
Conservation Refugees

The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global
Conservation and Native Peoples

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Introduction: “Enemies of Conservation”

First we were dispossessed in the name of kings and emperors, later in the name of state development, and now in the name of conservation.

—Indigenous delegates to the Fifth World Parks Congress, Durban, South Africa, 2003

Against the wall of a large meeting room in Bangkok, Thailand, packed with committed environmentalists, stands Martin Saning’o. The Maasai leader from Tanzania listens intently to a panel discussion of the human factor in conservation, and patiently awaits an invitation to comment. He stands out as the only black man in the room. When his turn comes Saning’o speaks softly in slightly accented but perfect English, describing how nomadic pastoralists once protected the vast range in eastern Africa that they have lost over the past century to conservation projects.

“Our ways of farming pollinated diverse seed species and maintained corridors between ecosystems,” he explains to an audience he knows to be schooled in Western ecological sciences. Yet, in the interest of a relatively new vogue in conservation called “biodiversity,”¹ he tells them, more than one hundred thousand Maasai pastoralists have been displaced from their traditional homeland, which once ranged from what is now northern Kenya to the savannah grasslands of the Serengeti plains in northern Tanzania. They called it Maasailand. “We were the original conservationists,” Saning’o tells the room full of shocked white faces. “Now you have made us enemies of conservation.”

This was not what six thousand wildlife biologists and conservation activists from over one hundred countries had traveled to Bangkok to

hear. They were there at the Third Congress of the World Conservation Union (also known as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN]) to explore new ways to stem the troubling loss of biological diversity on an ecologically challenged planet.

Based in Gland, Switzerland, IUCN is an assembly of 77 states, 114 government agencies, innumerable conservation NGOs, and over 10,000 scientists, lawyers, educators, and corporate executives from 181 countries. The IUCN's mission is "to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to assure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable." To those who believe that ecological health trumps all other measurements of human security, IUCN stands among the most important international organizations in the world.

What drew Martin Saning'o and about four hundred other indigenous people to the November 2004 gathering was the congress's theme—"People and Nature—Only One World." It was not a title that all members of IUCN would have chosen, as there remains in that community a fair number of traditional conservationists who define wilderness as the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964 does: "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." It is a definition that expresses itself through a practice known in the field as "fortress conservation," wherein areas designated for conservation protection are bordered and guarded to keep wildlife in and unwanted humans out.

However, the word *People* in the conference theme was a long-awaited indication to Indians, pastoralists, bushmen, aboriginals, and forest dwellers on every continent that international conservation groups were reconsidering fortress conservation and trying a little harder to understand the historical role that most native peoples have played in stewarding the very ecosystems being selected for protection.

This was not the first foray of indigenous peoples into the elite and well-endowed world of global conservation. For a quarter of a century their leaders have been traveling thousands of miles to conservation, national park, and wilderness conventions around the world. The message they bring is clear and simple: "We have proven ourselves good stewards, otherwise you wouldn't have selected our land for conservation. Let us

stay where our ancestors are buried and we will help you preserve the biological diversity we all treasure.”

Here in Bangkok, in one thematic word, was a sign that their message was getting through—although not to everyone. There remain skeptics, and holdouts for that model of exclusionary conservation invented in the United States more than a century ago that spread gradually to every continent on the planet, and they were in Bangkok in force. This factor only heightened the congress as an opportunity not to be missed. In Bangkok native people from every continent found the largest gathering ever of scientists, activists, bureaucrats, donors, and bankers, many representing organizations that for more than a century had pretty much excluded tribal people from the conservation planning process. It was Martin Saning’o’s moment. But it wasn’t the first time he had traveled thousands of miles from his homeland in the Serengeti to watch indigenous peoples confront organized conservation, nor would it be the last.

The Beat Goes On

Every form of refuge has its price.

