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Conservation Through Different Lenses: Reflection, Responsibility, and the Politics of Participation in Conservation Advocacy

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Abstract This essay considers the arenas of advocacy, politics, and self-reflection in strengthening conservation and resource management initiatives. It frames key questions that reflective conservation practitioners may address in seeking to enhance the results of conservation projects, including equity and more inclusive participation by non-privileged groups. The essay touches on the importance of understanding conservation work within particular political and historic dynamics, including the need to understand non-Western and/or indigenous or traditional perspectives on conservation. The author makes the case that Western or privileged conservation practitioners are uniquely situated to advocate effectively for change.

Keywords Advocacy · Equity · Historic dynamics · Participation · Politics · Reflection

In 2004, two African women won international praise for their work to promote a healthy environment, human rights and good governance. Kenyan environmental advocate Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize, and Delphine Djiraibe of Chad won the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award for her work to defend local communities and the environment affected by the Chad-Cameroon pipeline funded by ExxonMobil and the World Bank. This high-profile recognition signals an important and somewhat nascent shift toward appreciation and inclusion of non-Western and nonprivileged leadership in resource conservation. It highlights many of the lenses that this essay addresses in terms of equity, participation, advocacy, politics and historic dynamics and can challenge each of us to reflect on our relation to the conservation initiatives in which we engage and how to increase our effectiveness.

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Introduction

At Antioch University New England, we focus on training reflective environmental practitioners. A critical piece of this professional development is the practice of the lens of self-reflection, and key to this reflection is the central question: How is it that I have come to make conservation the focus of my work? The answer to this question can provide a touchstone and foundation for conservation work, grounding and strengthening the practitioner. It can also open up new understanding about the questioner's "standing," responsibilities, or "place" in advocating for sustainability and environmental protection.

For me, my work began with a fax that arrived one day on my desk in Washington, DC, where I was working as an international human rights advocate. The fax contained a report that was written at great personal risk by a West Papuan human rights defender. The report detailed severe human rights abuses perpetrated by the Indonesian military, with at least financial and logistic support from United States-based Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold, Inc., a mining company that operates the world's largest gold and copper mine in the territory of West Papua, Indonesia. The military had detained, killed, tortured, disappeared, and raped local indigenous community members who had resisted Freeport's mining operations on, and its confiscation and despoliation of, their traditional lands (Abrash 2002).

The challenge for me, as a United States-based advocate, was to determine how best to work in solidarity with these survivors of human rights abuse to defend themselves and their lands. This work launched a trajectory spanning the spheres of human rights and environmental advocacy and an in-depth education about the politics and historic geopolitical dynamics that precede and can dominate decision making about land use and resource management. This essay draws on the Freeport case study and related research from the Indonesian archipelago.

In framing consideration of advocacy and the politics of participation, I offer some definitions and pose a series of questions, which, when taken together, can provide a matrix for assessing effective and equitable strategies for conservation. My purpose is to encourage a particular type of analysis by conservationists: one that advances successful conservation advocacy through reflection based on one's own unique situation, assets, and responsibilities with respect to a given conservation challenge.

Advocacy

David Cohen, co-director of the Advocacy Institute, defines advocacy as

> "the pursuit of influencing outcomes ... that directly affect people's lives [or, for the purposes of this essay, the interactions between people and the ecosystems that sustain them].
> Advocacy consists of organized efforts and actions based on the reality of 'what is.' These organized actions seek to highlight critical issues that have been ignored and submerged, to influence public attitudes, and to enact and implement laws and public policies so that visions of 'what should be' in a just, decent society become a reality" (Cohen and others 2001).

Like so many good things in life, the best and most effective advocacy often is spurred by desire—the desire to protect something cherished or vital. Our love of place—our deep-rooted connection to it and our reliance on it—is more often than not the foundation for successful conservation.

The connections among the heart and the spirit and effective advocacy are also crucial. As conservation biologist and student of Buddhism Michael Soule states, "Facts compute, but they don't convert ... An instant of honesty and compassion is more important than an hour of logical argumentation and the facts" (Jones 2003).

As conservationists, we are challenged to ask: How do we speak from our hearts as we advocate for sustainability and environmental protection? What purposeful results do we seek? How do we gain access and voice in decision making? How do we change the power dynamics between institutions and the human and natural communities affected by their decisions? How do we draw strength from, and how are we accountable to, those on whose behalf we advocate?

Politics

Politics encompasses the central question in conservation: Who decides? Politics determines who makes the decisions about human impacts on the natural environment and what will be the processes of decision making and norm setting. Politics is how we arrive at law, policy, and regulations, and it is often how large-scale polluters and extractors avoid law enforcement. Politics is the forum for advocacy, and to be effective conservationists, we must understand and engage with the political systems and dynamics through which decision making about the environment occurs.

