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CONSERVATION AND TRADITIONAL PEOPLES.

**Manuela Carneiro da Cunha,
Department of Anthropology, The University of Chicago**

In this paper, I will be addressing four questions which have implications for Traditional Group Rights and for Conservation Strategies. Are traditional Peoples conservationists? Not necessarily. Have traditional people conserved Tropical Forests? They have. Will they go on doing so? It depends on the deal. Do we need them to do it? Certainly.

Opponents of traditional peoples' involvement in conservation argue that: 1. not all traditional societies are conservationists 2. even those who are might change when entering the market sphere.

As regards the first point, let me start with a parenthesis. It is ironic that indigenous peoples should presently be accused of over-exploiting resources, since in the sixteenth century Europeans attempted to deny them titles to their land on the account of them under-exploiting it. Although many indigenous peoples in Lowland South America were agriculturalists, they were portrayed as lacking agriculture. They supposedly merely scratched the land without having real roots in it. Agriculture being the real way of relating oneself to land, it followed, so the argument went, that indigenous peoples should have no dominion of their territory.

But let me go back to the point. For a long time, there has been, among anthropologists, conservationists, policy makers and traditional peoples themselves, what someone in another context has called a 'working misunderstanding'. It revolved around what one could call the essentialization (a source of many evils everywhere it pops up) of traditional peoples' relations to environment. A cluster of ideas representing indigenous groups as natural conservationists resulted in what has been aptly labelled "the myth of the ecologically noble savage" (K.Redford and A.Stearman 1991, 1993; A.M. Stearman 1994). Of course, there is no such thing as 'natural conservationists', and an anthropologist would immediately translate the idea into 'cultural conservationists'. But can traditional peoples be described as 'cultural conservationists'?

Conservationism is not just a set of practices. It is also an ideology. We therefore have three different situations

which tend to be blurred by using a single term 'conservationism' to cover them all. One is when there is the ideology but not necessarily the practices. Western society might fit into the description.

Then we have conservationism proper, in which sustainable practices and cosmology are both present. Many amazonian indigenous societies uphold a sort of lavoisierian ideology in which everything, including life and souls is recycled. Nothing is created, everything is transformed. Theirs is an ideology of limited exploitation of natural resources, and of the role of men as sustainers of the equilibrium of the universe, nature and supernature included. Values, food and hunting taboos, institutional or supernatural sanctions, provide the instruments for them to act according to this ideology. We could then ascertain that many traditional peoples have the skills and the institutions for preserving resources. Such societies can be included in this category of cultural conservationists. The Yagua (Chaumeil) and Upper Rio Negro examples (Dolmatoff, Hugh-Jones) come immediately to mind.

And finally one can have cultural practices without the ideology (N.Gonzales 1992). In this case, we can think of people that, although lacking an explicit conservationist ideology, follow cultural rules for using natural resources which are sustainable. As Monsieur Jourdain did prose 'sans le savoir', so these peoples provide for conservation, although unknowingly. It is worth observing that in order to conserve resources, a society does not have to avoid any waste. It has just to keep it within limits. If a society approves on killing a whole group of monkeys, females and offspring included, and if such massacre, however distasteful, has no consequence as far as resources are concerned, then this society is not infringing conservation practices. All one has to ask in this respect is whether such habits are compatible with sustainable use, not whether they are morally wrong. We might object on sport hunting in our society, yet it is a fact that North American hunters associations such as the Wildlife Federation have had a strong concern with and results in conservation. Indigenous groups might conserve and manage their environment with much ingenuity and knowledge, (W. Balee 1989, W. Balee and A. Gely 1989, A. Anderson 1991, H.Kaplan and K. Kopischke 1992, etc.) particularly when soil is poor, yet this is not done under a conservationist ideology (A.M. Stearman 1994, K.Redford and A.M. Stearman 1991). Their management of a more bountiful environment might be much less commendable, but the point is that low population density will still make it sustainable. One could safely state that, in the long run, given a certain territory and a certain population, all known indigenous societies were using their

resources sustainably for the very simple reason that they would not otherwise have survived.

