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Conservation refugees

When protecting nature means kicking people out



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MARK DOWIE

Low fog envelopes the steep and remote valleys of southwestern Uganda most mornings, as birds found only in this small corner of the continent rise in chorus and the great apes drink from clear streams. Days in the dense montane forest are quiet and steamy. Nights are an exaltation of insects and primate howling. For thousands of years the Batwa people thrived in this soundscape, in such close harmony with the forest that early-twentieth-century wildlife biologists who studied the flora and fauna of the region barely noticed their existence. They were, as one naturalist noted, “part of the fauna.”

In the 1930s, Ugandan leaders were persuaded by international conservationists that this area was threatened by loggers, miners, and other extractive

interests. In response, three forest reserves were created – the Mgahinga, the Echuya, and the Bwindi – all of which overlapped with the Batwa’s ancestral territory. For sixty years these reserves simply existed on paper, which kept them off-limits to extractors. And the Batwa stayed on, living as they had for generations, in reciprocity with the diverse biota that first drew conservationists to the region.

However, when the reserves were formally designated as national parks in 1991 and a bureaucracy was created and funded by the World Bank’s Global Environment Facility to manage them, a rumor was in circulation that the Batwa were hunting and eating silverback gorillas, which by that time were widely recognised as a threatened species and also, increasingly, as a featured attraction for ecotourists

from Europe and America. Gorillas were being disturbed and even poached, the Batwa admitted, but by Bahutu, Batutsi, Bantu, and other tribes who invaded the forest from outside villages. The Batwa, who felt a strong kinship with the great apes, adamantly denied killing them. Nonetheless, under pressure from traditional Western conservationists, who had come to believe that wilderness and human community were incompatible, the Batwa were forcibly expelled from their homeland.

These forests are so dense that the Batwa lost perspective when they first came out. Some even stepped in front of moving vehicles. Now they are living in shabby squatter camps on the perimeter of the parks, without running water or sanitation. In one more generation their forest-based culture – songs, rituals, traditions, stories – will be gone.

It's no secret that millions of native peoples around the world have been pushed off their land to make room for big oil, big metal, big timber, and big agriculture. But few people realise that the same thing has happened for a much nobler cause: land and wildlife conservation. Today the list of culture-wrecking institutions put forth by tribal leaders on almost every continent includes not only Shell, Texaco, Freeport, and Bechtel, but also more surprising names like Conservation International (CI), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). Even the more culturally sensitive World Conservation Union (IUCN) might get a mention.

In early 2004 a United Nations meeting was convened in New York for the ninth year in a row to push for passage of a resolution protecting the territorial and human rights of indigenous peoples. The UN draft declaration states: "Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option to return." During the meeting an indigenous delegate who did not identify herself rose to state that while extractive industries were still a serious threat to their welfare and cultural integrity, their new and biggest enemy was "conservation."

Later that spring, at a Vancouver, British Columbia, meeting of the International Forum on Indigenous Mapping, all two hundred delegates signed a declaration stating that the "activities of conservation organisations now represent the single

biggest threat to the integrity of indigenous lands." These rhetorical jabs have shaken the international conservation community, as have a subsequent spate of critical articles and studies, two of them conducted by the Ford Foundation, calling big conservation to task for its historical mistreatment of indigenous peoples.

"We are enemies of conservation," declared Maasai leader Martin Saining'o, standing before a session of the November 2004 World Conservation Congress sponsored by IUCN in Bangkok, Thailand. The nomadic Maasai, who have over the past thirty years lost most of their grazing range to conservation projects throughout eastern Africa, hadn't always felt that way. In fact, Saining'o reminded his audience, "...we were the original conservationists."

The room was hushed as he quietly explained how pastoral and nomadic cattlemen have traditionally protected their range: "Our ways of farming pollinated diverse seed species and maintained corridors between ecosystems." Then he tried to fathom the strange version of land conservation that has impoverished his people, more than one hundred thousand of whom have been displaced from southern Kenya and the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania. Like the Batwa, the Maasai have not been fairly compensated. Their culture is dissolving and they live in poverty.

