

Seeing (and Doing) Conservation Through Cultural Lenses

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Abstract In this paper, we first discuss various vantage points gained through the authors' experience of approaching conservation through a "cultural lens." We then draw out more general concerns that many anthropologists hold with respect to conservation, summarizing and commenting on the work of the Conservation and Community Working Group within the Anthropology and Environment Section of the American Anthropological Association. Here we focus on both critiques and contributions the discipline of anthropology makes with regard to conservation, and show how anthropologists are moving beyond conservation critiques to engage actively with conservation practice and policy. We conclude with reflections on the possibilities for enhancing transdisciplinary dialogue and practice through reflexive questioning, the adoption of disciplinary humility, and the

realization that "cross-border" collaboration among conservation scholars and practitioners can strengthen the political will necessary to stem the growing commoditization and ensuing degradation of the earth's ecosystems.

Keywords Biodiversity conservation · Ecological anthropology · Community-based conservation · Local knowledge · Interdisciplinary studies · Collaborative research

Introduction

The concept of "conservation without borders" is intriguing, holding numerous interpretations and implications for conservation practice and policy. The conservation community is increasingly realizing the necessity to move the protection of biodiversity out of the confines of bounded protected area rubrics and spaces, to attend to the abundant biodiversity found in the cultural and ecological matrices that hold no clear borders (Moguel and Toledo 1999; Wiersum 2004; Bennett 2004; Chester 2006). At the same time, an increasing number of conservation practitioners and scholars seek to step across cognitive and disciplinary boundaries in order to more effectively collaborate in understanding and taking care of the earth's ecosystems, whose complexity demands concerted rather than isolated investigation (Hannah and others 2002).

One manifestation of border crossings such as these is the attention being drawn not only to the impact of human communities on the conservation of biodiversity but also to the impact of conservation on human communities. Community-based conservation (CBC), human inhabited protected areas (HIPA), conservation with social justice—these and other rubrics capturing conservation's necessary

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interweaving of the human and the nonhuman, the natural and the social sciences, social justice and ecological integrity are now commonplace. Many borders are being crossed but the commonness of such terms today does not necessarily equate to the successful realization of the goals they assert. Thus, a special journal issue on these topics can help to further the movement from clarification of thought to improvements in action, from design of more socially just and ecologically viable conservation policies to their actual implementation on the ground.

Few if any in the conservation community would dispute that the need for more effective “cross-border” conservation is critical (Robinson 2006; Brosius 2006; Bawa 2006). Yet, current cross-border initiatives remain thwarted by real differences in the values, perceptions, and methodologies of different disciplinary cultures (Drew and Henne 2006). Contemporary processes and structures of neoliberalization, operating at local and global scales, are dramatically altering the conceptualization, use, and ownership of nature, presenting additional challenges for cross-border conservation (Heynen and Robbins 2005). Recent conservation scholarship has made significant strides in addressing both these issues, though much work remains to be done. Collaboration across disciplinary boundaries through “cross-disciplinary publication, expanding memberships in professional societies and conducting multidisciplinary research based on similar interests” (Drew and Henne 2006, p. 1) is on the rise (Mascia and others 2003; Redford and Brosius 2006). Social science research on conservation has steadily expanded the number of case studies showing that detailed ethnographic accounts of specific conservation interventions are indispensable for conservation success. Increasingly such case studies are meant to proactively guide conservation initiatives rather than solely offering reactive critique (West and others 2006; Brockington and Igoe 2006; West 2005; Brosius and Russell 2003). Similarly, an increasing number of studies are providing greater understanding of how processes of neoliberalization are affecting conservation institutions and practices, ecological spaces, and local/indigenous communities. Such research reveals in a detailed manner how neoliberalization can often drive a wedge between various conservation actors but, in other situations, create synergies between them (Igoe 2007a; Sodikoff 2007; Igoe 2005; Goldman 2001).

Such challenges accentuate the need for conservation practitioners and scholars utilizing different disciplinary lenses to create constructive dialogue geared toward better conservation practices. Indeed, *vis-à-vis* the forces that are driving the loss of both biological and cultural diversity under economic globalization, advocates for conservation and advocates for the rights of local/indigenous communities are relatively weak. Reluctance to work with and

through their differences, in collaborative support of their common goal to preserve multiple manifestations of diversity, will only heighten their comparative weakness. As Redford and Brosius (2006) note:

Such conflicts pitting weak defenders of cultural diversity against weak defenders of biological diversity do not provide the sort of model needed to slow the advance of homogenization. . . .

In the face of the broad-scale homogenization of the world . . . individual dimensions of diversity most treasured by a given group are being saved with often little attention to the broader context within which homogenization is advancing. If we are to hold the homococene at bay, a starting point must be to recognize that it is not simply discrete, distinct dimensions of diversity that are at risk, but rather the fabric that binds these dimensions into the intricate pattern of life’s rich tapestry. What is needed is an appreciation for diversity as composed not of single, discrete entities, but as an intertwined complexity of natural and cultural dimensions with both pattern and process. Biological and cultural diversity rely on one another, and losing one or the other can create conditions for the erosion of both. (p. 318)

That such a statement emanates jointly from a leading wildlife biologist and an ecological anthropologist is a positive sign. More of such cross-border perspectives need to be heard in the places where policies affecting both biological diversity and local/indigenous communities actually get made. In short, unless we more assertively and effectively advocate for dialogue and action with regard to the pressing social and ecological issues surrounding conservation—to put it bluntly, unless we get political—those issues will remain eclipsed by other concerns.