—Don Henley and Glenn Frey, *The Eagles*

In early 2004, a United Nations meeting was convened 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 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples read in part, “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, one indigenous delegate rose to state that extractive industries, while still a serious threat to their welfare and cultural integrity, were no longer the main antagonist of indigenous cultures. Their new and biggest enemy, she said, was “conservation.” Later that spring, at a meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, of the International Forum on Indigenous Mapping, all two hundred delegates signed a

declaration stating that “conservation has become the number one threat to indigenous territories.”

A year later, the International Land Coalition (ILC) added “conservation” to its list of factors that were “negatively affecting” landless people, alongside “extractive industries” and “tourism.” ILC later identified conservation as one of five threats to common-property regimes and condemned the “appropriation of common property for conservation.”

Then in February 2008, representatives of the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) walked out of a Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) annual meeting, unanimously condemning CBD (of which IIFB had been a formally recognized member since 1996) for ignoring their recommendations and interests. “We found ourselves marginalized and without opportunity to take the floor and express our views,” read their statement. “None of our recommendations were included in [the meeting’s report]. So we have decided to leave this process which clearly does not respect our rights and participation.”²

These are all rhetorical jabs, of course, and perhaps not entirely accurate or fair. But they have shaken the international conservation community, as have a subsequent spate of critical studies and articles calling international conservationists to task for their historical mistreatment of indigenous peoples.

Transnational conservation’s threat to indigenous land and lifeways has been an increasingly prominent theme at international conventions like the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; the Convention on Biological Diversity; previous IUCN meetings in Caracas, Montreal, and Amman; and more recently at the World Parks Conference held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2003 where Nelson Mandela pled with conservationists not to “turn their backs” on rural economies, and to treat indigenous peoples more fairly in the course of creating new parks and game reserves.

Mandela was followed on the podium by his political protégé and successor, South African President Thabo Mbeki, who warned that “mere exhortations to poor people to value and respect the ecosystems contained within national parks will not succeed. It is critically important that alternative means of livelihood be found for the poor of the world, so that they are not forced to act in a manner that undermines

the global effort to protect these ecosystems, driven by hunger and underdevelopment." To that Mandela added: "I see no future for parks, unless they address the needs of communities as equal partners in their development."

Mandela and Mbeki were bearing witness to an African conflict that had over the previous century poisoned relations between international conservationists and natives of the continent. It was in large measure symptomatic of a larger global conflict between science-based and rights-based conservation. Here is how Roderick Neumann, associate professor of international relations at Florida International University, describes the African conflict: "From the perspective of park officials and wildlife conservationist, the conflict is defined by livestock trespass, illegal hunting, wood theft, and consequent ecological costs such as species extirpation. For local communities the conflict revolves around reduced access to ancestral lands, restrictions on customary resource uses, and the predation of wildlife on cultivated lands."³

The discord between indigenous communities and "big conservation," which subsided for a while as the indigenous movement gained strength and volume through the 1980s, is heating up again as the once-dominant force of science-based conservation reemerges in the world. However, there remain some promising signs of peace and reconciliation, as conservation intellectuals like Kent Redford and Steven Sanderson, who for years sought to distance themselves from the social consequences of "fortress conservation," have come to see the folly of evicting people from protected areas,⁴ and the worldwide indigenous rights movement has become more sophisticated about the use of international law.

In the chapters that follow I describe the direct experience of the following peoples with transnational conservation:

- The Miwok, Paiute, and Ahwahneechee of Yosemite Valley
- The Maasai of Eastern Africa
- The Pygmies of Uganda and Central Africa
- The Karen of Thailand
- The Adevasi of India
- The Basarwa of Botswana
- The Ogiek of Kenya

- The Kayapo of Brazil
- The Mursi of Ethiopia
- The Babongo, Bakoya, Baka, Barimba, Bagama, Kouyi, and Akoa of Gabon

Their stories differ in many ways, particularly in how they responded to the tendency of conservationists to ignore their basic rights, at times their very existence, in the course of protecting biological diversity. Some have failed and others succeeded in retaining land tenure, negotiating as equal players, and convincing modern, science-based conservationists of the strength and reliability of traditional ecological knowledge.