"We don't want to be like you," Saining'o told a room of shocked white faces. "We want you to be like us. We are here to change your minds. You cannot accomplish conservation without us." Although he might not have realised it, Saining'o was speaking for a growing worldwide movement of indigenous peoples who think of themselves as conservation

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Kingston Chang

The Maasai are seminomadic pastoralists, dependent on their domestic animals for their livelihood



refugees. Not to be confused with ecological refugees – people forced to abandon their homelands as a result of unbearable heat, drought, desertification, flooding, disease, or other consequences of climate chaos – conservation refugees are removed from their lands involuntarily, either forcibly or through a variety of less coercive measures. The gentler, more benign methods are sometimes called “soft eviction” or “voluntary resettlement,” though the latter is contestable. Soft or hard, the main complaint heard in the makeshift villages bordering parks and at meetings like the World Conservation

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Congress in Bangkok is that relocation often occurs with the tacit approval or benign neglect of one of the five big international nongovernmental conservation organisations, or as they have been nicknamed by indigenous leaders, the BINGOs. Indigenous peoples are often left out of the process entirely.

Curious about this brand of conservation that puts the rights of nature before the rights of people, I set out last autumn to meet the issue face to face. I visited with tribal members on three continents who were grappling with the consequences of Western conservation and found an alarming similarity among the stories I heard.

Khon Noi, matriarch of a remote mountain village, huddles next to an open-pit stove in the loose, brightly colored clothes that identify her as Karen, the most populous of six tribes found in the lush, mountain reaches of far northern Thailand. Her village of sixty-five families has been in the

same valley for over 200 years. She chews betel, spitting its bright red juice into the fire, and speaks softly through black teeth. She tells me I can use her name, as long as I don't identify her village.

“The government has no idea who I am,” she says. “The only person in the village they know by name is the ‘headman’ they appointed to represent us in government negotiations. They were here last week, in military uniforms, to tell us we could no longer practice rotational agriculture in this valley. If they knew that someone here was saying bad things about them they would come back again and move us out.”

In a recent outburst of environmental enthusiasm stimulated by generous financial offerings from the Global Environment Facility, the Thai government has been creating national parks as fast as the Royal Forest Department can map them. Ten years ago there was barely a park to be found in Thailand, and because those few that existed were unmarked “paper parks,” few Thais even knew they were there. Now there are 114 land parks and 24 marine parks on the map. Almost twenty-five thousand square kilometers, most of which are occupied by hill and fishing tribes, are now managed by the forest department as protected areas.

“Men in uniform just appeared one day, out of nowhere, showing their guns,” Kohn Noi recalls, “and telling us that we were now living in a national park. That was the first we knew of it. Our own guns were confiscated . . . no more hunting, no more trapping, no more snaring, and no more ‘slash and burn.’ That’s what they call our agriculture. We call it crop rotation and we’ve been doing it in this valley for over two hundred years. Soon we will be forced to sell rice to pay for greens and legumes we are no longer allowed to grow here. Hunting we can live without, as we raise chickens, pigs, and buffalo. But rotational farming is our way of life.”

A week before our conversation, and a short flight south of Noi's village, 6,000 conservationists were attending the World Conservation Congress in Bangkok. At that conference and elsewhere, big conservation has denied that they are party to the evictions while generating reams of promotional material about their close relationships with indigenous peoples. “We recognise that indigenous people have perhaps the deepest understanding of the Earth's living resources,” says Conservation International chairman and CEO Peter Seligman, adding that, “we firmly believe that indigenous people must have ownership, control and title of their lands.” Such messages are carefully projected



Darren Nance

The Karen were forced by the government to trade Thai citizenship for the right to practice swidden cultivation, which has had a serious impact on their livelihood.

toward major funders of conservation, which in response to the aforementioned Ford Foundation reports and other press have become increasingly sensitive to indigenous peoples and their struggles for cultural survival.