Management is the related, practical piece: implementation of the decisions advocated for and enacted through political processes. It is where the "rubber meets the road." Management also, ideally, encompasses structures of accountability through which those implementing policy are kept on track.

As author Joni Seager writes, "The *real* story of the environmental crisis is a story of power and profit and political wrangling; it is a story of the institutional arrangements and settings, the bureaucratic arrangements, and the cultural conventions that create conditions of environmental destruction. Toxic wastes and oil spills and dying forests, which are presented in the daily news as the entire environmental story, are the symptoms of social arrangements, and especially of social *derangements*. The environmental crisis is not just the sum of ozone depletion, global warming, and overconsumption; it is a crisis of the dominant ideology" (Seager 1993).

As conservationists, we are challenged to ask: How do we build power to engage effectively in the political process of decision making and norm setting? Who are our allies? Who are our targets? What strategies and tactics do we embrace? And again, what purposeful results do we seek? In many instances, we already have enough scientific data and studies to tell us what we need to know as conservationists. At this point, we need to ask: How do we take a stand? And with whom do we stand?

Answering these questions, particularly when one is not a member of the community directly affected, requires developing an informed analysis of power structures, including our own embedded links to power. We are challenged to clarify our own values and to develop solid working relations of equality, respect, and trust with those

who share these values. Where there is a history of repression, colonialism, or other forms of alienating local communities from traditional lands, we often are challenged to recognize our own standing as members of a dominant group.

Indeed, politics and management practices are specific to unique historic processes; therefore, integral to any conservation initiative is the need to place our understanding in an overall historic context. This context recognizes that our current era of economic globalization, with all of the extra challenges it creates for conservation, is the most recent phase in a 500-year-long process of global conquest marked by colonialism and imperialism. Indeed, economic globalization has been described as imperialism on amphetamines. Today's purveyors of neoliberalism—chief amongst them multinational corporations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund—have been moving rapidly to incorporate within a few decades all known resources into the global economy through processes of commodification, privatization, and liberalization (Kennedy and Abrash 2001).

In this dynamic, conservation often arises as reaction to the enormous destructive forces unleashed on environmentally sensitive ecosystems and human communities. These forces include clear cutting forests, mountain-top removal mining, and factory fish trawling. For those working in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, the legacy of European conquest and the current dynamics of neoliberalism are an inescapable backdrop.

As in the early days of Europeans' global conquest in pursuit of natural resources, corporations, governments, and powerful individuals still co-opt or install local elites and use military or paramilitary forces to capture those resources, to displace local communities, to suppress dissent, and to remove independent monitors, such as journalists, environmental researchers, and advocates.

In seeking to define sustainability, authors Julian Agyeman, Robert D. Bullard, and Bob Evans underscore this nexus between repression and environmental destruction, writing that "In recent years it has become increasingly apparent that the issue of environmental quality is inextricably linked to that of human equality. Wherever in the world environmental despoilation [sic] and degradation is happening, it is almost always linked to questions of social justice, equity, rights and people's quality of life in its widest sense" (Agyeman and others 2003).

To address these destructive dynamics, conservationists can—and, I would argue, should—incorporate a social justice or human rights dimension to the overall analysis. For example, in his consideration of the challenges of tropical forest conservation, anthropologist and social ecologist Michael Dove writes that "Any resolution of the problems of tropical forest development and conservation must begin, not by searching for resources that forest dwellers do not already have, but by first searching for the institutional forces that restrict their ownership and use of existing resources ... There is less need to ... counterbalance the local peasants' or tribesmen's purported interest in clearing the forest, than to find institutional mechanisms that will counterbalance the political–economic forces favoring self-interested resource use by national and international elites" (Dove 1993). To put it more bluntly, we are challenged to ask: How can we remove the corporate, military, and/or governmental boot from the necks of those whose traditional lands and ecosystems we are seeking to conserve?

Responsibility and the Politics of Participation

How do we do what Dove suggests? For conservationists from North America or coming from other positions of privilege, we can ask ourselves: How are we acting to dismantle living legacies of racism, exploitation, and elitism? Does our work empower local communities? Is conservation being done *to* or *for* a community as opposed to *by* or *with* a community?

For example, when we undertake fieldwork research in pursuit of a new plant species or to study a bird species' behavior or to develop a management plan for a park, have we been invited to undertake conservation initiatives by the local communities whose lands, livelihoods, or lifestyles may be affected by our activities? Are our work plans and conservation strategies transparent, and are they the result of dialogue with, or the direct initiative of, the local community?