The Protected Area Strategy

This is the perfect place for us, which is why the Creator put us here, these few of us, and made us tough enough to stay.

—Upik elder

The central strategy of transnational conservation relies largely on the creation of so-called protected areas (PAs). There are several categories of PAs ranging from rigid exclusionary “wilderness” zones, off limits to all but a few park guards and an occasional scientist, to community-conserved areas (CCAs) initiated and managed by a local population. While the categories vary widely in style and purpose, the essential goal of all of them is the same: protect and preserve biological diversity.

From 1900 to 1950, about six hundred official protected areas were created worldwide. By 1960 there were almost a thousand. Today there are at least one-hundred-and-ten thousand, with more being added every month. The size and number of PAs are a common benchmark for measuring the success of global conservation.

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, as over 12 percent of all land, a total area of 11.75 million square miles (18.8 million square kilometers) is now under conservation protection. That’s an area greater than the entire landmass of Africa and equal to half the planet’s endowment of cultivated land. At first glance,

such a degree of land conservation seems undeniably good, an enormous achievement of very good people doing the right thing for our planet. But the record is less impressive when the social, economic, and cultural impact on local people is considered.

About half the land selected for protection by the global conservation establishment over the past century was either occupied or regularly used by indigenous peoples. In the Americas that number is over 80 percent. In Guyana, for example, of the ten new areas gazetted for protection, native people currently occupy eight. However the most recent and rapid expansion of protected area initiatives has occurred in Africa and Asia.

During the 1990s, the African nation of Chad increased its protected area from 1 to 9.1 percent of its national land. All of that land had been occupied by what are now an estimated six hundred thousand displaced people. No country I could find beside Chad and India, which officially admits to about one hundred thousand people displaced for conservation (a number that is almost certainly deflated) is even counting this growing new class of refugee. And existing quantitative studies of conservation evictions covered but a few hundred of the tens of thousands of enclosed parks and refuges, like Yosemite National Park, where human settlements once existed.⁵ Thus world estimates range widely from five million to tens of millions of refugees created since Yosemite Valley was gazetted for protection in 1864.

Charles Geisler, a rural sociologist at Cornell University who has been studying the problem for decades believes that since the beginning of the colonial era in Africa there could have been as many as fourteen million evictions on that continent alone. The true figure, if it were ever known, would depend on the semantics of words like *eviction*, *displacement*, and *refugee*, over which parties on all sides of the issue argue endlessly. However, the point at issue is not the exact number of people who have lost their homeland to conservation, it is that conservation refugees, however defined, exist in large numbers on every continent but Antarctica, and by most accounts live far more difficult lives than they once did, banished from lands they thrived on, often for thousands of years, in ways that even some of the conservationists who looked aside while evictions took place have since admitted were sustainable.

Not to be confused with ecological refugees—people forced to abandon once-sustainable settlements because of unbearable heat, drought, desertification, flooding, disease, or other consequences of climate chaos—conservation refugees are removed from their homelands involuntarily, either by force or through a variety of less coercive measures. They have come to call the gentler, more benign methods of displacement “soft evictions,” which they claim are as bad as the “hard” ones. “If you allow people to stay on land without the right to use it,” said Cherokee leader Rebecca Adamson, “you might as well have taken their land from them. It’s as bad as outright eviction.”

Soft or hard, the common complaint heard at one international meeting after another is that relocation so often occurs with the tacit approval of one or more of five largest conservation organizations—Conservation International (CI), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)—which collectively have been affectionately nicknamed the “BINGOs” (Big International NGOs) by indigenous leaders.

The rationale for “internal displacements,” as these evictions are officially called, usually involves a perceived threat to the biological diversity of a larger geographical area, variously designated by one or more BINGO as an “ecological hot spot,”⁶ an “ecoregion,” a “vulnerable ecosystem,” a “biological corridor,” or a “living landscape”—alternatives for categorizing what each organization hopes will be designated a protected area by the government of its host country.

