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Decolonising Conservation: Towards a Postcolonial Conservation Regime

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CELINE GERMOND-DURET, JUN 7 2022

The current environmental crisis is unprecedented. According to the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (2022), it is almost inevitable that we will reach or exceed 1.5 °C warming in the near-term, and some experts have warned of a sixth mass extinction. The need for preservation is evident and pressing, and after 150 years of marginalising narratives and practices, it is time to embrace a post-colonial regime.

It is widely considered that modern environmentalism started in the 1960s, with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as a key marker, which highlighted the potential negative impacts of human activities on the natural environment (for instance, the impact of pesticides on bird population) and paved the way to further reflection on the relationship between economic development and the environment. However, the first efforts to preserve the natural environment are much older. For instance, the Age of Enlightenment and, later, the Industrial Revolution and resulting pollution of coal-burning industries, prompted the emergence of Romanticism, a movement which opposed the scientific rationalization of nature and contributed to the search for "wilderness"; a natural environment that would be pristine, untouched, and free from human inhabitants. This aesthetic appreciation of wilderness was driven by transcendentalism and the belief in God's immanence in nature. This is best illustrated by the paintings of that time, like Thomas Cole's famous landscape painting of "The Garden of Eden" (1828). It is at that time that Yellowstone, the first national park, was created in the US. What people valued was its apparent wilderness and lack of human presence. However, Yellowstone was not "empty"; Native American tribes were living there and had to be displaced. This was the starting point of a long story of dispossession on behalf of nature conservation, a story still occurring today.

Area-based conservation has often been linked to colonialism. Conservation policies, designed by external actors, have often involved evictions or dispossession of local communities. This is not surprising in itself, since conservation initiatives are ultimately about power: the power to control and use the lands. Indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to encroachments on their territory, precisely because of their lack of legal rights to the lands they have traditionally used.

The mainstream approach adopted for the creation of protected areas has been a "fortress" approach. Fortress conservation is an approach based on defence: the defence of the natural environment against human intrusions. It assumes that natural resources are used in an irrational and destructive way and that the only way to protect them is to separate them from harmful human activities, sometimes literally through forced displacement as well as fences and enforced monitoring (hence being sometimes referred to as "fines and fences"). This method is underpinned by dominant beliefs, which relate to colonial narratives. First, the idea that nature and culture are essentially incompatible; the *civilised* and *rational* world of culture opposes the *wild* and *irrational* world of nature. This binary thinking extends to the way Indigenous peoples have been represented, as "backward" and "underdeveloped". The Noble Savage myth and its portrayal of Indigenous populations as "*of Nature*" has been replaced in the contemporary era by the vision of Indigenous peoples as a threat to the environment, over-hunting and depleting resources. Interestingly, both representations have served to justify interventions in their territories. Second, and linked to the previous point, is the belief in the superiority of Western knowledge and scientific expertise, and a disregard for Indigenous systems. This, for example, results in a disregard for communal land systems compared to

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private land tenure, and the belief that lands have no value if they are not cultivated.

Although fortress conservation remains the dominant and widespread model, since the 1990s we have witnessed a change towards more inclusive approaches resulting from several factors. First, it corresponds to the emergence of the concept of sustainable development, which aimed to integrate economic, environmental, and social needs. Second, a new emphasis on the need for multidisciplinary enabled dialogue and collaboration between disciplines and expertise, which so far operated in isolation; for instance, projects involving wildlife conservationists and anthropologists facilitated the taking into account of cultural needs. Third, Indigenous peoples became more vocal and visible, notably thanks to their enhanced mobilisation through the United Nations, and campaigned for the recognition of their customary land rights. Finally, there was also a growing recognition that the human cost of fortress conservation was simply not acceptable. More decentralised and inclusive approaches have been used since, like community conservation, which aims to integrate conservation goals with livelihoods and implies a form of co-management of local resources.

However, challenges remain. Top-down initiatives and exclusionary practices persist, and Indigenous peoples are still subject to colonial policies, expropriation and marginalisation. The militarisation of protected areas as a means of surveillance is not uncommon, and abuses have been reported. A notable example is the allegation that eco-guards, supported by the WWF, were involved in the beating, torture and killing of tribespeople under the guise of anti-poaching operations. An investigation by an independent panel of experts reviewing these allegations in Central Africa, Nepal and India cleared the WWF of complicity; however, it concluded that the WWF was aware of the risk of abuses but did not act to prevent or respond to them, and that the “implementation of its social policies and human rights commitments has been inconsistent”.