One means of fostering greater political power is through enhanced collaboration. The symposium (“Conservation Without Borders: The Impact of Conservation on Human Communities,” Center for Tropical Ecology and Conservation, Antioch New England Graduate School, October 9, 2004) on which this special issue is based was organized to further collaboration between the disciplines and disciplinary practitioners engaged in conservation. To meet that goal, the symposium organizers offered the metaphor of examining conservation and its impacts on human communities through four different types of lenses—ecological, cultural, economic, and political. In this paper we focus on the cultural lens.

Before delineating what a cultural lens has to offer the work of conservation, we must first acknowledge that there is not one cultural lens but many different cultural lenses, their shape and hue influenced by theoretical preferences,

by the multiplicity of methods utilized in “cultural research,” and by the idiosyncrasies of individual cultural researchers; thus our pluralistic title. There are also, of course, numerous fields that approach conservation through cultural lenses (e.g., sociology, cultural geography, political science, education, natural resource management, political ecology, and psychology), though the field of anthropology most often comes to mind. Finally, there are numerous definitions of culture; depending on which definition is used, the cultural lens through which conservation is viewed and the resultant cultural contributions to the work of conservation change shape and contour.

Thus this summary of seeing and doing conservation through cultural lenses will not be definitive; it cannot speak for all of anthropology, much less for all fields that employ cultural lenses in their work. Nor can it hope to address cultural perspectives on conservation through employing every definition given to culture. It is instead more humble in scope—our insights into what employing a cultural lens has meant for our work in the field of conservation and, a bit more ambitious perhaps, our musings on the common concerns about conservation that can be filtered out from a diverse set of cultural lenses employed by a wider community of cultural researchers. To adequately embrace that diversity, we have chosen to work from a more general, rather than specific definition of culture, as “the system of . . . beliefs, values, perceptions, and social relations that encodes the *shared* learning of a particular human group essential to its orderly social function” (Korten 2006, p. 76, emphasis in original). We are guided by Clifford Geertz’s interpretative orientation toward culture as the “webs of significance” that we spin. Like Geertz (1973), we believe that the analysis of culture, or, in our case, of cultural lenses, is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (pp. 4–5). What new meanings are derived for the theory and practice of conservation in examining conservation through lenses that focus on the shared beliefs, values, perceptions, and social relations of and between those groups carrying out conservation and those groups affected by it? That is the principal question we seek to address. In this sense, our use of the lens metaphor pertains both to methodology—*how one looks*—and to ontology—*what aspects of being one looks at*—for it is through both their ways of looking and their choice of what to look for that practitioners of cultural lenses make important contributions to conservation theory and practice.

We first discuss various vantage points we have gained from our own experiences of approaching conservation through a cultural lens: in that regard, one of us has an interdisciplinary doctorate in environmental studies (R.B.P.), while the other three have Ph.D.’s in anthropology, but with very diverse field and professional orientations.

Then, to draw out some of the more general concerns and contributions of anthropologists with regard to conservation, we summarize and discuss the work of the Conservation and Community Working Group (CCWG) within the Anthropology and Environment Section (AES) of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). The CCWG was convened largely by the efforts of coauthors Brosius, West, and Russell. Other members of this working group represent a wealth of knowledge and experience in ecological anthropology, especially with regard to the themes of this special issue. We conclude with reflections on the possibilities for enhancing transdisciplinary dialogue and practice through reflexivity, the adoption of disciplinary humility, and the realization that cross-border collaboration among conservation scholars and practitioners can strengthen the political will necessary to stem the growing commoditization and ensuing degradation of the earth’s ecosystems.

Insights from Experience

The Appendix describes the work each of us has done in the realm of conservation. Taken together, our nearly three decades of practice, study, and research in integrating cultural perspectives into conservation efforts have provided several vantage points. Let us discuss four.

Conflicts Rooted in Culture

Conservation conflicts are deeply rooted in culture, in fundamentally different ways that the different actors in the conservation drama perceive, value, and use the natural world. Institutionalized modern conservation has largely been an endeavor rooted in the values, perceptions, and methods of Western conservation science and culture. Many of us working in the conservation field tend to view the how and why of preserving biodiversity through the Western lens fitted us through our training, cultural origins, or both. Why preserve biodiversity? To protect a scientific laboratory, stem global warming, preserve wilderness, and/or save species. Our methods most often depend on empiricism and are embedded in the scientific approach of proposing and testing hypotheses, gathering more and better data, and making predictions of the best courses of action based on analysis of that data. Inhabitants of those places with the highest levels of biodiversity often perceive their surrounding environments and the need to protect them differently.

Rather than as a scientific laboratory, local/indigenous people perceive their environment as the source of their life, both materially and culturally. In addition to offering sustenance, their terrain offers spaces, materials, and meanings fundamental to cultural identity. Historically,

inhabitants of biodiverse ecosystems have both protected and transformed them in order to safeguard their livelihood and their culture. When the integrity of these ecosystems is significantly compromised, so is the capacity for societies to survive economically and culturally. In short, as is now commonly understood, the protection of biodiversity and of cultural diversity are deeply intertwined, but in highly complex ways.

Despite the important interconnections between these two types of protection, scientists' and local people's different ways of perceiving, valuing, and using the natural world often conflict (Adams and McShane 1996; Duffy 2000; Neumann 2001; Peterson 2000). Viewing conservation through cultural lenses helps illumine the fact that to resolve such conflicts we need to reveal the value-based assumptions that underlie perceptions and uses of the natural world. A cultural lens can also help us better understand the historical and cultural context within which power, both political and economic, is differentially distributed among conservation actors. Trying to resolve conservation conflicts solely through economic compensation, or even through some means of community-based conservation, may ease impasse for a while, but long-term resolution will only come through carefully and respectfully negotiating culturally based worldviews and the persistent social and economic inequalities among different conservation actors (Brockington 2002; Ferguson 2006). Examining conservation through the lens of culture can illuminate the conditions and contents of a more robust negotiation process and, thereby, yield greater chances for the protection of both biological and cultural diversity. Compromising on negotiation robustness in favor of more facile and expedient incentives can often exacerbate conflict. As Igoe's (2004a) work in South Dakota and Fay's (2007) work in South Africa point out, indigenous communities, in such cases, understandably find confrontation and antagonistic approaches to be more effective means of achieving their desired ends.