The huge parks and reserves created in this fashion occasionally involve a debt-for-nature swap (some national debt paid off or retired in exchange for a parcel of sensitive land) or similar financial incentive provided by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and one or more of its eight “Executing Agencies” (bilateral and multilateral banks), combined with an offer made by the funding organization to pay for the management of the park or reserve. Broad rules for human use and habitation of the protected area are set and enforced by the host nation, often following the advice and counsel of a BINGO, which might even be given management powers over the area through a World Bank- or GEF-funded contract.

In countries where evictions from ancestral homelands are illegal or otherwise unfeasible, the process is often sanitized by terms such as *voluntary relocation*, or veiled behind a so-called *co-management* project where a government imposes strict livelihood restrictions (e.g., no hunting, fishing, gathering of certain plants, agricultural practices) to be enforced by a BINGO. Inducements are offered to refugees, often involving promises of compensation that are all too frequently unfulfilled or inadequate.

Until quite recently, most conservation leaders responded to the injustices of exclusion by denying they were party to it while generating unapologetic and defensive promotional material about their affection for and close relationships with indigenous peoples. That message was carefully projected toward a confused and nervous funding community, which has expanded in recent years beyond the individuals and family foundations that seeded early global conservation organizations, to include very large foundations like Ford, Packard, McArthur and Gordon and Betty Moore, as well as international financial institutions like the World Bank, the Global Environmental Fund, foreign governments, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a host of bilateral and multilateral banks, and, most recently, transnational corporations. All but the latter have expressed concerns about the uneasy relationship between native people and transnational conservation, and have begun to insist on fairer treatment of native people who happen to be living in high biodiversity areas.

International funding agencies dedicate the equivalent of billions of dollars every year to land and wildlife conservation. The five largest conservation organizations absorb about 70 percent of that expenditure. The rest is scattered among thousands of local conservation NGOs, many of them created by the larger organizations when funders insist some money be regranted to local groups. Indigenous communities receive virtually none of it.

With that kind of financial leverage, five Euro-American nongovernmental organizations—the BINGOs, with chapters in almost every country of the world, strong connections to business and political leaders, millions of loyal members, and nine-figure budgets—have assumed enormous influence over the world’s conservation agenda.

Commitment to People

Conservation will either contribute to solving the problems of the rural people who live day to day with wild animals, or those animals will disappear.

—Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane, Worldwide Fund for Nature

All of the BINGOs and most of the international agencies they work with have issued formal and heartfelt declarations in support of indigenous peoples and their territorial rights.

The Nature Conservancy's "Commitment to People" statement states that "we respect the needs of local communities by developing ways to conserve biological diversity while at the same time enabling humans to live productively and sustainably on the landscape."

After endorsing the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the World Wildlife Fund International (WWF-I) adopted its own Statement of Principles upholding the rights of indigenous peoples to own, manage, and control their lands and territories (see appendix A for the full text). Shortly thereafter, the World Wildlife Fund United States (WWF-US) approved and adopted the principles.

In 1999 the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas formally recognized indigenous peoples' rights to "sustainable traditional use" of their lands and territories. The following year the IUCN adopted a bold set of principles for establishing protected areas, which state unequivocally, "The establishment of new protected areas on indigenous and other traditional peoples' terrestrial, coastal/marine and freshwater domains should be based on the legal recognition of collective rights of communities living within them to the lands, territories, waters, coastal seas and other resources they traditionally own or otherwise occupy or use."

Of course the UN draft declaration on indigenous rights became the prize, because it had to be ratified by so many nations, and because unlike the International Labor Organization, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and other international bodies that have weighed into this issue on behalf of indigenous peoples, the draft declaration has behind it the potential enforcement and sanction powers of the United Nations. Almost two decades after it was first proposed, the strongly worded

declaration was approved in 2007 by the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva and two months later by the UN General Assembly.