Financial support for international conservation has in recent years expanded well beyond the individuals and family foundations that seeded the movement to include very large foundations like Ford, MacArthur, and Gordon and Betty Moore, as well as the World Bank, its Global Environment Facility, foreign governments, USAID, a host of bilateral and multilateral banks, and transnational corporations. During the 1990s USAID alone pumped almost \$300 million into the international conservation movement, which it had come to regard as a vital adjunct to economic prosperity. The five largest conservation organisations, CI, TNC, and WWF among them, absorbed over 70% of that expenditure. Indigenous communities received none of it. The Moore Foundation made a singular ten-year commitment of nearly \$280 million, the largest environmental grant in history, to just one organisation – Conservation International. And all of the BINGOs have become increasingly corporate in recent years, both in orientation and affiliation. The Nature Conservancy now boasts almost two thousand corporate sponsors, while Conservation International has received about \$9 million from its two hundred fifty corporate “partners.”

With that kind of financial and political leverage, as well as chapters in almost every country of the world, millions of loyal members, and nine-figure budgets, CI, WWF, and TNC have undertaken a hugely expanded global push to increase the number of so-called protected areas – parks, reserves, wildlife sanctuaries, and corridors created to preserve biological diversity. In 1962, there were some 1,000 official protected areas worldwide. Today there are 108,000, with more being added every day. The total area of land now under conservation protection worldwide has doubled since 1990, when the World Parks Commission set a goal of protecting 10 percent of the planet’s surface. That goal has been exceeded, with over 12% of all land, a total area of 11.75 million square miles, now protected. That’s an area greater than the entire land mass of Africa.

During the 1990s the African nation of Chad increased the amount of national land under protection from 0.1 to 9.1%. All of that land had been previously inhabited by what are now an estimated 600,000 conservation refugees. No other country besides India, which officially admits to



Driven out of their forests, many Batwa turned to pottery and to some extent, this craft is now synonymous with Batwa ethnic identity. But plastics and other modern industrial substitutes are posing a threat to the potters’ livelihoods

1.6 million, is even counting this growing new class of refugees. World estimates offered by the UN, IUCN, and a few anthropologists range from 5 million to tens of millions. Charles Geisler, a sociologist at Cornell University who has studied displacements in Africa, is certain the number on that continent alone exceeds 14 million.

The true worldwide figure, if it were ever known, would depend upon the semantics of words like “eviction,” “displacement,” and “refugee,” over which parties on all sides of the issue argue endlessly. The larger point is that conservation refugees exist on every continent but Antarctica, and by most accounts live far more difficult lives than they once did, banished from lands they thrived on for hundreds, even thousands of years.

John Muir, a forefather of the US conservation movement, argued that “wilderness” should be cleared of all inhabitants and set aside to satisfy the urbane human’s need for recreation and spiritual renewal. It was a sentiment that became national policy with the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, which defined wilderness as a place “where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” One should not be surprised to find hardy residues of these sentiments among traditional conservation groups. The preference for “virgin” wilderness has lingered on in a movement that has tended to value all nature but human nature, and refused to recognise the positive wildness in human beings.

Expulsions continue around the world to this day. The Indian government, which evicted 100,000

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The Huaorani of Ecuador are fighting oil prospecting in the Yasuni National Park

adivasis (rural peoples) in Assam between April and July of 2002, estimates that 2 or 3 million more will be displaced over the next decade. The policy is largely in response to a 1993 lawsuit brought by WWF, which demanded that the government increase protected areas by 8%, mostly in order to protect tiger habitat. A more immediate threat involves the impending removal of several Mayan communities from the Montes Azules region of Chiapas, Mexico, a process begun in the mid-1970s with the intent to preserve virgin tropical forest, which could still quite easily spark a civil war. Conservation International is deeply immersed in that controversy, as are a host of extractive industries.