Incorporating Local Cultural Resources

A second vantage point gained by seeing and doing conservation through cultural lenses illumines the need to grapple more energetically with how to incorporate local cultural resources—metaphysical, social, and practical—into conservation work. In the same way that the philosophy and practice of appropriate technology seek to build with local materials, so do conservation projects need to incorporate local principles, concepts, and knowledge into their practices. We need to complement the lenses and models we favor with what can be learned from local people and their traditions, and from indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK); not to romanticize these sources, but

neither to neglect and dismiss them. Instead we need to approach them with respect and in the spirit of *sankofa*—an Akan concept that roughly translates as “drawing on the past to prepare for the future.” There is no going back to the past, yet the past holds much wisdom and insight that can be creatively applied to present and future challenges.

This vantage point on conservation raises further questions that demand careful research: How can conservation projects actually apply local understandings of land and of “right relationship” to land in their practice? Are such “local land ethics” being put into practice in the contemporary real-life situations of rural peoples, and if so, how and where? Where do Western and indigenous approaches to conservation complement each other, and where does each need to be corrected? How do conservationists and local people negotiate the power to decide this? Questions such as these highlighted by viewing conservation through cultural lenses need to be addressed alongside the critical ecological and biological questions conservation poses.

Going Beyond Empiricism

A third vantage point cultural lenses offer pertains to another often-marginalized source of insight for conservation work. In addition to learning from local people and from indigenous ecological knowledge, we need to go beyond empirical research to include investigation into culturally defined religious, spiritual, and metaphysical realms that shape human/land relations. Conservation projects would do well to take peoples' beliefs about the environment, or about spiritual forces that affect their relationship to the environment, seriously. Local cosmologies that shape how people perceive land and the symbolic realms within which people give meaning to land provide the deep foundations that are needed for building durable structures of conservation and/or natural resource management. Without understanding these realms, we often miss important realities that affect the failure or success of our work.

Elsewhere, Peterson (2006) has used a cultural lens to analyze the role that belief in Mami Wata—mythological aquatic figures widely known throughout much of Africa—plays in the development of small water-powered mills in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He found such beliefs pointing to ways in which existing policies failed to fit local ideas of fairness in terms of the distribution of project benefits. Seeking to understand, rather than dismiss, the meanings and implications of such nonempirical systems pertaining to natural resources can improve management and conservation policies. Use of cultural lenses can help us achieve such understanding but this will require a shift in methodology, one that entails greater respect for and a better grasp of the nonverifiable, the subjective, and

the numinous alongside the more traditional realms of empirical data.

Cultural lens approaches that go beyond empiricism hold relevance not only for conservation projects, but also for the environmental challenges affecting all of us at a global scale. As environmental ethicist J. Ron Engel (1993) explains:

Contemporary threats to biodiversity are of such an order of magnitude that it is difficult to conceive how more and better management, knowledge, education, political participation, or economic incentives will suffice. The grip of the modern development world view is so strong that only a fundamental shift in what people believe to be of ultimate concern will be powerful enough to motivate them to search for a more ethical relationship to the diversity of life, and effect the change in heart and in social behavior required.

Historically, religious myth, symbol, and ritual have served as the primary vehicles for . . . motivating personal and collective transformation. (p. 193)

As threats to biodiversity continue to expand globally, we need to complement vital scientific research with research into how the rich culturally embedded spiritual and ethical heritages of humankind can aid our collective human quest for a more harmonious relationship with the rest of creation (Posey 1999; Kellert and Farnham 2002). Many, if not all, of these heritages have long made central the ancient question, “How shall we then live?” And indeed, many of them have applied that question to the particularities of place to ask, “How shall we then live *on this land?*” For many who adhere to these heritages, the goal is to live on the land in ways that leave it intact for future generations, while also honoring those who have gone before.

Writing in an African context, Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1994) elucidates how such spiritually based beliefs and worldviews can yield positive conservation values and principles:

Of all the duties owed to the ancestors none is more imperious than that of husbanding the resources of the land so as to leave it in good shape for posterity. In this moral scheme the rights of the unborn play such a cardinal role that any traditional African would be nonplused by the debate in Western philosophy as to the existence of such rights. In the upshot, there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obligations to both ancestors and descendants, which motivates environmental carefulness, all things being equal. (p. 46)

It is important to note that in the face of historical and contemporary political and economic forces of exploitation,

such metaphysically rooted beliefs in “two-sided” stewardship have not kept Wiredu’s native Ghana from experiencing environmental degradation (Wiggins and others 2004). Nevertheless, projects seeking to conserve what ecosystem integrity remains may benefit by drawing upon such metaphysical resources for ecological care. Cultural lenses can help illuminate these resources and determine how they can be applied to conservation goals.

Hearing Local Voices Speak

A final cultural lens vantage point pertains to methodology, to “how” rather than “where” we look for knowledge. In our conservation research it is important that we do more to genuinely listen to and include in our writings the voices of local people. Too often in the numerous reports, journal articles, books, and other publications that come from our conservation research, the real men and women with whom we conduct fieldwork completely disappear beneath theoretical discourses and abstractions, beneath the roar of percentages and the din of statistics. And yet, as Escobar (1995) reminds us,

The alternative is, in a sense, always there. From this perspective, there is not surplus of meaning at the local level but meanings that have to be read with new senses, tools, and theories. . . . The subaltern do in fact speak, even if the audibility of their voices in the circles where “the West” is reflected upon and theorized is tenuous at best. (p. 223)

We have found presenting people’s narratives *as they related them* an important complement to theorizing about what such narratives might mean, even when utilizing “new theories” as Escobar recommends.

