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Conservation and Culture: Natural Resource Management and the Local Voice

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Introduction

Contemporary natural resource management is expanding its focus as a result of the dynamic interchange between conservationists and local people residing in or near the world's protected wildlands. Whereas conservation efforts previously focused on the biological aspects of particular wild areas, today's conservation involves local, national, and international stakeholders in a broader, more sociopolitically-charged context. This paper illustrates the different variables involved in natural resource management from the local to international sphere, and discusses the new emphasis in management programs that involve culture and local involvement as crucial components to their success. Following this discussion, the paper will illustrate how these variables have broken down in the Ecuadorian Amazon, resulting in desperate attempts by local communities to surpass national resource managers and appeal to the international conservation community for protection of their native environment. The process of contextualizing natural resource management is difficult, especially when viewed at the external or international level. However, integration of different cultural perspectives concerning natural resource management at the local level, with acknowledgement of site-specificity, may prove to be the new paradigm in conservation. It is upon the social stage, rather than the economic, that conservation of culture and conservation of environment will be viewed as the same process. And it is when local perspectives and cultural contexts are respected and valued, that conservation becomes an effective process.

The Politics of International Conservation

Conservation projects in the developing world have been historically driven at the national or international level by interest groups concerned with preserving biological diversity in ecologically-rich natural areas. International and national-level non-government organizations (NGOs) and other conservation institutions around the globe have oftentimes undertaken projects which reflect their biases for preservation of biological diversity over cultural integrity, without reflection upon the relationship between the two. Policies with direct implications for local communities are oftentimes formulated in international arenas (Milton 1993), rather than at the sites of their administration.

Acceptance of national parks has been shown to increase proportionately with increased distance to the area

(Rentsch 1988), a finding which reflects the decontextualized nature of park delimitation. This decontextualization in environmental policy making can have drastic consequences upon local communities "who may find their everyday activities banned by international laws, or their economies undermined by the campaigning efforts of NGOs" (Milton 1993:5). As notes Einarsson, "in the *realpolitik* of international relations, ethnocentric assumptions can be forced upon cultures that deviate from what hegemonic cultural superpowers define as civilized and acceptable" (1993: 81-2). He further states that, "greater understanding of the cultural barriers that are crossed when policies are implemented could make these policies more sensitive to local needs" (Milton 1993:5). Developing countries, many of which retain large expanses of wildlands in unprotected or newly-protected status, may be forced politically or economically to accept natural resource policies that ignore the cultural context of resource use. While management successes such as the debt-for-nature swaps and ecotourism have served to combine wildland protection with economic planning (Hendee et al. 1990), their effects upon local people in terms of social, rather than economic, factors have not been fully explored.

The decontextualized nature of international conservation projects often results in a breakdown in enforceability at the local level. It has been noted that the Western ideals of parks and preserves have protected externally-valued areas at the expense of local rural peoples, who view the reserves as taking away local life support (Field and Burch 1988). The argument that the concept of wilderness is "too elitist, exclusionary and recreation-oriented to be of value in developing countries where the more basic issues of food, education, rising population, and poverty are higher priority" (Hendee et al. 1990: 76-7) is highly relevant from the perspective of the rural subsistence farmer, as well as other inhabitants of lands adjoining protected areas. In the case of protected areas, the establishment of national parks - a luxury of wealthier nations (Southgate and Clark 1993) - may cause displacement and resentment from local communities that can result in extreme opposition and conflict between managers and their constituency (Southgate and Clark 1993). Well-organized rural groups may choose not to recognize reserve boundaries demarcated in their territories by an inaccessible bureaucrat (Southgate and Clark 1993). The existence of these problems illustrates the imperative that local people are included in the

management process from initiation to implementation, and that policies are made by individuals who are familiar with the context in which these policies are to be applied.

