



Book Review

Conservation Refugees

The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples

Emerson Peek
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Mark Dowie
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Conservation Refugees is an illustrative review of contemporary conservation biology, indigenous land tenure, and cross-cultural methods of *biotic* and *abiotic* resource management. Author Mark Dowie recounts numerous case studies, which bear two fundamental purposes within the debate of bio-cultural diversity preservation. First, his examples reveal how international conservation organizations have negatively impacted indigenous communities through displacement and restricted resource use. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Dowie shows creative, situation-specific ways in which native communities are currently fighting to protect their land rights and life-ways, which drive the survival of indigenous livelihoods and, consequently, maintain biodiversity.

At the root of Mark Dowie's argument lies the fact that

about half the protected land in the world was either occupied or regularly used by indigenous people prior to becoming protected. From the forceful evictions of the Miwok in California to the prohibition of rotational farming imposed on the Karen of Thailand, transnational conservation organizations have used whatever tricks necessary to pursue their versions of “fortress conservation” – an exclusionary model of conservation that ignores indigenous rights to habitat. What began with good intentions for wildlife protection and wilderness preservation has morphed into a long, brutal history of conflict between conservationists and Native Peoples. The result is that many conservation efforts, despite their noble attempts to save endangered animal and plants species, have threatened the habitat of endemic human cultures. International conservation organizations may not be inherently against indigenous self-determination, but their track record for cooperative and respectful interaction with Native Peoples raises serious questions.

Through this messy conflict between “BINGOs” (Big International NGOs) and indigenous peoples, one can easily see the “clash of romantic tendencies” that Dowie refers to in his second chapter, “Nature.” At extreme ends, some anthropologists and wildlife biologists approach their fields in a narrow and exclusive manner – either preferring to see ‘pristine’ wilderness or intrinsic ethnological knowledge as the single highest priority. Ironically, these two fields compliment each other very well in the context of conservation: “...both disciplines believe that an accelerating loss of animal or plant species is a sign of imminent ecological crisis” (p. 110).

The book’s journalistic approach details recent cases in which the forces of wildlife conservation and cultural preservation are exchanging ideas and collaboratively designing joint responses to bio-cultural diversity loss. One inspiring example can be found in the mapping projects described in the chapter “The Science of Princes.” By ‘tenure mapping,’ indigenous communities like the Maya and Garifuna of southern Belize can combine their hand-drawn maps with the expertise of Western techno-scientists to articulate traditional knowledge and ancient patterns of occupancy. This, in turn, increases

Native Peoples' creditability in the eyes of governments, conservationists, and development-hungry foreigners.

Another indication of emerging cooperation between these groups is the recently conceived idea of Community Conservation Areas (CCA). Taking a number of names (Indigenous Stewardship Area, Biocultural Heritage Site, etc.), these co-participatory management areas vary in structure and organization, but their underlying principle places indigenous peoples at the helm of the conservation project. Lakota Chief Iktomi Lila Sica, in 1930, proposed America's first CCA, which was supposed to be an "Indian University" for ecological knowledge and culture. The National Park Service rejected the idea until the 1970s, when the Blackfoot, Ogala Sioux, and Havasupi peoples established parks on or around their reservations. The Australian Homelands Movement, for another example, has been working to resettle Aboriginal peoples on lands that have been theirs for millennia. Academics working within this movement, as well as those working in movements like it, help native peoples map their lands and set up rules that the indigenous communities can enforce. The guiding principle behind a CCA is to support indigenous autonomy and self-governance in a way that blends both traditional knowledge and land management with contemporary scientific inquiry.

Although Dowie relies heavily on anthropological findings and reams the frequently narrow foci of conservation BINGOs, his pro-indigenous credo essentially seeks to bridge the traditional expertise and innate rights of indigenous peoples with the ecologically based mindset of conservationists. Dowie very effectively calls attention to a broad range of examples that prove how easy it is to oversimplify in a debate like this. His basic opinion, shared by others in the bio-cultural diversity realm, is that the interests of indigenous peoples and environmental activists share a common goal: to sustain life on this planet through the maintenance of bio-diverse ecosystems.

By challenging the boundaries between disciplines like wildlife biology and anthropology, Dowie provokes activists and researchers to reflect on their core intentions in this "good guy vs. good guy" story. Substantiated by compelling evidence, his arguments demonstrate how incorporation of humans into an

ecological perspective not only protects native cultures, lands, languages, and life ways, but also holds great potential for genuine stewardship and conservation via time-tested methodologies. Through cooperation and acknowledgement of native autonomy, researchers and activists alike can enter indigenous communities respectfully and exchange traditional and nontraditional knowledge for the mutual benefit and continued existence of all ecosystem participants and their cultures.

About the Author

Emerson Peek joined the CWIS team in 2009 as a work-study employee through the Evergreen State College. As a sophomore-level transfer student with previous travel experiences and a hunger to learn about new cultures, Emerson registered for a yearlong program called Andean Roots. Between two quarters in the classroom and one quarter abroad in Cusco, Peru, the program's academic themes focused on contemporary issues such as food sovereignty, loss of bio-cultural diversity, and the economic, environmental and cultural consequences of globalization. Using the indigenous people and geography of the Andes Mountains as a case study, students in Andean Roots utilized an interdisciplinary perspective to examine how traditional ecological knowledge is either maintained or lost in relation to the external pressures of standardization, international commerce and climate change.

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