The Africanist historian Jan Vansina (1961, 1985) has perhaps more than any other westerner raised the value of oral traditions and narratives as valid sources of history. Yet Vansina has been criticized by African scholars such as V. Y. Mudimbe and the Kenyan philosopher D. A. Masolo (1994) for treating “the storyteller as a mere resource from whom the scholar extracts and constructs his mute knowledge” (p. 186). Mudimbe (1988) offers similar critiques of oral tradition methodologies in which “narratives were submitted to a theoretical order, and rather than accounting for their own being and their own meaning, they were mainly used as tools to illustrate grand theories” (p. 182). He encourages researchers to use methods whereby “narratives presented in the truth of their language and authenticity become texts of real peoples and not merely the results of theoretical manipulations” (p. 182). Both Mudimbe and Masolo see local people themselves as legitimate producers of knowledge. They encourage researchers to let narratives stand on local people’s own

terms and fall out along lines of demarcation that local people themselves choose, rather than seeing knowledge as being defined only as an “objective product of the expert” (Masolo 1994, p. 186). Mudimbe quotes Barnes (1974) to show how such an “enterprise from within” is far more fruitful for explanation since “such a demarcation is part of the actors’ perception of the situation; and action is intelligible only as a response to that perception” (p. 100). Thus, when it comes to conservation, getting at local people’s perceptions of their environmental situation holds the most promise for understanding people’s actions toward the natural world and, perhaps, for encouraging changes in those actions. This demands that we include their voices as well as our own; honor knowledge from their texts as well as from ours.

Much of the work of Harvard scholar Robert Coles deals with the intimate relationship between people and land. A prolific writer, although not one who directly addresses conservation, Coles holds vast experience in the painstaking art of accurately and movingly documenting people’s lives. In his classic study, *Migrant, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*, he describes well the method of carefully listening to and letting be heard the voices of local people:

The aim . . . can be put like this: to approach certain lives, not to pin them down, not to confine them with labels, not to limit them with heavily intellectualized speculations but again to approach, to describe, to transmit as directly and sensibly as possible what has been seen, heard, grasped, felt by an observer who is also being constantly observed. (Coles 1971, p. 41)

Including narratives recounted in peoples’ own words also tempers the inevitable reductionism of generalizing analytical methods that result in gross simplification of the complexity of everyday life. In contrast, they provide a space for the more true to life disorder, contradictions, and points of view of the minority to be heard. We believe it is as important to listen to these voices, as it is to describe—through vast and often impersonal statistical techniques—voice patterns across large decontextualized spaces.

Concerns Shared by a Wider Community of Cultural Researchers (Primarily Anthropologists)

Having drawn from our own experience, let us cast the net a bit broader to examine concerns shared by a wider community of cultural researchers. The following discussion does not attempt a comprehensive overview of cultural lens perspectives, but focuses on the work of a group of anthropologists who have come together to

grapple with what their disciplinary lens might have to contribute to the practice of conservation. Drawing on a discussion paper prepared for a workshop on conservation and community held prior to the 2001 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, we first discuss four concerns many anthropologists share about conservation—the backlash against participatory conservation, the poor quality of social research, the emergence of ecoregional conservation models, and the dynamics of power and decision-making within large conservation organizations. We then go on to discuss 10 contributions “cultural lens” perspectives can make to conservation work.

Backlash Against Participatory Conservation

One issue of concern to those who approach conservation through a cultural lens is the backlash against participatory conservation models that has been spawned by the perceived failure of such models to adequately conserve biodiversity (Kramer and others 1997; Terborgh 1999; Oates 1999; Rabinowitz 1999). Although experience with models such as CBC has shown that successfully balancing human needs and ecosystem needs is a lot more difficult than first anticipated, it does not mean that those models should necessarily be discarded. Rather it may simply mean that we need to apply more energy, skills, resources, and research to improving them.

Especially disconcerting is how the perceived failure of community-based models can reinvigorate earlier authoritarian models based more on coercion and expropriation than on collaboration (Brockington 2002). In some cases, conservationists are using evidence of CBC’s and other participatory models’ kinks, challenges, and mistakes to justify limiting this approach in favor of “science-based” ecoregional and landscape-scale conservation (Brosius and Russell 2003). Although forms of CBC may live on within ecoregional conservation projects, they are often not recognized as such. Nor is it sufficiently recognized that the failure of community-based approaches is often due to historical, political, and structural forces that make successful local institution building for conservation difficult. In some cases, larger-scale political forces may deliberately thwart the creation of such institutions. Rather than putting resources into local institutions and into transforming wider governance and economic forces that hamper strong local response, conservationists have used the alleged failure of CBC to justify the futility of working with local people.

Igoe draws on his research in Tanzania and other’s research around the globe to show how ultimately whether or not community-based conservation fails or succeeds depends on the complex interplay of a host of variables,

including colonial histories and communities' historical encounters with conservation; communities' historically governed degrees of sovereignty and political clout; the nature of the roles played by indigenous NGOs and other civil society actors; local attitudes toward and understandings of conservation; and the understandings of "indigenous environmental knowledge" and "capacity building" that become operationalized by both local and nonlocal actors (Igoe 2004b). Certainly failure or success of community-based approaches to conservation is due to far more complex causes than simply local inadequacy or lack of conservation values. Cultural lens approaches can help provide more of the desperately needed in-depth understanding of these complex interlinked causes.