It is a fact that indigenous groups and even some migrant groups such as rubber-tappers in Brazil have preserved and possibly enhanced biodiversity in neotropical forests. For one thing, they have acted as subverters, as 'natural revolutionaries' in oligarchic forests in which subaltern species are oppressed by dominant ones. This would be achieved by mere clearing prior to cultivation, in which oppressed species would be given a new chance for outrunning their competitors. Balée (1994: 119-123) provides a detailed review on the evidence of Amazonian Societies enhancing environmental resources, be it rivers, soils, wildlife or plant diversity. In western Brazilian Amazon, the Juruá Extractive Reserve where I am presently conducting work together with a team including several biologists, has been inhabited first by a number of panoan-speaking groups and then by rubber-tappers who have exploited the region for the last one hundred years. Yet "preliminary inventory of the Reserve in 1989-1990, covering butterflies and anurans, suggested that it could include an even higher biological diversity in these and other animal groups than nearby areas with poorer soils, considered to be the richest in species on the planet (Tambopata, Manu and Pakitza in Peru, and Jaru and Cacaupatia in Rondônia)" (report K.Brown in M. Carneiro da Cunha, K.Brown and M.Almeida 1994)

The second argument suggests that, although traditional societies might have exploited their environment in a sustainable manner, frontier population which comes into contact with such societies will induce a short-sighted strategy for utilizing resources. There will be a lack of adequate institutions and little information about alternative opportunities. Anomy will morally dissolve groups, as young entrepreneurial people will clash with old customs and reciprocity values (R. Chase-Smith 1994).

So, goes the argument, although 'traditional culture' might once have fostered conservation, the induced needs and the link with market economy will inevitably lead to changes in culture and over-exploitation of natural resources. It certainly will lead to changes, but not necessarily to over-exploitation. For what the pre-contact balanced situation also implies is that, given some structural conditions, traditional peoples might play a central role in conservation.

What one fails to recognize in this scenario is that the situation has changed and the validity of old paradigms has changed along with it. Traditional Peoples are neither in an external arena (Wallerstein, Sahlins) to central economy,

nor are they anymore simply in the periphery of the world system (Wallerstein, Bunker, Wolf), for traditional peoples and their organizations are not any more dealing solely with frontiersmen. They have become partners to such central institutions as the UN, the World Bank and first-world powerful NGOs. Latin American governments, willy-nilly, have to cope with them.

Nor is the market in which traditional people now can move the market of old. Rather, it is the emerging market of 'existence values' such as biodiversity and natural landscapes. Things that are paid for by people who think that the very existence of a particular thing, irrespective of their using or even seeing it, is valuable in itself. Buying an acre of Amazonian land for this acre to be preserved is an example in point. Such 'existence values' are somehow fourth-generation commodities, only purchased by people in the core of the Empire. Indigenous societies, for their part, are getting cash from first-generation commodities (raw materials such as rubber, nuts, minerals, etc.)¹ So here is a situation in which societies in the process of trying to become consumers are asked to assimilate values sustained by people who are beyond consumers society. They are asked to embody ultimate criticism to consumers society, Indigenous societies being construed as first-world super-ego.

Indigenous organizations, such as COICA (Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin), ISI (Indigenous Survival International) and the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) (IWGIA 1990, 1991, P.J. Poole 1993:16) have issued statements related to the role of indigenous peoples in the protection of biodiversity. Basically and very soundly, they want conservation taking indigenous land rights into account. And whenever one goes into the detail of actual experiments in management or co-management of preservation areas, one finds, not surprisingly, the desire to harmonize access to consumers goods and to a reasonably agreeable life with conservation concerns (Chase-Smith, Salick,).

Conservationists don't always seem to realize that they are operating with commodities, albeit last-generation ones. The return which is expected from traditional peoples would be, in the Amazon, the re-production of the forest and its biodiversity. Here is something which still has no price-tag attached to it, but for which, clearly, people are willing to pay. This is the counter-part to de-essentializing the nature of traditional societies relation to their environment.

¹ Second-generation commodities would be processed goods; third-generation would be information (processes, software, etc.)

