

Indigenous Peoples, National Parks, and Protected Areas: A New Paradigm Linking Conservation, Culture, and Rights

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Indigenous Peoples, National Parks, and Protected Areas: A New Paradigm Linking Conservation, Culture, and Rights

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8165-3091-5.

Arguments about the extent to which conservation schemes should involve local people are long-running. They are contentious, involving controversial claims to knowledge about the natural environment and complex political issues around demands for disputed rights. This book is a recent contribution to the debate that promises a “new paradigm” or fundamental change in approach. It comprises 2 introductory chapters by the editor, followed by 9 case study chapters that focus on conservation issues in particular regions, and concludes with a chapter, again by the editor, that summarizes the “new paradigm.” As is the case with most edited volumes, readers are unlikely to read the book from cover to cover but will rather pick off those chapters that deal with issues and regions of particular interest to them. The chapters that are most likely to attract the interest of this journal’s readers are those that focus on mountain regions and associated conservation issues.

The first of these is Chapter 4, which concerns the rugged national parks of Southeast Alaska, home to the Tlingit people. They occur in the Northwest Coast cultural region famous in the anthropological literature for the *potlatch* exchange institution (the *koo.éex* “giving” in Tlingit), which features reciprocal ceremonial feasts and transactions of possessions between clans to validate relations and status. Thomas Thornton alights upon the recently popular

idea of “inalienable possessions” —advanced by the French social philosopher Marcel Mauss, drawing partly on the *potlatch* ethnography—which suggests that when persons give things they maintain some inalienable spiritual connection to them that prompts the receiver to reciprocate. Thornton argues that the Tlingit have a similar attitude to natural resource exploitation, and he suggests that this might fruitfully be extended to conservation arrangements. These people think that an area can be protected only when they exploit its resources reciprocally, with the resulting products presented in exchange transactions. The next chapter, focusing on northern Canada, serves to frame the previous one historically. John Sandlos gives a general overview of conservation programs, describing how these have moved from paternalist colonial impositions that excluded indigenous people to current participatory co-management arrangements that acknowledge local views. He argues that the authorities need to extend on these and give people more control—even restore local management and exploitation regimes—although he gives few ideas how to overcome the considerable political hurdles.

In Chapter 6, we move to South America and the Andes. According to Emily Caruso, the Ashaninka people—who live in tropical highland forests within the Vilcabamba Conservation Complex of Peru—offer a possible alternative to thwart governments extending bureaucratic control covertly over indigenous communities through co-management arrangements. The Ashaninka nullify this by following their acephalous ways, ignoring the state’s attempts to impose restrictions on their access to the forest, continuing to live according to their time-honored relations with the forest’s many spirit denizens. Although not an alternative, it is certainly a challenge to current co-management attempts—until the state possibly intervenes with force.

Chapter 8 takes us north to mountainous Honduras where Sharlene Mollet argues that attempts by the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve to reformulate local land access and tenure arrangements represent ethnocentric interference in the local Miskito people’s relations. They also challenge the legitimacy of the standard reserve layout with an excluding nucleus zone surrounded by buffer zones. Adopting a gendered perspective, Mollet argues that the state is undermining the position of Miskito women and encouraging struggles with men in seeking to consolidate the Reserve’s zonal boundaries by replacing the matrilineally organized collective land tenure arrangements with individual land rights. The Maya population in neighboring Guatemala have experienced similar disruption to their lives, where the Los Altos de San Miguel Park in the highlands region has sought to overlay traditional environmental stewardship with state-defined zoned-park arrangements; but here, Brian Conz argues in Chapter 10, it has resulted in some positive outcomes. In contesting the Park’s conservation policies and its impact on their forest-dependent livelihoods, the local population has reinforced its Mayan cultural identity, asserted its autonomy, and affirmed its customary and resource management arrangements. In short, the Maya illustrate indigenous shaping of conservation policy, although the necessary political conditions are the result of decades of civil war.

Chapter 11 is by Stan Stevens, the book’s editor. In this final case study, he argues that Sherpa people living in the Sagarmatha National Park of Nepal, which includes Mount Everest within its borders, should be allowed more autonomy in managing their region’s natural resources. He points out that their sustainable land use practices, collective management of forest and grazing commons, and protection of sacred natural sites witness a long-standing customary conservation ethic that is responsible

for today's natural environment. He argues that the Sherpa meet the criteria of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for recognition as custodians of an "Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Territories and Areas" (ICCA) region (a conservation arrangement he describes at length in Chapter 2, including its formal acceptance at the 2003 Fifth World Parks Congress in Durban). He mentions the considerable political barriers to such recognition, again without offering any meaningful suggestions as to how the Sherpa might overcome them—their communities continuing to occupy a marginal social status even after a decade of civil war that weakened the Hindu high caste governing elite's hold on power.

Although a collection of essays putting the case for involving local communities meaningfully in the declaration and management of conservation areas is welcome, it is perhaps disingenuous to say that it presents a "new paradigm." In agreeing to review the book, I anticipated some advance on the biocultural diversity argument that has sought for

some time to challenge the state-imposed protected area approach. Indigenous peoples have lobbied for it for decades at various international fora, as discussed in this book in the context of rights-based approaches. There is nothing new for those with an anthropological background, particularly an ethnobiological one, in arguing that today's "natural" environments owe something to generations of human-animal-plant interactions and that to suppress it may even alter the ecology that conservation seeks to protect. The volume also overlooks the lessons of the participatory approach to development with regard to integrating local communities into decision-making and management, particularly the associated indigenous knowledge approach that seeks, similar to the "new conservation paradigm," to make meaningful room for local views.

The root challenge is to get agencies and governments to involve local people substantially, which implies the former giving up some of their power—in short, reversing colonial domination. It is a tall order, and, as the editor observes, "shifting paradigms is easier done

rhetorically than on the ground" (p 79). We may assist communities through our research to show how their environmental relations and livelihood practices make them sound stewards of their regions, although indigenous approaches may differ from the orthodox conservation one, involving different knowledge and conceptions of the environment, which may imply "different kinds of protected areas that strikingly diverge in ownership; governance; management ... habitation; access to natural and cultural resources; and the allocation of responsibilities" (p 61). The other alternative is to become a politician and argue in various forums for changes in conservation practice, although this is arguably up to indigenous peoples' representatives, who are proving quite able to do so.

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