Furthermore, just because something is difficult and complex does not mean that it should be abandoned, or be assumed not to work. An analogy drawn from Thoreau may be instructive: in writing about friendship and love, Thoreau acknowledged their arduous demands. And yet, as he states, "There is no remedy for love but to love more" (Thoreau 1962, 1:88). In the same way, perhaps the only solution to successful participatory conservation is to participate more fully and complexly in the process of building more appropriate, stronger, and more reliable local institutions in support of conservation, but a conservation whose meaning has been carefully negotiated among local and nonlocal actors who agree to share power. Finally, lessons for contemporary conservation can also be gleaned from the history of the broader movement for environmental concern. We must remember that empowered communities utilizing community-based approaches spearheaded the environmental movement in the United States and are its backbone today (Gottlieb 2005).

Poor Quality of Social Research

A second area of concern to many anthropologists and other social scientists is the poor quality of social research that is often carried out by conservation organizations seeking to employ participatory models. The mandate to give more attention to community concerns gets juxtaposed with the conservation community's *a priori* sense of urgency. This can lead to fast-paced formalistic social research protocols often carried out by teams of expatriate consultants that focus more on "identifying threats" within, or "getting data" about, local communities rather than developing rapport with them. Participation, when it does occur under such social research approaches, tends to be characterized by the "stakeholder syndrome," where local communities' needs, concerns, and sentiments get reduced to "interests" to be bargained and balanced at the table. In worse cases, local community members are

designated only as "junior stakeholders who are in need of guidance and oversight so that they won't do the wrong things" (Igoe 2007a, p. 249). Such participatory approaches may lead to short-term consensus, but agreements often soon fall apart from deeper underlying tensions that have been left unexamined.

To avoid such pitfalls, conservation organizations would do well to early on seek out the help of anthropologists or other social scientists who utilize a more holistic, longer-term social research approach. Rather than wait until things run amok, it may be much more cost-effective for conservation organizations to engage in longer-term in-depth fieldwork from the outset, employing local students or local NGOs, rather than expatriates, to carry it out. By doing so, conservation organizations not only save precious resources that can be directed elsewhere, but also build local capacity and develop local partnerships for the long haul.

Emergence of Ecoregional Conservation Models

A third trend that has sparked concern among anthropologists is the emergence of ecoregional conservation models. Increasingly popular, such approaches are known under a variety of rubrics including "ecoregional planning," "ecosystem management," "landscape-level" conservation, and "transboundary protected areas." Expanding the scale of conservation has both enabled and been enabled by the rapid growth of information and cartographic technologies and methodologies such as Rapid Ecological Assessment (REA), Gap Analysis Process (GAP), Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER). Although there are many good reasons for expanding conservation planning and action beyond the park or reserve to the ecosystem or regional scale, such expansion and the increased dependence on costly computerized technologies that comes with it can encourage top-down conservation approaches. At the same time, reliance on computerized mapping and other technologies can distance conservation planners from the effects of their interventions.

Thus, the distance between those who hold power in conservation decision making and those living in and with the ecosystems earmarked for conservation tends to increase as a result of this trend, in two ways: first, through the increasing dependence on the intermediary of technology, which can lead conservationists to deal more with computer programs, maps, and large abstracted data sets than with real people, and, second, through the vast expansion of scale, which obviously precludes the amount of attention that can be afforded to particular places and communities. Institutionally, this trend can in the same way create greater dependence on and give more emphasis to large transnational conservation organizations at the

expense of local conservation groups (Brosius and Russell 2003).

Dynamics of Power and Decision-Making Within Large Conservation Organizations

A fourth and final concern shared by many anthropologists is the broader context within which conservation policy and investment decisions get made. In addition to studying their stock-in-trade—small communities—anthropologists are also increasingly turning attention to the dynamics of power within larger-scale institutions and to neoliberalism's influences on conservation (Brosius 1999; Ferguson 2006; West 2005; West and Carrier 2004; West and others 2006). In this regard, institutional ethnographies of large and powerful international conservation organizations can yield important insights as to how power is brokered and conservation decisions influenced by larger political and institutional interests. For example, local institutional capacity building, although a key investment for conservation success, can often be considered too expensive for project budgets, but few questions are asked about the various perks allotted conservation consultants. Promoting reflexivity within these powerful institutions can encourage greater awareness and amendment of such incongruities.

In short, we need to pay more attention to how “big conservation” does business and challenge the power imbalances and inequities that can at times lead to investments that favor the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalized (Chapin 2004; Dowie 2005). Institutional ethnographies of conservation organizations can build on the strong tradition of this type of work within the social sciences. Foundational work done in the realm of development, for example, Tandler's (1975) classic study of USAID, *Inside Foreign Aid*, offers methodological and substantive insights into the study of organizational cultures. More recently, and from a slightly different angle, certain chapters within *Contested Nature* by Brechin and his colleagues provide examples of how the science of institutional and organizational behavior can be applied to conservation (see Wilshusen 2003; Brechin and others 2003).

Contributions to Conservation from Cultural Lens Perspectives

Anthropologists have a reputation, in part justified, for being quick to point to what is wrong and slow to offer concrete advice about a better way. Although this may stem in part from an appreciation of complexity and a reluctance to impose their own views, anthropologists recognize the need to engage with the policy process to

improve both conservation practice and outcomes for local people. This concerted effort to engage constructively with policy-making is evidenced by such developments within AAA as its Department of Government Relations (<http://www.aaanet.org/gvt/index.htm>), its Committee on Public Policy (<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ppc/brief.htm>), and the proposed Center for Human Studies and Public Policy (Brumfiel 2005). More directly tied to conservation, the newly created Center for Integrative Conservation Research (CICR) at the University of Georgia has been established with the explicit goal of identifying policies and practices that both conserve biodiversity and meet human needs (<http://www.cicr.uga.edu/index.html>). In keeping with this shift toward anthropological engagement, members of the Community and Conservation Working Group have proposed a conservation model that incorporates the following 10 policy features, all of which build on the contributions cultural lens perspectives have to offer, as exemplified in the numerous studies by anthropologists and other social scientists that already exist in the literature (see review articles by Brockington and Igoe 2006; West and others 2006).