Tribal people, who tend to think and plan in generations, rather than weeks, months, and years, are still waiting to be paid the consideration promised. Of course the UN draft declaration is the prize because it must be ratified by so many nations. The declaration has failed to pass so far mainly because powerful leaders such as the UK's Tony Blair and the US' George Bush threaten to veto it, arguing that there is not and should never be such a thing as collective human rights.

Sadly, the human rights and global conservation communities remain at serious odds over the

question of displacement, each side blaming the other for the particular crisis they perceive. Conservation biologists argue that by allowing native populations to grow, hunt, and gather in protected areas, anthropologists, cultural preservationists, and other supporters of indigenous rights become complicit in the decline of biological diversity. Some, like the Wildlife Conservation Society's outspoken president, Steven Sanderson, believe that the entire global conservation agenda has been "hijacked" by advocates for indigenous peoples, placing wildlife and biodiversity in peril. "Forest peoples and their representatives may speak for the forest," Sanderson has said, "They may speak for their version of the forest; but they do not speak for the forest we want to conserve." WCS, originally the New York Zoological Society, is a BINGO lesser in size and stature than the likes of TNC and CI, but more insistent than its colleagues that indigenous territorial rights, while a valid social issue, should be of no concern to wildlife conservationists.

Market-based solutions put forth by human rights groups, which may have been implemented with the best of social and ecological intentions, share a lamentable outcome, barely discernible behind a smoke screen of slick promotion. In almost every case indigenous people are moved into the money economy without the means to participate in it fully. They become permanently indentured as park rangers (never wardens), porters, waiters, harvesters, or, if they manage to learn a European language, ecotour guides. Under this model, "conservation" edges ever closer to "development," while native communities are assimilated into the lowest ranks of national cultures.

It should be no surprise, then, that tribal peoples regard conservationists as just another colonizer – an extension of the deadening forces of economic and cultural hegemony. Whole societies like the Batwa, the Maasai, the Ashinika of Peru, the Gwi and Gana Bushmen of Botswana, the Karen and Hmong of Southeast Asia, and the Huaorani of Ecuador are being transformed from independent and self-sustaining into deeply dependent and poor communities.

When I travelled throughout Mesoamerica and the Andean-Amazon watershed last autumn visiting staff members of CI, TNC, WCS, and WWF I was looking for signs that an awakening was on the horizon. The field staff I met were acutely aware that the spirit of exclusion survives in the headquarters of their organisations, alongside a subtle but real prejudice against "unscientific"



native wisdom. Dan Campbell, TNC's director in Belize, conceded, "We have an organisation that sometimes tries to employ models that don't fit the culture of nations where we work." And Joy Grant, in the same office, said that as a consequence of a protracted disagreement with the indigenous peoples of Belize, local people "are now the key to everything we do."

"We are arrogant," was the confession of a CI executive working in South America, who asked me not to identify her. I was heartened by her admission until she went on to suggest that this was merely a minor character flaw. In fact, arrogance was cited by almost all of the nearly one hundred indigenous leaders I met with as a major impediment to constructive communication with big conservation.

If field observations and field workers' sentiments trickle up to the headquarters of CI and the other BINGOs, there could be a happy ending to this story. There are already positive working models of socially sensitive conservation on every continent, particularly in Australia, Bolivia, Nepal, and Canada, where national laws that protect native land rights leave foreign conservationists no choice but to join hands with indigenous communities and work out creative ways to protect wildlife habitat and sustain biodiversity while allowing indigenous citizens to thrive in their traditional settlements.

In most such cases it is the native people who initiate the creation of a reserve, which is more likely to be called an "indigenous protected area" (IPA) or a "community conservation area" (CCA). IPAs are an invention of Australian aboriginals, many of whom have regained ownership and territorial autonomy under new treaties with the national government, and CCAs are appearing around the world, from Lao fishing villages along the Mekong River to the Mataven Forest in Colombia, where six indigenous tribes live in 152 villages bordering a four-million-acre ecologically intact reserve.

