

Rights, Tenure, Governance and a More Pro-Poor Vision for Conservation: What Should We Be Aiming at?

Summary

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The future of the world's forests is inextricably linked with the fortunes of millions of the world's poorest people. Over a billion people, surviving on less than US\$1 a day, live within 25 of the 35 global biodiversity hot spots identified by Conservation International. Conservation policies, with their strong emphasis on creating protected areas, have frequently made matters worse for the rural poor, depriving them of their basic needs and the means to make a living. This has led to conflict and undermined conservation activities.

Over 12 percent of the Earth's land surface is now formally set aside as protected areas (perhaps a third of this is actually successfully protected). Conservation policies have persistently overridden the rights of indigenous people and other forest-dwellers to own, control and manage their lands. This is a worldwide problem, and there may be over 100 million "conservation refugees" – people either evicted from their land to make way for wildlife or, more commonly, finding that the legal status of land under their feet has changed, and now dispossesses them. It is time for conservation agencies to look again at what has become an undemocratic and unjust model for conservation.

The struggle to maintain protected areas comes at a time of dramatic change in forest land tenure. A quarter of the forest estate in many developing countries is now legally owned and administered by indigenous and rural communities. Experience suggests that communities can play a key role in managing biodiversity and restoring degraded resources. It is estimated that forest communities already invest at least US\$2.5 billion purely on the conservation of forests – more than double the sum invested by international organizations - though they are of course investing in local, not global conservation values.

It will be hard, if not impossible, to achieve conservation goals without engaging with local communities. Conservationists need to get much more involved with poverty reduction and they should more actively strive to address the governance issues that most hurt the poor. Locally, conservation agencies need to be more accountable to owners and users of land with high biodiversity and to work with them as partners, not adversaries. This involves taking a more sophisticated approach to the economic drivers which promote conservation, and developing a greater capacity to analyze when conservation will be the result of local common property norms and when it will not.

Local development needs will conflict with global conservation needs at times. But global wishes should not always win, and when they do, much more substantial and permanent livelihood alternatives need to

be found for those who lose access to livelihood assets they enjoyed before. In summary, conservation on the cheap, at the expense of poor people, has to be seen for what it is and brought to an end.

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