1. *A well-developed social definition of conservation.* Such a definition can complement conservation's ecological or biological definition. It should focus on articulating what roles individuals and social groups play in the conservation drama in addition to the roles of ecological phenomena. A social definition of conservation would also enlarge the circle of what needs to be conserved and what gets defined as a conservation issue. In addition to its traditional focus on species, habitats, and ecosystems, the conservation agenda defined socially would also include such socio-ecological issues as soil and water degradation and the loss of traditional food crop varieties. A social definition of conservation would entail validating and encouraging local small-scale conservation efforts with the goal of achieving a better balance of power among institutional actors.
2. *Greater channeling of money and resources to the grassroots.* Conservation actions need to support rather than usurp local institutions and organizations. Instead of introducing new conservation initiatives based on external organizational models (e.g., environmental education programs that model Ranger Rick), we need to learn about, build on, and replicate the network of community and social organizations (based within universities, technical schools, religious organizations, and civil society) that already exist within conservation locales, linking such efforts with each other and with conservation initiatives.

3. *Analysis that weaves understanding of local systems with knowledge of larger-scale power dynamics.* Such an analytical framework is well suited for locating the root causes of environmental degradation and would situate equity and power concerns within larger political and historical contexts. In addition it could be a means to sort out the distribution of present and future costs and benefits of proposed conservation initiatives (Igoe 2007b).
4. *More concerted and authentic collaboration between science and local ecological knowledge.* We need to recognize and respect “local science” and acknowledge that Western science is not the only valid source of information about ecological systems. Conversely, scientific methods can be incorporated into local practice, for example, in inventories, monitoring, and various means of social research. This can be a relationship of mutual enrichment, a complementary two-way street of learning that heightens conservation’s effectiveness.
5. *Recognition and rectification of naïve assumptions about “communities.”* We need a more complex understanding of what “the community” entails, recognizing that power relations, greed, and factionalism are found at all levels of social organization in all cultures (Neumann 2005, 188; Brosius and others 2005). Yet this refusal to romanticize the community should not lead us to forsake the need to center conservation initiatives around those whose livelihoods depend on the ecosystems we seek to conserve. As complex as local communities are, we still need to take the time to build authentic rapport and relationship with and within them. In so doing, we gain greater awareness of local conservation practices and beliefs, which are the foundation of any initiative.
6. *Land history embedded within conservation planning.* We need to continue deepening our understanding of the anthropogenic nature of “pristine” areas, recognizing that humans have been living with and in these so-called wildernesses for generations. The fact that such seemingly pristine yet long-inhabited natural areas remain significantly intact opens up questions as to how human societies have played and may still play positive ecological roles in the functioning of ecosystems. Conversely, land histories can also help us better understand the roles that various social ills such as war, subjugation, poverty, and illness have played in despoiling landscapes, clarifying the sociopolitical causes of degradation that go beyond simplistic attributions to humans as a species.
7. *Ethnography and case-study analysis employed as essential and early-initiated elements of conservation research and planning.* Rather than waiting to utilize such methods until things go awry, we need to employ them from the beginning to enrich the quality of the social research serving conservation. We also need to be wary of simply transcribing methods used in the natural sciences onto the investigation of social phenomena. Sole dependence on quantitative surveys, for example, may yield skewed results and rarely captures the nuanced complexity of social issues impacting conservation.
8. *More concerted questioning of how images of local communities are woven into “crisis narratives.”* We need to examine and crosscheck both positive and negative characterizations of local people—as poachers, threats, naïve, ecologically minded, wise, wily, entrepreneurial, etc.—against the reality of people’s lives. How do local people define and describe themselves? How do their actions conform to or contradict such descriptions? How do local people define threats, environmental and otherwise?
9. *Articulation and promotion of new and more expanded definitions of conservation success.* Conservation success may be difficult to achieve because of the institutional arrangements put into place by NGOs, governments, and other actors. It is important to articulate a social definition of success and to understand that “conservation success” will have different meanings even within one culture or population. Accurate measures of biodiversity loss and ecological improvements are impossible without contributions from people living and using forests, seas, rivers and other areas. While some anthropologists imply that “conservation success” remains highly elusive (Walley 2004; McDermott-Hughes 2006), many are moving beyond simply critiquing projects and approaches to identify and assess what is working and why (Brosius and Russell 2003; Haenn 2005; Russell and Harshbarger 2003; West and Brockington 2006). In addition to the ecological parameters that might indicate success, what social and cultural parameters do the same? How do we measure these effectively and institutionalize them as part of the conservation assessment process? New work along these lines is currently being carried out by anthropologists and other practitioners of cultural lens approaches through such centers as CICR and the MacArthur-funded Advancing Conservation in a Social Context (ACSC) project spearheaded by the Global Institute

of Sustainability at Arizona State University (<http://www.tradeoffs.org/static/index.php>).

10. *Maintenance of distinction between local views and our own views on conservation.* We must not try to “speak for” local people or conflate our views with theirs. This includes recognizing and respecting local disagreement with our own conclusions and points of view. In working with local communities on conservation issues, we need to create space for, and refrain from facilitating over, differences, discord, and even antagonism. Instead, such normal and true-to-life realities of any community can be a source of further understanding.

This final point relates to the humility and openness that are necessary for true dialogue, not just with “local people,” but also among practitioners of different disciplines, a matter with which we now conclude.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, in this age of globalization, neoliberal expansionism, and the growing commoditization of nature through free-market mechanisms, those individuals and groups seeking to protect biological and cultural diversity remain relatively weak compared to more powerful structures and institutions scrambling to maximize the wealth and utility to be derived from nature.

