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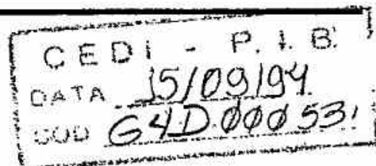

Indigenous Peoples and Conservation

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Forest-dwelling peoples' organizations continue to express concern about destruction of their forests. The International Alliance of the Indigenous-Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests issued The Forest Peoples Charter in February 1992 (available from the World Rainforest Movement in the U.K. and Cultural Survival in the U.S.A.). The Charter sets out a conservation policy based on recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to conserve their forests and to regulate development activities currently imposed upon them without their consent. It is the first such statement from a global network of forest-dwelling peoples' organizations.

At the local level, forest-dwellers around the world have repeatedly made declarations deploring outsiders' destruction of forests for at least 500 years. The Forest Peoples Charter adds its weight to other international forest-dwellers' declarations, including the 1988 statement of the Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Peoples' Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) highlighted in the essay by Redford and Stearman (1993). Many conservation groups are now supporting forest peoples' struggles for recognition of their rights. The Global Biodiversity Strategy (World Resources Institute et al. 1992) supports recognition of ancestral domains. Redford and Stearman also conclude that it is wise for conservationists to work with indigenous peoples. But like Clad (1984), they argue that the interests and agendas of the two groups are "partially or completely in conflict."

Conservation is a social and political process. Conservationists interested in achieving on-the-ground conservation of biodiversity have to choose among real options, not idealized academic options. Conservationists in an increasing number of countries are choosing the option of working with local peoples' organizations. Redford and Stearman are correct in stating that compromises are being made, but decisions about goals and compromises deserve further thought.

A decade ago, U.S. and European-based conservationists focused on supporting protected-areas strategies implemented through state governments. Park departments, with staff trained by academic centers that teach strategies based on protected areas, still espouse the conservationists' goals and agenda described by Redford and Stearman. But, despite the confluence of those two agendas, park departments and other state agencies have failed miserably at conserving biodiversity, globally and in Amazonia. Instead, paper parks abound, and deforestation rates have increased. While states have pleased conservationists by announcing the creation of parks, a careful look at state performance shows a general pattern whereby state-linked elites are continuing to log and mine in protected and reserved areas.

Not only have park strategies failed, but they have undermined forest-dwelling communities' ability to protect forests. They have been implemented at costs to local people in order to achieve global benefits (Wells 1992). The expected conservation benefits have not accrued, but local costs have been considerable (see Ghimire 1991). Conservationists' recognition of their "myth of the noble savage" (Redford 1990) is coupled with their recognition of what I call their "myth of the noble state." Conservationists are becoming more aware of real-world options and their costs and track records. And they are seeking to create positive partnerships with real indigenous peoples and real states.

Redford and Stearman pursue a question that merits further discussion in Conservation Biology: What interests do indigenous people and conservationists have in common? Redford and Stearman identify major differences in the two groups' conservation goals, based on their understanding of those goals. I would like to pursue their question further.

First, I will focus on their definitions of goals. The indigenous definition of conservation, based on Redford and Stearman's experiences, should be expanded. Based

upon my own experiences in the Amazon, Central America, Asia, and the Pacific, and corroborated by other ethnobiologists and the ethnobiological literature, Redford and Stearman's definition is inadequate and misleading. Redford and Stearman accurately note that there is great heterogeneity within and between indigenous groups. Nonetheless, there are general patterns that provide a definition beyond the one they provide: "In the indigenous view, preserving biodiversity means preventing large-scale destruction." To my knowledge, there is no direct translation for the word "conservation" in any non-European language. It is generally translated as "respecting Nature," "taking care of things," or "doing things right." Indigenous peoples often find the Western idea of "conservation" as something to be separated from the rest of their activities as strange. A Karen man recently asked me why we always "put things in boxes." It makes things difficult, he said. To him, and to many others I've met in other countries, conservation is just part of making a living. Indigenous goals are different from the conservationists' goals characterized by Redford and Stearman. But the goal expressed in IUCN's updated World Conservation Strategy, "Caring for the Earth" (IUCN et al. 1991) is a close match for indigenous ideas of conservation.

Indigenous people demonstrate a concern for maintaining the ecological processes and the species that mediate those processes (Alcorn 1989*a*, 1989*b*). They often demonstrate a keen interest in the locations of rare plant species. Within any given community, there are usually several people who bring rare plants into cultivation in order to maintain them. There are fewer published examples of indigenous peoples' active efforts to maintain mammals. Many indigenous groups in Africa and Asia have a tradition of maintaining sacred forest areas where animals and plants are not disturbed. More common globally are community-enforced rules of forest and game use. In traditional societies, nature is viewed as part of human society, and proper relations with nature are necessary in order to have proper relations between people, including past and present generations. The commitment of indigenous peoples to conservation is complex and very old.

I strongly disagree with Redford and Stearman's statement that indigenous people have presented themselves as conservationists "*only* because they recognize the power of this concept in rallying support in their struggle for land rights" [emphasis added]. When indigenous people enter into discussions with powerful outsiders, they must meet on outsiders' terms and use their vocabulary. New use of the outsiders' concept of conservation coincides with the rise of international conservationists as a new player among powerful outsiders; this does not mean that conservation is new to indigenous peoples.