Tribal people, who tend to think and plan in generations rather than weeks, months, and years, patiently await the consideration promised in these thoughtful declarations and pronouncements. Meanwhile, 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, many of whom still maintain that humans and wilderness are inherently incompatible, argue that by allowing native populations to grow, hunt, and gather in protected areas, their supporters become agents in the decline of biological diversity. Some, like legendary paleontologist Richard Leakey, maintain "the entire issue" of protected areas "has been politicized by a vociferous minority that refuses to join the mainstream."⁷ Others, like the Wildlife Conservation Society's outspoken president Steven Sanderson, believed for some time that the entire global conservation agenda had been "hijacked" by advocates for indigenous peoples, placing wildlife and biodiversity at peril.

In contrast, human rights groups such as Cultural Survival, First Peoples Worldwide, Earthrights International, Survival International, and the Forest Peoples Programme accuse the BINGOs of complicity in destroying indigenous cultures, the diversity of which they argue is essential to the preservation of biological diversity.

Meanwhile, the public-relations spin placed on "market solutions" to this unfortunate divide has been relentless and misleading. BINGOs promote cooperative management plans, ecotourism, bioprospecting, extractive reserves, and industrial partnerships that involve such activities as harvesting nuts for Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream or plant oils for The Body Shop products as the best way to protect land and community with a single program. Websites and annual reports feature stunning photographs of native people harvesting fair-trade coffee, Brazil nuts, and medicinal plants. But few native names or faces can be found on the boards of the BINGOs, which have become increasingly corporate in recent years.

Market-based solutions, which may have been implemented with the best of social and conservational intentions, share a lamentable outcome,

barely discernible behind a smokescreen of slick promotion. In almost every case, indigenous people are moved into the lowest end of the money economy, where they tend to be 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” becomes “development,” and native communities are assimilated into national cultures.

Assimilation invariably means taking a permanent place in society at the bottom of the ladder. Whole societies like the Batwa of Uganda, the Basarwa of Botswana, the Maasai and Ogiek of Kenya, the Mursi of Ethiopia, the Karen and Hmong of Southeast Asia, and the Ashinika of Peru are transformed from independent and self-sustaining to deeply dependent and poor communities. People who gradually become dependent on commercial markets, labor contractors, and governments operating under the ill-defined rubric of “development” are going to be easy prey for any new colonizer, even one as seemingly benign and worthwhile as a conservation organization.

It should be no surprise, then, that tribal peoples like the Maasai, who have seen their lands plundered for two hundred years by foreign colonizers, do regard conservationists as just another colonizer, an extension of the deadening forces of economic and cultural hegemony. Nor should conservationists be surprised to find central African communities associating plans to protect biodiversity with forced expulsion, or to hear Martin Saning’o once again declare himself an “enemy of conservation.”

Close observers of evacuated areas on almost every continent have noticed other unfortunate consequences of the colonial model. Evictees, deprived of their usufruct rights are driven to desperate survival actions denounced as “criminal” by conservationists. Once accustomed to harvesting game with traditional weapons for their own community’s use, expelled natives often buy rifles, reenter their former hunting grounds, and begin poaching larger numbers of the same game for the growing “bush meat,” or the meat from wild animals, trade, which like almost everything else has gone global. Bush meat, even roast eland and sautéed howler monkey, can now be found on the menus of chic restaurants in Europe. Whose fault is that?

And who is to blame for what happened in Cameroon in 2003 after two "flagship" nature reserves that had expelled their inhabitants and consumed more than \$20 million in international support both lost their donor funding? Overnight, impoverished and embittered refugees invaded both reserves and plundered their natural resources.

Banished Pygmies will sometimes sneak back into the forest to harvest medicinal plants and firewood at the risk of being legally killed by eco-guards hired and paid by conservation agencies. And much less desirable groups—colonists, renegade loggers, exotic animal hunters, cash-crop farmers, and cattle ranchers—are moving into unpatrolled protected areas the world over. As they often share ethnicity with the ruling class of the nation involved, the new settlers are generally favored in territorial conflicts with Indians and other aboriginals who are arrested or expelled for doing the same things.