Public Involvement

Natural resource managers have been traditionally much more successful in addressing biological problems than the sociopolitical aspects of resource management. This is mostly due to the types of manager training and focus of resource management agencies (McMullin and Nielsen 1991). Many resource managers still adhere to the old ideology of professional management, believing that they are the best decision makers with regard to the areas under their supervision (McMullin and Nielsen 1991). However, recent controversies over the use of natural resources on a global scale proves that managers can no longer approach management autocratically. As Nowicki (1985: 277) notes, the sharing of global resources - either for aesthetic, spiritual, utilitarian, or anthropocentric reasons - constrains all people to share responsibility for their management. This responsibility "cannot be superimposed from outside parties, nor can assumptions and information upon which problems are identified and decisions are made, ignore the local concerns and points of view" (Nowicki 1985: 277). Rather, citizen participation and involvement in natural resource decision-making at initiation and throughout the management process is the most effective approach to conserving protected areas and resources (McMullin and Nielsen 1991; Hendee et al. 1990).

Local people must be seen as natural components of ecosystems, and their values and interests relating to natural resources must be respected - even when their values diverge from those of outsiders (Einarsson 1993). Since people inhabiting lands adjacent to protected areas are those with more investment and personal interest in the consequences of protected area regulations, they must be included in the decision-making process from the outset (Bachert 1991), or disputes and disregard for regulations on resource use will become inevitable (West and Brechin 1991). This public involvement will require that management administrators include regular meetings, hearings, or working groups for special issues as part of their organizational schedule (Bachert 1991). It is only by encouraging interaction between various interest groups that the different values and attitudes towards the protected area will be brought out, and it is through this continuous process of discussion and interaction that stakeholders may have a voice in management.

Different Cultures, Different Views of Wilderness

Hendee et al. (1990) note that it is often only residents of highly developed societies who discriminate wilderness from civilization. For those who interact with the natural environment directly and daily for subsistence, the distinction between nature as "other" and nature as interconnected with human existence is a moot point. As noted by Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Oglala Sioux in the 19th

Century:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and the winding streams with their tangled growth as "wild." Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land "infested" with "wild" animals and "savage" people. To us it was tame (McLuhan 1971 *IN* Hendee et al. 1990).

Hendee et al. (1990) also note that the differences in attitude between developed and less-developed nations comprise one reason why conservation has no meaning in many areas of the world where large expanses of wildlands still exist. Although the intersection of two different cultural traditions often results in a degree of synergy between them (Dover et al. 1992), resource conflicts may emerge in the international sphere when one set of views towards the environment is subordinated politically, socially, or economically for the dominant set. The differences in perceptions and attitudes in these situations have caused a "cultural blockage" to the adoption of a more conservationist attitude (Hendee et al. 1990). Since that conservationist attitude is so tightly linked to culture, the resistance to adopt new perspectives may represent resistance to the hegemony of the dominant group more than resistance to conservation itself. As notes Tohmé, "development projects can only be applied in a particular country if the people of that country desire them and if the cultural entity and natural environment of that country are taken into consideration" (1992:12). Careful consideration of the different attitudes towards wilderness and protected areas, and sensitivity to those differences across stratified groups in different countries, then, are integral to the promotion of successful conservation programs.

The Culture Connection

Tohmé finds that in many pre-industrial and rural societies, the management of natural resources is instilled in their cultural values (1992). Contrary to the Western practice of industrial domination over the environment and subordination of nature to meet the demands of over-consumptive livelihoods, many rural peoples demonstrate a high degree of harmony and respect for both the processes of nature and the human limitations within it. Environment and culture are bound together through socioeconomics, human surroundings, and cultural frameworks in a way that makes them vulnerable to the same enemies; such as poverty, illiteracy, disease, famine, alienation, the desire to dominate, etc. (Tohmé 1992: 20). The consequence of this connection is that most researchers have concentrated on socioeconomic development over cultural development, although damage to both the environment and culture are irreversible (Tohmé 1992). However, the connection between culture and environment for many of the world's rural populations is clear, due to their direct reliance upon a healthy environment and land for subsistence living.