Thus, how important it is that those seeking conservation through whatever lens not diminish their collective voice for the protection of life in all its diversity. There is a vital place for difference, for disagreement, for distinction and debate between these four (ecological, cultural, economic, political) and other lenses of conservation. But more than ever, we need the promotion of civil and constructive dialogue, collaboration, open-mindedness, humility, and the willingness

to appreciate and employ the contributions each lens can offer our collective struggle. There is no longer any room or time for maintaining a bridled defensiveness of our respective lenses. If we do, we simply tie our hands and silence our voices even more effectively and certainly more efficiently than could those who do not want the message and practice of conservation, human rights, and sustainability to limit their use of nature for aggrandizing profit without concerns for social and ecological well-being.

We conclude this paper, first, with a set of questions that practitioners of any disciplinary lens might ask themselves as they embark toward achieving “conservation without borders.” We close by briefly summarizing the contributions, and key questions, cultural lens perspectives bring to the work of conservation.

Questions to Ask Ourselves

Humility and reflexivity—these traits may be more important than any to practice, if we are to achieve genuine interdisciplinary collaboration on conservation. More specifically, we might approach such experiments in collaboration by asking ourselves the following three types of questions on how perspectives from our lens (ecological, cultural, economic, political, etc.) might be integrated with perspectives from other lenses.

- *Contributory question:* What valuable insights does our lens bring to the dialogue with other conservation lenses?
- *Collaborative question:* How might we, as practitioners of a particular lens, better integrate the perspectives, and collaborate with the practitioners, of other lenses?
- *Reflexive question:* How do we look critically at our own critiques of other lens and at ourselves to go beyond heated debate to authentic dialogue in order to build more effective conservation? (see Fig. 1)

Fig. 1 Needs for the way forward

At the Antioch symposium, breakout sessions on each of the four disciplinary lenses followed the opening plenary. Participants in the breakout session on cultural lenses generated numerous insights that pertain to these three types of questions, among others. With regard to collaboration and reflexivity in particular, participants identified the following critical needs:

- Need to pay attention to our language, learn the language of other lenses, and create good translation mechanisms.
- Need to not debunk quantitative data or qualitative data, but learn how to better interchange and interrelate the two.
- Need to help other lenses value cultural knowledge and data.
- Need to assess the validity of “crisis narratives” and recognize their costs and implications.
- Need to maintain a long-term view alongside a crisis mentality.
- Need to let the problem define the nature of collaboration.
- Need to realign the incentive structure within academia to encourage trans-lens collaboration.
- Need to collaborate in the creation of new academic programs (e.g., Environmental Studies) that develop expertise in interdisciplinary approaches.
- Need to collaborate better with funding agencies to educate them on problems with funding-driven project schedules.
- Need to collaborate with local people in assessment and evaluation of conservation initiatives.
- Need to collaborate and build rapport with local communities by also educating them about our culture and what makes us tick.
- Need to communicate back to our own disciplines the lessons and benefits of cross-lens collaboration.

Fig. 2 Areas of common ground

The panel discussion that closed the Antioch symposium revealed points of common ground among practitioners of the four lenses, while leaving us all with additional questions. Common ground exists along the following contours:

- We need to be direct—to clearly lay out the goals, benefits, and costs of conservation in order to better negotiate what it means for different conservation actors.
- Economic lenses may be especially important in achieving the goals of conservation in that they provide a language to which institutions and governments listen.
- We need to invest in local capacity and avoid micro-managing projects.
- As practitioners of any lens, we have a vital need and obligation to take a reflexive approach.
- There are many different types of valid conservation data; by dismissing some we hurt our collective goals.
- The perils of generalization apply to conservation as much as they do anywhere.
- Conservation cannot be divorced from questions about social justice.

Many questions remain, including the following:

- How do we build and/or claim power? Who are our allies?
- Is it better to focus more of our energies domestically rather than abroad, to take greater responsibility for our own cultural foibles, and to focus on making policy change in Washington, given the U.S. influence in the world?
- Where do we go from here? What are specific ways we can continue to build inter-lens collaboration back in our workplaces, research places, and communities?

Rather than supplying clear answers, this paper has provided additional grist for the mill of ideas and practices to feed the ongoing experiments in conservation collaboration that will and inevitably must continue. We have discussed some of the key contributions cultural lens perspectives have to offer these experiments. We began by drawing on our own experiences in the field to highlight cultural lens vantage points pertaining to the cultural roots of conflict; respecting and incorporating local cultural resources for conservation; expanding research beyond empiricism to include investigation into culturally defined religious, spiritual, and cosmological realms that shape human/land relations; and incorporating the voices and perspectives of local people in our writing about conservation. Casting the net more broadly, we then discussed four concerns cultural lens practitioners hold with regard to conservation: the backlash against participatory conservation; the poor quality of social research; the emergence of ecoregional conservation models; and the dynamics of power and decision-making within large conservation organizations. Finally, we offered 10 areas in which cultural lens practitioners have made, and are continuing to make, contributions to the work of conservation, from the conceptual to the practical. These 10 areas are by no means exhaustive but, by themselves, indicate that there is much to keep cultural lens practitioners interested in conservation busy in the years ahead.

Recent publications by anthropologists and others (see those referenced above as well as Orlove 2002; West 2006; Lansing 2007) have begun to answer many of the questions and to meet some of the needs we raise in this article. New research centers such as CICR and research projects such as ACSC, focused on integrating social and cultural knowledge and concerns into conservation work, are getting under way. These are exciting and important developments; as they continue to mature, we, as cultural

lens practitioners, would do well to remember our own continuing need for reflexivity and disciplinary humility as we seek to build with practitioners of other lenses the political will necessary to conserve and protect both cultural and biological diversity (see Fig. 2).