Absent knowledgeable and responsible stewardship, these occupied lands have declined into anarchic decay. In such areas biodiversity ebbs closer to zero as species either leave or crash. International conservationists then issue reports lamenting the impending extinction and blaming the very poachers and timber thieves that their policies and actions created. Indigenous peoples' presence, it turns out, may offer the best protection that protected areas can ever receive. That's a possibility that international conservationists have begun to consider.

But large organizations are generally slow to learn, about other people or themselves. Thus many well-meaning conservationists are still willing to introduce native peoples to the money economy, then scorn them for craving consumer goods; deprive them of protein, then rebuke them for eating bush meat; or ply them with alcohol and call them drunks. On every continent indigenous peoples are still being driven into the deepest imaginable poverty, then tried as criminals for selling ivory, tiger pelts, bush meat, or turtle eggs to stay alive.

So it is true that some tribal peoples are abusing their habitat. But before condemning them, conservationists need to ask: Why is this happening? Why, for example, did that Quichua farmer I met on a bank of the Napo River in Ecuador sell his only shade tree, a three-hundred-year-old mahogany, to a renegade logger for \$15—unaware that the milled lumber of his tree would fetch a thousand times that price in the retail

market? Why do Cameroonian natives plunder what had been their homeland for centuries? And why have some Huarani, a people who lived productively in the Ecuadorian rainforest for thousands of years, suddenly turned against the very ecosystem that sustained them for centuries? What was their motive? What was the catalyst? Have they been corrupted by *petrolero* (oil worker) jobs and money? What is disrupting their kinship systems and social networks? What forces undermine their traditional livelihoods, their cultural identity?

Issues and Lessons

To say that Yosemite is Eden is to say that everywhere else is not.

—Rebecca Solnit, University of California

In structuring this book I have interspersed the aforementioned chapters documenting the experience of tribes and native communities with chapters discussing the issues that face both conservationists and indigenous peoples worldwide:

- Chapter 2, for example, confronts the tortured semantics of *nature* and *wilderness* and shows how widely varying definitions of both words, and conflicting views of wild nature itself, create a communications impasse between land-based people of the south and science-based conservationists from the north.
- Chapter 4 describes the rise of a global conservation “aristocracy,” which eventually concentrates itself into five very large organizations headquartered in Europe and the United States.
- Chapter 6 traces the origins, philosophies, and eventual justifications for exclusionary “fortress” conservation.
- Chapter 8 traces the fascinating trajectory of traditional ecological knowledge from a discipline rejected by northern wildlife biologists as baseless superstition and “nonsense” to a major contributor to their own “sound science.”
- Chapter 10 attempts to differentiate and document the impacts of positive and negative human disturbances on the world’s ecosystems.

- Chapter 12 recalls the rise of the most remarkable social movement in history—the concerted global uprising of four thousand five hundred indigenous “nations.”
- Chapter 14 describes the indispensable value of mapping to people struggling to establish and protect land rights and tenure.
- Finally, chapter 18 recounts the creation and success of several community initiated, -owned, and -managed conservation projects.

The obvious theme of these chapters and perhaps the central thesis of this book is that Northern, science-based conservationists still have more than they ever imagined to learn from the ancient ecological practices and accumulated wisdom of people who were residing in high-biodiversity areas of the planet long before they were “discovered” by conservation circuit riders, schooled, and credentialed as “naturalists” and “wildlife biologists.”

History is burdened with stolen stories, particularly when human conflict has occurred. And as the rest of this book demonstrates, the history of conservation is fraught with human conflict. In fact, as chapter 1 attests, the early conservation movement was partly spawned in war. The record of that war, and Yosemite National Park’s subsequent relationship with its original occupants, is replete with inconsistency and self-generated mythology. It is a classic stolen story, and as usually happens, the winners, in this case of both the war and the park, stole the story from the losers. I have tried to return part of the story to its rightful owners, with the thought that stolen stories are also truths that we hide from ourselves. So few of us know what “had to be done” to create the national parks and wildlife refuges we truly believe are ours to enjoy.