Most conservationists have broader goals than those defined by Redford and Stearman. Most U.S.-based conservation biologists do seem to share the narrower goals, although this continues to be debated within this journal. Conservation did not originate among biologists (as stated by Redford and Stearman), unless one accepts the narrow goals defined by Redford and Stearman that conservationists are to maintain ecosystems isolated from human beings (except the biologists who want to study them). Indigenous peoples' goals, as I have described them, don't completely match those narrow conservationists' goals. They more closely match the broader goals espoused by many conservationists who recognize that most of the world's biodiversity is found, and will continue to be found, in landscapes occupied by people.

Regarding Redford and Stearman's concern for the loss of the traditional conservation ethic, I would like to return to Chapin's comment quoted in their essay. Chapin notes that the modern conservation ethic may not be adequate to maintain biodiversity, compared to the traditional conservation ethic. I agree. I have argued elsewhere that the modern approach is too narrow and that conservationists have two goals: to stabilize the traditional conservation ethic wherever it still exists, and to improve the modern conservation ethic (Alcorn 1991).

Redford and Stearman characterize development as a threat to biodiversity and warn that indigenous peoples will cease to conserve biodiversity as they pursue development. There is evidence both to support and to contradict their warning. Some indigenous peoples pursuing economic and social development are moving to adopt the modern reserve concept to protect biodiversity from threats by commercialization. They are seeking the state's assistance to defend biodiversity. For example, in Mexico, rural communities sought and achieved establishment of "campesino ecological reserves" (Toledo 1992). Through the Union of Indian Nations, Brazilian Xavante sought assistance from the World Wildlife Fund to use scientific methods to monitor game populations in order to prevent poaching by outsiders and better regulate their own hunting (Butler 1992, personal communication). Likewise there is widespread evidence that, for centuries, traditional peoples around the world have intensified land use in certain areas of their territories in order to maintain forests in other areas.

Large-scale, outsider-driven development projects wreak devastating effects on levels of biodiversity. But examination of the range of development activities in the broader landscape shows that conventional wisdom about the impact of development is often wrong in areas where strong non-Western cultural roots are still intact. For hundreds of years, local communities have fought to keep commercial loggers out of their forests. Now they also fight "reforestation programs" that threaten to replace existing forests with plantations. The tradition of community forest defense continues around the world.

One of the main threats linked to development is commoditization of land and disruption of common

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property regimes. As Redford and Stearman note, indigenous patterns of communal land use offer "greater promise for conservation than Western systems of individual property rights." Indigenous peoples have held forest under complex, often-overlapping tenure rights that share benefits across their community and exclude noncommunity members. Overlapping rights protect the community from outside acquisition of their forests and from exclusive use by any one entity who might destroy it. Traditional systems are in effect partnerships between individuals and their community.

Partnerships with indigenous peoples offer the best option for achieving on-ground conservation both inside and outside parks. An internal World Bank evaluation of Latin American efforts found that even when indigenous lands have been demarcated and recognized by governments, they are still being exploited by settlers and logging operations. The state is not defending indigenous peoples' property rights, despite the facts that the state has recognized those rights and that a primary function of the ideal state is to defend property. This is particularly a problem among the smaller Amazonian groups described by Redford and Stearman. Strong partnerships with the state will be necessary for continued conservation of indigenous groups' forests. Building appropriate partnerships between states and indigenous communities may require new legislation, policies, institutional linkages, and processes. It requires creating communication networks and research linkages. It also requires adequate monitoring of biodiversity and institutional processes, an area where the collaboration of nongovernmental organizations can be particularly helpful.

One barrier to partnerships is the attitude that conservationists are in a position of authority to "cede" land, to "grant" rights to others, to speak for others, or to define others' knowledge. The 1988 COICA statement was itself issued in response to this problem. The COICA declaration specifically states, "We are concerned that you have left us Indigenous Peoples and our organizations out of the political process which is determining the future of our homeland.... [W]e never delegated any power of representation to the environmentalist community.... We want to represent ourselves and our interests directly in all negotiations concerning the future of our Amazonian homeland." When Redford and Stearman write about indigenous people "claiming standing" to enter conservation discussions, their statement implicity acknowledges the problem noted by COICA: "conservationists" are acting as gatekeepers to a discussion table that does not have a place set for those whose homeland's future hangs in the balance.

Until we recognize the authority of indigenous peoples as equals at the discussion table, we cannot join in partnerships with them. Chhatrapati Singh (1986) has noted: "Amongst ... externalities, the most destructive [to nature] is injustice or *adharma* ... [T]he consequences of such *adharma* have been borne by the rural poor, the tribals, and the flora and fauna" (Singh 1986: 1). "[T]he issues actually at stake in the forest question ... are three: (a) justice to the people, forest dwellers and nondwellers; (b) justice to nature (trees, wild life, etc.); and (c) justice to coming generations" (Singh 1986:7). In the real world, conservation of forests and justice for biodiversity cannot be achieved until conservationists incorporate other peoples into their own moral universe and share indigenous peoples' goals of justice and recognition of human rights.

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