In light of the above, the recently launched 30×30 initiative has raised concerns. It is part of the proposed post-2020 global biodiversity framework and aims at conserving 30% of the Earth’s land and oceans through area-based conservation measures. More than 100 countries have already committed to meet this objective. It includes oceans and the creation of Marine Protected Areas, as reiterated at the One Ocean Summit organized in Brest, France, in February 2022. After a history of green dispossession, the risk of “blue grabbing” (the appropriation of marine resources and coastal lands, by either private or public actors) is tangible. In 2016, when conservation targets were less ambitious, the report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, highlighted that:

In view of the targets set by the parties to the Convention [on Biological Diversity] to expand protected area coverage to at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas by 2020, [...] States and conservation organizations need to implement measures to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples as a matter of priority.

The concern here is not necessarily the objective (and for instance, Indigenous organisations have recently pushed for the protection of 80% of the Amazon Basin by 2025), but rather how it will be reached. Therefore, there is a need for a post-colonial conservation regime. This implies a shift in three interrelated areas:

1. decolonising narratives
2. decolonising knowledge
3. decolonising practices

First, it is important to recognise the structural causes of the problem we are trying to address. Wildlife conservation should not be seen as a local and individual issue. Rather, it should be seen as part of the global environmental crisis, which results from the over-consumption of natural resources and the destroying of natural habitats due to industrial activities. The narrative that blames poverty or traditional systems for environmental degradations should be deconstructed and reassessed to further reflect on the roots of both global development and global environmental issues (for instance, the role played by the dominant production and consumption model and resulting values).

Second, conservation initiatives operate through the same technical apparatus as development initiatives, i.e. on the

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basis of scientific expertise and data. However, it would be wrong to assume that science is the only factor influencing the creation of new protected areas. Which areas are selected for protection is not just influenced by science but also by politics (for example when areas in need of protection are situated across international borders) and, some argue, the 'mappability' of landscapes (e.g. how definable and visible are different areas in carto-geographic terms). The value of traditional knowledge needs to be recognised. Not just as an ethical imperative, but also because it has been established that it has a role to play in conservation. A recent study showed that Indigenous-managed lands plays a critical role in maintaining biodiversity as much as protected areas.

Third, and finally, change needs to occur at the micro-level. Even if there is a paradigm shift and a complete rethinking of how conservation should be envisaged and practiced, ultimately, what matters is what happens in the field. Progressive and inclusive guidelines and resolutions can be adopted in international fora, but as long as they are not legally binding, projects are still subject to national policies, laws and tenure rights. For example, while the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) reflects a commitment by states to comply with its principles, it is non-legally binding and it is up to each country to implement it. On paper, and at the global level, signs are encouraging. Several United Nations agencies have acknowledged that Indigenous peoples should work as partners in conservation efforts; the WWF recognises the right of Indigenous peoples to give, modify, withhold or withdraw their free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) on interventions impacting their lands; and for the first time, Indigenous groups were granted full voting status at the 2021 World Conservation Congress. However, the situation at national and sub-national levels often fails to reflect these advances. An avenue for change could be the conditioning of conservation projects and funding to initiatives that are co-designed and co-managed with, and by, traditional users, and the support for local initiatives.

Nature conservation is a noble and important cause, even an emergency, as we are heading towards an era of irreversible damage. Ultimately, conservationists and Indigenous peoples have a common interest: the protection of biodiversity, albeit underpinned by different values and understandings of the relationship between people and nature. The negotiations of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework offers an opportunity to initiate a systemic change, which would endorse a right-based approach with Indigenous peoples as equal partners.

About the author:

Dr Celine Germond-Duret is a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University, UK, specialised in development and sustainability. Her interests include global inequalities, international environmental politics (climate change and oceans in particular), and Indigenous peoples. Her research notably appeared in *Development and Change*; *The Geographical Journal*; *Environment, Development and Sustainability*; *Marine Policy*; *Third World Quarterly*; *Sustainable Development*. She is the author of a book on Development, the World Bank and Indigenous Peoples (Karthala Press, France).