversity and its use but it is also important to contribute to the empowerment of the direct users to manage biodiversity in sustainable ways. Alliances are often formalized through explicit agreements that bind the organizations to work together toward a common goal. The WCS usually commits to provide funding and technical support to address threats to conservation that can be managed by indigenous peoples. Some activities include funding to secure titles to land, projects to manage domestic animals and avoid the spread of diseases to wildlife, or educational activities, among many others. Capacity building to manage projects is a core activity in a joint conservation program. The ability to manage funds and administrate projects provides indigenous peoples the opportunity to apply for external funds on their own.

In Bolivia, WCS began a close relationship with the Ioseño-Guaraní in the Gran Chaco in 1991, and with the Tacana in Madidi in 1999. In both cases, partnerships were developed from the outset with the legitimate representatives of these indigenous groups (see Arambiza & Painter 2006). Throughout, WCS has supported the Guaraní and Tacana in securing legal rights over their indigenous territories that buffer the core protected areas. Both groups have a subsistence economy based on small-scale agriculture, hunting, fishing, and gathering. They have been in contact with the national society for a long time and have maintained a distinct social organization and culture. When the Kaa-Iya National Park was created, the Guaraní were key players in drawing the boundaries of the Park, and this protected area is now under their direct management. The Guaraní have the clear mandate of managing the Kaa-Iya National Park, located in the state of Santa Cruz. In contrast, the Tacana in La Paz do not have the mandate to manage Madidi National Park themselves but they do participate in the management of the Park through the *Comité de Gestión* (Management Committee), a recently developed governance structure that allows local stakeholders to recommend best practices to Park officials. The Tacana, however, control the buffer areas of the Madidi National Park because they are titled indigenous territories that are under their

management. The boundaries for the indigenous territories were drawn by the Tacana with financial and technical support from WCS. Each indigenous group aims to achieve an adequate standard of living, health, shelter, and education based on access and control of resources. Conservation, as Western society understands it, is a foreign concept to them, so it was important to clearly establish the terms of the partnerships and their goals. The WCS does not have the welfare of local people as a primary goal. Nevertheless, conservation of natural resources ultimately contributes to quality of life locally, so it was important to agree upon this with the indigenous partners at the outset. The partnerships focus on the common aspects of conserving natural resources, and one of the main tools offered by WCS is scientific information for management of wildlife resources.

In the case of the Guaraní, the partnership with WCS has been beneficial for both the Guaraní and for conservation when the Guaraní were negotiating with corporations that sought to develop their land for the Bolivia–Brazil gas pipeline. The partnership successfully negotiated with the pipeline sponsors to ensure that environmental and socioeconomic impacts were mitigated: the pipeline was constructed in areas that would have minimal environmental impact and a set of detailed monitoring measures were established. Additionally, the agreement included the establishment of a permanent source of revenue for the protected area under the control of the partnership (Redford & Painter 2006). The Guaraní and its allies jointly decide how the revenue of the trust fund is allocated for conservation and sustainable development.

The case of indigenous partnerships for WCS in Ecuador is sharply different from those in Bolivia. Since 2000, WCS has focused its efforts on Yasuní Biosphere Reserve in Ecuador. The two main indigenous groups in that region, the Kichwa and the Huaorani, were not fully consulted when the Yasuní National Park was created in 1979. At that time, the Huaorani, a hunter-gatherer group that functions in family groups, received an indigenous territory, the Huaorani Ethnic Reserve (see Fontaine & Narváez 2007).

Some Huaorani (Huao) did not have contact with the outside world until the late 1980s and then contact spurred when Texaco opened the Via Auca, the road into their territory for oil extraction (Cabodevilla 1999). There are still two Huao clans that have remained isolated. The Huao formed a representative organization to deal with the impact of oil companies and they are currently dealing with the company Repsol that controls Via Maxxus, a road crossing Yasuni National Park and extends into the Huaorani Ethnic Reserve. [The Huaorani Ethnic Reserve is surrounded by the Yasuní National Park (created in 1979), together they make up the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve which was created in 1989.] It has been more challenging to work with the Huao as those communities are dependent on oil revenue, and many Huao mistrust outsiders. The WCS aims to work more closely with the group of Huao women who have expressed interest in sustainable development activities.

The Kichwa, who migrated to the Upper Amazon from the Andes hundreds of years ago, have been in contact with

Ecuadorian society for a while. Their subsistence is based on agriculture, hunting/fishing, and gathering, and they effectively negotiate with officials through their representative organizations. The WCS has developed a solid partnership with six Kichwa communities in order to develop wildlife management plans. The WCS advises them on how to use biological indicators to monitor the impact of oil development. The partnerships in Yasuni are strong at the community level but the main challenge is to scale-up due to the high diversity of interests within each indigenous group. For instance, the Huaorani are divided as some of them are keener to work with oil companies rather than working with conservation organizations. Currently, the most delicate issue in Yasuni is to protect the right of those isolated Huaorani groups that live in areas that may be awarded for oil development. The presence of outsiders to develop their land for oil will cause indigenous displacement.