The Kayapo, a nation of Amazonian Indians with whom the Brazilian government and CI have formed a co-operative conservation project, is another such example. Kayapo leaders, renowned for their militancy, openly refused to be treated like just another stakeholder in a two-way deal between a national government and a conservation NGO, as is so often the case with co-operative management plans. Throughout negotiations they insisted upon being an equal player at the table, with equal rights and land sovereignty. As a consequence, the

Xingu National Park, the continent's first Indian-owned park, was created to protect the lifeways of the Kayapo and other indigenous Amazonians who are determined to remain within the park's boundaries.

In many locations, once a CCA is established and territorial rights are assured, the founding community invites a BINGO to send its ecologists and wildlife biologists to share in the task of protecting biodiversity by combining Western scientific methodology with indigenous ecological knowledge. And on occasion they will ask for help negotiating with reluctant governments. For example, the Guarani Izoceños people in Bolivia invited the Wildlife Conservation Society to mediate a co-management agreement with their government, which today allows the tribe to manage and own part of the new Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco National Park.

Too much hope should probably not be placed in a handful of successful co-management models, however. The unrestrained corporate lust for energy, hardwood, medicines, and strategic metals is still a considerable threat to indigenous communities, arguably a larger threat than conservation. But the lines between the two are being blurred. Particularly problematic is the fact that international conservation organisations remain comfortable working in close quarters with some of the most aggressive global resource prospectors, such as Boise Cascade, Chevron-Texaco, Mitsubishi, Conoco-Phillips, International



Mayan communities are being evicted from the Monte Azules National Park in Mexico, because they are allegedly destroying the rainforest (www.grain.org/seedling/?id=272).



Paper, Rio Tinto Mining, Shell, and Weyerhaeuser, all of whom are members of a CI-created entity called the Center for Environmental Leadership in Business. Of course if the BINGOs were to renounce their corporate partners, they would forfeit millions of dollars in revenue and access to global power without which they sincerely believe they could not be effective. And there are some respected and influential conservation biologists who still strongly support top-down, centralised “fortress” conservation. Duke University’s John Terborgh, for example, believes that co-management projects and CCAs are a huge mistake. “My feeling is that a park should be a park, and it shouldn’t have any resident people in it,” he says. He bases his argument on three decades of research in Peru’s Manu National

Park, where native Machiguenga Indians fish and hunt animals with traditional weapons. Terborgh is concerned that they will acquire motorboats, guns, and chainsaws used by their fellow tribesmen outside the park, and that biodiversity will suffer. Then there’s paleontologist Richard Leakey, who at the 2003 World Parks Congress in South Africa set off a firestorm of protest by denying the very existence of indigenous peoples in Kenya, his homeland, and arguing that “the global interest in biodiversity might sometimes trump the rights of local people.”

Yet many conservationists are beginning to realise that most of the areas they have sought to protect are rich in biodiversity precisely because the people who were living there had come to understand the value and mechanisms of biological diversity. Some will even admit that wrecking the lives of 10 million or more poor, powerless people has been an enormous mistake – not only a moral, social, philosophical, and economic mistake, but an ecological one as well. Others have learned from experience that national parks and protected areas surrounded by angry, hungry people who describe themselves as “enemies of conservation” are generally doomed to fail.



Hmong child selling trinkets. Like many others, the Hmong are in danger of becoming little more than a tourist attraction

More and more conservationists seem to be wondering how, after setting aside a “protected” land mass the size of Africa, global

biodiversity continues to decline. Might there be something terribly wrong with this plan – particularly after the Convention on Biological Diversity has documented the astounding fact that in Africa, where so many parks and reserves have been created and where indigenous evictions run highest, 90% of biodiversity lies outside of protected areas? If we want to preserve biodiversity in the far reaches of the globe, places that are often still occupied by indigenous people living in ways that are ecologically sustainable, history shows us that the dumbest thing we can do is kick them out.



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This article was first published in Orion Magazine, www.oriononline.org