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Appendix: Authors’ Experience in Conservation

Richard Peterson

Peterson became involved in conservation in the mid-1980s, working as a project manager with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in the Ituri Forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He went on to earn both his M.S. and his Ph.D. in Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Utilizing anthropological methods, his early research examined various ecological and social impacts of the spontaneous immigration of Eastern Congo’s highland farmers into the lowland rainforest. Pushed to explore more of the fundamental causes of the environmental problems and conflicts he witnessed, he undertook further studies aimed at integrating ecology with examination of how various Central African forest cultures have defined their relationship to,

and valuing of, the natural world. This research, utilizing a combination of ethnographic interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, led to a book, *Conversations in the Rainforest: Culture, Values, and the Environment in Central Africa* (2000), which examines how ecology, community livelihood, land ethics, and conservation interventions are intertwined among various societies inhabiting Central Africa's rainforests. His work, also published in several articles and book chapters, focuses on how current projects to promote ecological and social sustainability in the Central African region can limit the extent of conflict they generate among local people and have a greater chance of success by incorporating local cultural, ethical, and practical resources for ecological sustainability rather than relying solely on externally derived concepts and practices. He is currently Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of New England.

Diane Russell

Russell also carried out fieldwork in the mid-1980s in the DRC for her Ph.D. in anthropology but it was not focused on conservation. In 2000, she returned to DRC as "environment advisor" to the DRC Mission of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and to the Central African Regional Program on the Environment (CARPE). Between those times, she was employed by the USAID-funded Biodiversity Conservation Network (BCN) as BCN's social scientist based in Asia and the Pacific. BCN was an ambitious program to test an enterprise-based approach to conservation, centered on enterprises carried out by and benefiting communities in biodiverse areas. On leaving BCN, she met coauthors Brosius and West as part of the AAA/AES, and under its auspices the three formed the Conservation and Community Working Group (CCWG), mentioned above. Her experiences in BCN and CARPE put her in direct contact with emerging conservation approaches within conservation NGOs involving landscape-scale mapping, biodiversity priority setting, monitoring, and evaluation. Integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) were increasingly criticized by these NGOs as delivering neither conservation nor livelihood benefits. These experiences led eventually to a book with Camilla Harshbarger, *Groundwork for Community-Based Conservation: Strategies for Social Research* (2004). In the book and in various articles Russell incorporates anthropological knowledge of patterns of natural resource management, trade, markets, and political influence as well as migrations, innovations, and cultural change to articulate a different vision for "landscapes," a vision that includes people, history, agriculture, struggle, and cultural meaning. All these elements form part of the

"cultural landscape" that must be integrated into conservation's conceptions of landscapes.

Paige West

West is a cultural and environmental anthropologist with interests in the linkages between environmental conservation and international development, the material and symbolic ways in which the natural world is understood and produced, the aesthetics and poetics of human social relations with nature, and the critical analysis of the creation of commodities and practices of consumption. She received her M.A. in Environmental Anthropology from the University of Georgia and her Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Rutgers University. She is currently Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Barnard College and Columbia University. Since 1996, drawing on the theories, methods, and insights of both cultural anthropology and political ecology, she has conducted fieldwork in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Australia, Germany, England, and the United States. In 2006 Duke University Press published her book *Conservation Is Our Government Now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea*, which is an ethnographic examination of the history and social effects of conservation and development efforts in PNG. She has just completed a second book manuscript entitled *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: Tracking the Commodity Ecumene for Papua New Guinean Coffee*, which will be reviewed by Duke University Press. She is also the author of several articles, including those cited in this paper.

Peter Brosius

Brosius has a long-standing interest in the human ecology of Southeast Asia, particularly with respect to issues of environmental degradation. Since 1992 when he joined the anthropology faculty at the University of Georgia, where he is currently Professor of Anthropology, his research has focused on the international campaign against logging in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. Utilizing what anthropologist George Marcus has termed "multisited ethnography," Brosius has carried out "field" research at a diverse number of sites: encampments of nomadic Penan, the Ministry of Primary Industries in Kuala Lumpur, Rainforest Action Network headquarters in San Francisco, WWF International headquarters near Geneva, the Parliament building in Vienna, the offices of the International Tropical Timber Organization in Yokohama, and in London, Copenhagen, Munich, Basel, Sydney, Penang, and elsewhere. He is currently writing two books based on this research: *Melted Earth: The Politics and Poetics of Dispossession in Sarawak* (under

review) and *Arresting Images: The Sarawak Rainforest Campaign and Transnational Environmental Politics*. In them, and in several published articles, he provides a history of the Sarawak campaign and how it has been transformed from a singular focus on the imperative to stop the progress of bulldozers to one forced to contend with the Uruguay round of GATT, post-UNCED conventions, ITTO criteria and indicators of sustainability, ecolabeling, and the North-South debate. His current research focuses on linkages between anthropology and conservation. He recently published a coedited volume with Anna Tsing and Charles Zerner, *Communities and Conservation: Histories and Politics of Community-Based Natural Resource Management* (2005), whose purpose is to examine the history of community-based natural resource management, and to address both some of the tensions and possibilities that emerge out of efforts to reconcile the goals of conservation and social justice. He is currently developing two new research projects: the first will focus on protected area planning and implementation in Pulong Tau National Park in Sarawak and is premised on the recognition that such planning must be viewed in the broader context of other state landscape planning and environmental management agendas, specifically related to timber concessions and plantation development. The second research project will examine a series of ecoregional conservation approaches as they are applied in specific conservation initiatives, focusing specifically on understanding the consequences of visualizing biodiversity at different scales, on how such methodologies produce images of local communities as threats, and on how they lay the groundwork for various forms of environmental governance.

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