A more detailed and systematic study on displacement of indigenous peoples to create displacement and protected areas in Latin America is sorely needed to determine the true impact of this change in land tenure. However, looking at the historical picture, human displacement due to the creation of protected areas is small compared to the magnitude of the displacement by infrastructure and industrial development in natural areas. In fact, in several cases, the creation of protected areas has benefited indigenous peoples because they have established alliances that have brought more national attention to their situations. In many cases, the creation of protected areas has allowed for better ecological zoning, the development of conservation-based income generating activities, and has attracted international attention and funding that have ultimately benefited indigenous and local peoples. The WCS has contributed to help title indigenous lands, support sustainable wildlife use, and generate information for sound development activities, all of which provide a political advantage to indigenous and local peoples when they negotiate with other international entities.

Admittedly, WCS and conservationists have stumbled along the way, but conservationists are learning and incorporating more social science in their work. Conservationists at WCS now incorporate a stakeholder analysis in any new conservation initiative, realizing that some stakeholders may be more powerful (corporations), some may be absent (isolated/uncontacted Indians), and others are transitory (squatters). Indigenous peoples and those local people that have strong ties to the land are the best allies for conservation as they will stay in the region. The 'human footprint' left behind by indigenous peoples is much less than environmental impacts left by other groups. Most indigenous groups understand that their way of life depends on maintaining the services that their ecosystems provide. The challenge remains in finding the long-term balance of biodiversity conservation in partnership with the state while making sure not to negatively affect indigenous access to and control of the territories in which they live.

A necessary change for the future would be a comprehensive land and natural resource use reform allowing indigenous peoples to gain access to productive agricultural land and forest

products. A focus on effective land-use planning in several countries in Latin America would allow for both protected areas and for indigenous and local peoples to have access to natural resources. Conservation organizations have the funding and connections to facilitate and implement comprehensive land/resource use plans at specific locations. In the future, conservationists have the responsibility to include indigenous and local peoples as equals partners in conservation.

After years of trial and error, many international conservation organizations now have specific internal policies regarding indigenous peoples, displacement, and human rights. These organizations are openly discussing the impact of conservation on indigenous peoples within the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) forum, and taking measures to improve their activities and approaches. One positive outcome in response to recent critiques is that now there is a concerted effort among large international conservation organizations to coordinate actions and to learn from past mistakes. The idea of establishing a panel to monitor international conservation NGOs actions akin to the Inspection Panel that monitors Financial Institutions development projects to promote transparency and accountability may be a good one, but time and sufficient funds to support this approach are scarce. Another idea that is quickly taking shape is that of peer review among conservation organizations.

At the end, the fate of conservation is in the hands of all social groups within a given society. We will only succeed in protecting biodiversity if we are able to see beyond our differences and establish partnerships that give equal voice to vulnerable actors such as indigenous groups. Practical solutions need to be tested but at the beginning of the 21st century, in this globalized world, there is not much room for error any more so we need to quickly shift gears when actions do not work. Small gains with great impact at the local level are the basis to scaling up and informing national and international policy. Usually, these small gains in Latin America are the result of painstaking partnerships between field conservationists and indigenous communities who care about all forms of life.

REFERENCES

- Arambiza, E. and M. Painter. 2006. Biodiversity conservation and the quality of life of indigenous people in the Bolivian Chaco. *Human Organization* 65(1): 20-34.
- Bray, D. and A. Anderson (n.d.). Global conservation non-governmental organizations and local communities. Working Paper No.1. Florida, USA: Latin America and Caribbean Center. Florida International University.
- Cabodevilla, M.A. 1999. *Los Huarani en la historia de los pueblos del oriente*. Quito, Ecuador: CICAME.
- Chapin, M. 2004. A challenge to conservationists. *Worldwatch*. November/December.
- Dowie, M. 2005. Conservation refugees. *Orion*. November/December.
- Fontaine, G. and I. Narváez. 2007. *Yasuni en el siglo XXI. El estado ecuatoriano y la conservación de la Amazonía*. Quito, Ecuador: FLACSO/IFEA/ABYA-YALA/PETROBRAS/WCS/CEDA.
- Huertas Castillo, B. 2002. *Los Pueblos Indígenas en Aislamiento*. Copenhagen, Denmark: IWGIA.

20 / *Avecita Chicchón*

- Inter-American Development Bank. 2006. Fact sheet on population in Latin America.
- Marzal, M. 1989. *Historia de la Antropología: La Antropología Indigenista en México y Perú*. Lima, Peru: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP).
- McSweeney, K. and S. Arps. 2005. A "Demographic turnaround": The rapid growth of indigenous populations in lowland Latin America. *Latin American Research Review* 40(1): 3-29.
- Perz, S., J. Warren and D. Kennedy. 2008. Contributions of racial-ethnic reclassification and demographic processes to indigenous population resurgence. The case of Brazil. *Latin American Research Review* 43(2): 8-29.
- Redford, K.H. and M. Painter. 2006. Natural alliances between conservationists and indigenous peoples. WCS Working Paper No. 25. New York, USA: Wildlife Conservation Society.
- Rostowrowski, M. 2001. *Historia del Tahuantinsuyu*. Lima, Peru: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP).
- Sanderson, S. 1981. *Agrarian populism and the Mexican state: The struggle for land in Sonora*. Berkeley, USA: University of California Press.
- Schmink, M. and C. Wood. 1984. *Frontier expansion in Amazonia*. Gainesville, USA: University of Florida Press.
- Shepard, G. 1999. Pharmacognosy and the senses in two Amazonian societies. Ph.D. dissertation. University of California, Berkeley, USA.
- Stavenhagen, R. 1973. *Land reform and institutional alternatives in agriculture: The case of the Mexican ejido*. Vienna, Austria: Vienna Institute for Development.
-