There are other legitimate reasons and sources for rewarding traditional societies, and these are germplasm in situ conservation and intellectual property rights. The current estimate of plants in the world is around half a million, of which probably 80.000 (16%) might be in the Amazon (R.Schultes and R. Raffauf 1990). Only around 150 are used as food. 95% of the world nutrition relies on only 30 species, a fact which makes humanity most vulnerable, since new virus could destroy crops and launch a global famine. Hence the strategic importance of germplasm banks which provide for new possibilities. Most of germplasm ultimately originated in the Third-World and benefitted primarily first-world countries (J.Kloppenborg Jr. and Daniel Lee Kleinman 1987). germplasm was collected on the basis of common heritage, that is on the assumption that it was free. But once seeds and breeds were processed, they would be sold on the market. A recent study commissioned by the UN Development Programme estimates that Indigenous peoples' seed varieties stored in international agricultural research centers are yielding at least five billion dollars a year in germplasm to developed-country crop production and that almost all of it comes from developing nations. (J.Dayal 1994). A controversy originated: either access should be free on both ends (germplasm and resulting seeds and breeds) or it should be a commodity on both ends as well. This last option was ultimately adopted in The Convention on biological Diversity. (G. Nijal, Cunningham). On the other hand, plant varieties evolve and co-evolve with micro-organisms. It is therefore crucial to conserve these varieties in situ as well as in germplasm banks. Such conservation was the outcome of the work and research of generations of cultivators. In recognition of such a contribution, the UN Food and Agriculture Administration established for them an International Fund for Phytogenetic Resources. It recognized, in 1989, Farmers' Rights as "arising from the past, present and future contribution of farmers in conserving, improving and making available plant genetic resources, particularly those in the centers of origin/diversity" (apud G.Nijal). A similar recognition, stating the role of indigenous peoples, figures in the Convention on Biological Diversity (G.Nijal:9)

Another source should originate from diffuse intellectual property rights. There are over a million and a half species on the planet. How is one to screen possible plants, in search of chemical compounds of value to medicine or industry? Traditional peoples' accumulated knowledge is important in setting orders of priority, and it increases the efficiency of screening plants for medical purposes by more than 400% (Balick). Indigenous Intellectual Rights should be compensated with royalties whenever a product which profitted from it goes into the market, and different approaches for compensating Indigenous Knowledge in other situations have been discussed (Stephen Brush).

Can this work? Can traditional peoples be involved as managers or co-managers in conservation areas?

Here we get to practical challenges, as there is no simple answer to this question. A number of case studies are being conducted to specify the conditions under which there could be successes (J. Poole 1993, Chase-Smith, Hill). But certain parameters are already clear. First of all, people want to lead a better life, have access to health and education facilities and have access to goods. If they can achieve these goals and at the same time provide tropical forest for the benefit of humanity, then we have some chance of success. The main challenges are both internal and external. Internally, democratic institutions and values have to be fostered which will allow for rational collective action to take place. Externally, the market (unless one wants to resort to dictatorship) has to encourage rational collective behavior by rewarding things that, up to now, were side-products of traditional management and simply taken for granted. It could do so directly, by treating traditional peoples as forest-keepers, and paying them, but this is hardly a desirable procedure. But it can also do it indirectly by providing basic services, particularly health and education programs, enhancing training in managerial, quality testing and marketing skills and by helping the development of sustainable new products. ²

Lastly, the question is. Why should traditional peoples be involved in conservation plans?

I think there are four main reasons for doing so:

The first is plain justice: traditional peoples live in their territories, and they have rights to the land and its resources.

Then there is the fact that if traditional peoples participate in resource preservation, there will be significantly more preserved areas. In Brazil, as of 1990, natural preservation areas in the Amazon added up to some 17 million hectares in 1990, whereas a report from 1992 gave a total of 74,5 million hectares set aside (though in various stages of recognition) for Indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon (Commission on Development 1992, apud Davis and Walaka 1993). It appears that throughout the world, if tropical forests were only to be preserved in existing natural parks, around 66% of existing species could

² A few interesting studies have been conducted on the market value of forest products Ch. Peters et alia 1989a and 1989 b).

disappear. And then, disappearance does not only affect living species, it also, most importantly, affects information: all the knowledge about the environment, all the skills and management procedures discovered and developed by Indigenous peoples would be endangered as well.

Third, economically, it is much more sound and politically, much more viable to empower traditional peoples as custodians and guardians of the forest instead of expelling people from the land and building a fence around it (Alegretti).

The last reason is that traditional peoples have vested interests in conservation and have manifested their desire to participate in it, and such grass-root demands bear greater prospects of success than top-down initiatives. Vested interests are of two kinds. First, it is clear that if they want to continue deriving a living from their territory, they will have to continue protecting its resources. And then, although their land rights stem from historical sources, public opinion backing which relies to a great extent on conservation, is crucial for indigenous populations to be able to evict encroachers.

I would like to stress at this point that, at least in Brazil, the foundations of Indigenous land Rights is their historical precedence on the land. To make them dependent on conservation would entail denying long-established rights. This means that there cannot be, there should not be a contract which submits Indian Rights to other considerations.

On the other hand, here is an opportunity to make a new deal with traditional peoples. Instead of being viewed as hindrances to progress and relics from the past, by becoming managers or co-managers of natural areas for the benefit of humanity as a whole, they will be partners and allies for our common future.

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