As notes Nowicki, "a culture, once having achieved a symbiotic relationship with its natural environment, is resistant to change in itself" (1985: 279). Protection of the environment allows cultural development in relation to that habitat to occur (Tohmé 1992). Yet, many cultures do not need outsiders to inform them about the sustainable uses of their natural resources. Where they diverge from conservation ethics may be in the adoption of a Western emphasis on extraction and utilitarian uses of those resources. Once this is realized, and the economic side of resources is emotively valued less than future resource sustainability and cultural integrity, a society may find that its beliefs about the environment more closely resemble those of its traditional ancestors. For many modern societies, the only remnant populations of those native foreparents are indigenous peoples living near protected areas or wildlands.

Recontextualizing the Theme of Conservation

Since the 1980s, indigenous people residing in or near biologically diverse natural areas have become symbols and participants in the development of an ideology that links local natural resource use conflicts with international social movements (Conklin and Graham 1995). Using their "symbolic capital" as natural caretakers and conservationists, these indigenous groups have united with international conservation coalitions in order to preserve their rights to natural resource use and entitlement (Conklin and Graham 1995). Although these alliances have served both indigenous groups and conservationists in their respective agendas of resource control and resource protection (Conklin and Graham 1995), the relationship between the two groups is only as lasting as their abilities to uphold the images they have presented. For indigenous groups, the homogenization of many diverse belief systems into the projection of one, conservation-oriented ideal may backfire. Changing circumstances which may cause indigenous groups to differ from those conservation ideals may leave them with the dilemma of either conforming to their projected image or risk losing the political support gained by their alliances with international organizations (Conklin and Graham 1995). Conservation groups also may be affected by these changing circumstances. Indigenous groups which, through the support of conservation groups, have been given legal dominion over areas of high biological diversity may then elect to sell parts of that land for timber, mining, or other extractive purposes. Thus, the alliance between conservationists and indigenous groups is threatened by the image which has brought the two together - that of the indigenous as "natural conservationist" (Conklin and Graham 1995).

Despite the risks involved in uniting indigenous groups with environmental conservation, involvement by indigenous people - as well as local non-indigenous people - is believed to be the key to lasting environmental reform (Hendee et al. 1990). Before a dialogue can be established between local people and natural resource managers, "both

parties must be able to transform their symbolic perception of ecological reality into a common lexicon" (Nowicki 1985: 273). This process involves abolishing political images which do not truly reflect the values of the local community, concentrating instead on the real values, beliefs, and behaviors of local people in the environment under consideration. Only when the site-specific values, beliefs, and behaviors are established for all stakeholders can the process of developing a common ecological lexicon begin. Once the lexicon is developed, managers and local people can assess their natural resource needs and wants in the context of the local ecosystem. As Hendee et al. note, specific management techniques must be adapted to local circumstances (1990). When managers ignore the site-specificity of natural resource management, conservation projects will meet with problems and misunderstandings at the local level. Recontextualization of the natural resource management process is essential when attempting to meet the needs of different stakeholders in the environment under question.

Ecuadorian Case Study

In Latin America, natural resource managers view outside pressure, especially by small-scale subsistence farmers, as the major threat to wildland protection (Hendee et al. 1990). Although generalizations of the causes of natural resource degradation are easy to produce, it is much more complicated to assess the many variables involved when contextualizing the problems faced by a specific area. Studies conducted by in-country organizations in Ecuador have identified five important administrative problems in protected area management, including: lack of financial support for field activities, lack of properly trained personnel, unresolved land tenure problems, institutional inefficiency, and lack of technical and administrative personnel (USAID 1989). Additionally, USAID has listed five other major problems which threaten Ecuadorian wildland management, including: lack of imagination and foresight in administration, inadequate protection and management, deficiencies in wildland legislation and policy, lack of collaboration between public and private sectors, and lack of financial resources (USAID 1989: 39).

