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CONVERSATIONS 2: Forest Conservation

Revisiting Canons and Dogmas in the Conservation-versus-Human Rights Debate

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The conservation-versus-human rights debate typically positions ecologists and conservationists against social scientists and human rights activists (Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2010). I argue that recent research in the natural and social sciences invites us to revisit entrenched mythologies, canons, and dogmas on both sides.

The moral imperative of biodiversity conservation and protection of endangered species resonates with most people, as does the importance of protecting the rights of vulnerable people. To understand the spaces of agreement and dissent, it is important to disentangle the *twin moral imperatives* of conservation and social justice from the *canons and dogmas* informing conservation, *actual conservation strategies*, and the outcomes for humans and non-human species.

The *core premise* of protected areas-based conservation is that human presence in ‘pristine’ or ‘wilderness’ areas is detrimental to biodiversity (Karanth 2018). This canon of human disturbance has underpinned the creation of ‘inviolate’ protected areas as the preferred *strategy* for biodiversity conservation worldwide, and also underlies optional strategies like participatory conservation, ‘sustainable landscapes’ (Karanth 2018), as well as the ‘land-sparing’ arguments of more recent vintage (Phalan *et al.* 2011). The rate of creation of protected areas has accelerated in the twenty-first century as part of a global consensus under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD).

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Millions of the world's poorest people depend on protected areas for vital ecosystem services, and are disproportionately impacted by the exclusionary nature of conservation, since it is inherently a 'place'-based activity. Restrictions on poor peoples' access to resources in protected areas underpin the conservation-versus-human rights debate. Agencies have shifted towards using conservation strategies that are more participatory, but allegations of loss of livelihoods and lifeworlds of peoples dependent on protected areas remain widespread and well documented (Adams *et al.* 2004).

The strongest critiques of the canon of human disturbance have emerged from within the ecological sciences, in which the multiple meanings of conservation are being debated today (Sandbrook 2015). Several ecologists argue that not all human use of natural landscapes can be counted as 'disturbance'; the *nature and scale* of human interventions matter. Small-scale use of resources by local communities for subsistence or commercial purposes must be distinguished from large-scale extraction for corporate profit (Malm 2015).

Second, human use of protected areas is not equally detrimental to all species (Persha *et al.* 2011). Co-inhabiting a landscape with humans may be easier for leopards or lions than for tigers or elephants (Bhatnagar 2009; Odden *et al.* 2014), although it is important to differentiate coexistence from co-occurrence.

Third, the impact of human use on particular species should be distinguished from its impacts on communities of species and on entire ecosystems.

Lastly, human interventions like fire management and livestock grazing may be critical in maintaining the structure and functions of ecosystems like grasslands (Saberwal 1996), even though overuse may cause long-term damage. Evidence of *incremental* conservation gains from reduction or elimination of human use is scant, mainly because these gains have been *assumed* rather than *demonstrated*. Available evidence of biodiversity gains from fortress conservation usually does not consider the cascading impacts of exclusion on the landscape to which, for instance, people evicted from protected areas are moved.

Another unknown is how localized conservation successes through the establishment of protected areas compare against the widespread losses of biodiversity due to untrammelled urbanization and economic growth. In today's globalized world, resources flow continually between inviolate, less intensively used, and intensively used landscapes, but it is ignored in the

‘sustainable landscapes’ approach cited by Karanth (2018). These critiques are shared by ecologists as well as social scientists.

Interdisciplinary research in human-dominated landscapes, including urban areas and ‘novel ecosystems’, calls for nuancing the conservation-versus-human rights debate further. Protected areas-based conservation theory assumes that once human use is restricted or eliminated, ecosystems revert automatically to their original ‘pristine’ state, but restoration ecology research highlights that ecosystem recovery from human ‘disturbance’ happens neither automatically nor immediately. For ‘vacated’ landscapes to start supporting non-invasive flora and fauna, significant long-term human interventions are required (Babu *et al.* 2009). The choice, here, is not between inviolate versus managed protected areas but between different management regimes.

Social science critiques of the canon of fortress conservation include work by environmental historians who show that protected areas are not ‘pristine’ landscapes but historically shaped by human agency. Political ecologists questioning the nature-culture binary argue that ‘wilderness’ areas are, in fact, socially constructed and continue to be shaped by deeply political processes (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001). Those in power often abuse the dogma of fortress conservation to extend control over territories and resources through ‘green-grabbing’ (Fairhead *et al.* 2012).

Anthropological research on forest-dependent people has strongly questioned the canon of the ‘noble savage’. Indigenous and other individuals and communities that depend on natural resources are neither intrinsically conservationist nor necessarily isolated and remote remnants of a more equitable, harmonious, and sustainable past (Sinha *et al.* 1997). Abundant empirical evidence exists about dynamic social changes in these societies, diversity of resource use, increased mobility, and aspirations for modernity.

I agree with Karanth (2018) about the need for robust, evidence-backed strategies as opposed to faith-based claims. Social scientists, ecologists, conservationists, and activists working for the rights of humans and nonhuman species must strive to free the conservation-development debate from false canons, dogmas, and mythologies. Value plurality and defensible science are essential for opening new dialogic spaces and finding workable strategies to save humans and non-human species from destruction.

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