Ecuador maintains over 41,115km² of government-protected wildlands that cover approximately 15% of the national territory (EcoCiencia 1994); each facing numerous threats to their cultural and environmental integrity. Additionally, many of Ecuador's protected areas are inhabited or host adjacent human populations whose interests in the protected areas' natural resources may be intense - especially when those resources have high economic value to multinational corporations. Although international interests in Ecuador may focus mostly on the profits to be made from resource extraction, long-term members of communities adjacent to Ecuador's wildlands see more than economic gain from the use of their natural resources. When these local voices are extinguished by the draw of financial capital, the

result is more than a loss of biodiversity: a culture may face extinction as well.

The threats to local populations by multinational resource extraction and national parks management are illustrated in the current conflicts concerning the management of two of Ecuador's wild areas: the Huaorani Ethnic Reserve and Yasuni National Park in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The current threat to the Ecuadorian Amazon, pollution and road-building, has been reported to be caused by the multinational energy corporation, Maxus (El Comercio 1996). Maxus' operations have produced numerous oil spills, created two toxic waste landfills inside the Yasuni National Park, destroyed over 52,000 acres of ancient rainforest; and polluted or diverted 540 streams and waterways (Rainforest Action Network 1996). Maxus has also been accused of murdering a Huaorani man who was actively protesting their activities, and has used the Ecuadorian military to subdue local residents who protest their activities on local lands (Rainforest Action Network 1996). In March of 1996, Moi Enomenga, a Huaorani leader, sent the following message in order to tell the outside world of their plight:

"From our hearts, for our forest, we do not want any more of this company, its wells and roads in our territory. We don't want to work with Maxus, we just want to organize ourselves as Huaorani. The Huaorani don't want Maxus anymore, and we want the whole world to know" (Rainforest Action Network 1996).

Thus, natural resource conservation is more than just encouraging local participation: it is also acknowledging those local cultural views with regard to environmental protection and acting upon them in ways that protect both biological and cultural integrity on a site-specific basis. The destruction to the Yasuni/Huaorani area is prohibited by Ecuadorian Law #74, the Law of Conservation of Natural Areas and Wildlife, which created seven categories of Ecuadorian protected areas in 1981 (USAID 1989). As amended in 1985, this law states that aboriginal communities maintain exclusive rights to resource use, and that areas delineated as indigenous properties are withdrawn from the public domain - excluding them from colonization and commercial exploitation (USAID 1989).

As the Maxus example shows, the law in practice in Ecuador does not ensure that cultural and natural resource conservation goals will be met. To the contrary, the government's support for Maxus in repressing indigenous attempts to conserve their resources undermines conservation of Ecuador's Amazonian region. Rather than enriching the participatory process of natural resource management, this case represents the failure of managers to incorporate the local, rural indigenous perspective regarding their site-specific environment. The result of this in-country failure is that indigenous peoples without a national voice must turn to the international community in their last attempts to find

an audience for their pleas. When effective conservation programs are implemented, the coordination of groups at the local level and respect for their participation in resource management will make the international plea no longer necessary.

Conclusion

The different sociopolitical components of natural resource management at the local, national, and international levels have been discussed. Whereas international conservation risks decontextualization and generalization of local problems, it is often the last sphere in which local voices may be heard. When natural resource managers ignore the voices of local people living in or near protected areas, the consequences for conservation can be grave. As we see with the case of the Ecuadorian Amazon, it is not that local people refused to participate in the management process, but rather, that their voices are unheard by resource managers. In this case, the connection between culture and conservation is being ignored, with economic progress winning over cultural and environmental integrity. When local peoples resort to plaintive cries to the international environmental community, the failure of local and national natural resource management to attend to its social constituency is made gravely apparent.

Natural resource management must respond to the local, site-specific context in all stages of development. This new agenda differs from the old pattern of national managers as the ultimate decision-makers, requiring a more democratic approach to the field. As we have seen, however, natural resource managers cannot rely solely upon themselves to ensure the conservation of natural resources or protected wildlands. Indeed, it is oftentimes the responsibility of non-managers, such as the Huaorani, to fight for the protection of the environment when management institutions fail. Cultural and environmental protection are linked, and when the views of the local people are truly heard and accounted for in the world's protected wildlands, natural resource management will have reached its new paradigm.

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