How do we talk about our work? Do we place it in a historic and human context? Do we examine the economic and political dynamics that are creating the conservation challenges we are addressing? Have we anticipated the ways in which our research might be used by governments, corporations, or other actors to undermine local communities?

Dove offers a related path into reflecting on our responsibilities as conservationists: "De-mystification of the debate over tropical forest deforestation and development is needed, therefore, and this depends on untying what we might call 'discursive knots.' These knots are tied by asking, for example, 'How can we help?' instead of 'How are we hurting?', and 'What do we need to give *to* tropical forest people?', instead of 'What have we taken away *from* tropical forest people?'" (Dove 1993)

The corollary questions that arise include these: Are we viewed by communities as genuine partners working in solidarity for conservation, or are we seen as linked financially or otherwise to repressive governments or

exploitative corporations? How do we personally—or our institutions—benefit from the dynamics of destruction? What direct action can we take to encourage and support effective conservation that empowers local participation and decision making in ways that interrupt historic patterns of exploitation?

Untying Dove's "discursive knots" means delving into our own connections to the forces promoting environmental destruction and effectively harnessing our own powers to bring about changes in policy and practice to the benefit of conservation.

Promoting Advocacy: Engaging Ourselves

As the late 20th-century movement to divest from corporations operating in South Africa helped to bring about an end to apartheid there, so too can shareholder, consumer, and allied activism target corporations for advocacy in support of conservation. Various organizations in the United States, such as Rainforest Action Network, Project Underground, Oxfam America, and Earthworks, have pursued similar corporate campaigns to great effect, targeting hard-rock mining, lumber, paper, oil, and financial services corporations to end destruction in environmentally sensitive areas and to empower indigenous landowners in engaging in the land and other resource use decisions that affect them. Conservationists might well build alliances—on an individual, institutional, private, or public basis—with existing advocacy organizations such as these and with their counterparts in country and in other parts of the globe. Global Greengrants, a Boulder, CO–based nonprofit foundation, provides other avenues for investing in successful on-the-ground advocacy by affected communities and effective regional or national grassroots organizations.

Government and private pension funds offer conservationists another vehicle for effective advocacy. In June 2006, the Norwegian government made international headlines when it announced its decision to exclude Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold, Inc. (New York Stock Exchange symbol FCX) stock from its USD $230 billion pension fund. This decision was based on a judgment by Norway's Council on Ethics for the Government Pension Fund–Global that Freeport's dumping toxic mine waste into local river systems has caused environmental damage that is "extensive, long-term and irreversible," with "considerable negative consequences for the indigenous people residing in the area" (Ministry of Finance 2006).

Sharing similar concerns about risks to shareholders resulting from Freeport management's practices, the New York City Comptroller's Office, which manages the pension funds for firefighters, police, teachers, and other city employees and with a roughly USD $37 million investment in Freeport, has taken a variety of actions aimed at making Freeport's operations more accountable and transparent. In recent years, these include shareholder resolutions calling on Freeport management to review and report to shareholders about the company's environmental policies and practices in its Indonesia operations as well as the potential investor risks and liabilities resulting from Freeport's payments to Indonesia's notorious rights-abusing military (Bonner and Perlez 2006; Guerriere Ciaccio 2006). Imagine the power for change if every conservation biologist, geologist, hydrologist, mammalogist, herpetologist, ornithologist, park ranger, anthropologist, etc., were to engage their pension fund investments to promote conservation.

One specific vehicle for this type of advocacy, relevant to many in the field of research and academics, is TIAA-CREF. At many United States-based educational, research, and other nonprofit institutions, employees who receive pension benefits invest those funds in TIAA-CREF, the largest pension fund management corporation in the United States. With more than USD $330 billion invested, TIAA-CREF is often one of the largest institutional investors in the companies in which it holds shares.

For example, as one of Freeport's largest institutional shareholders, TIAA-CREF can wield enormous clout in influencing the way in which Freeport operates. TIAA-CREF can use this clout to maintain the status quo or to advocate for change by Freeport executive management in addressing the company's well-documented and egregious environmental and social impact. Any one of us who invests with TIAA-CREF, and hence, in Freeport, is benefiting directly from Freeport's operations, and I would argue that we also have a responsibility to ensure that those operations do not undermine the ecologic values that we work to uphold and promote.

Another avenue for advocacy to engage TIAA-CREF's considerable financial might is the Make TIAA-CREF Ethical Coalition. Beginning in 1984, coalition member efforts began to promote greater social responsibility by TIAA-CREF. Today, the coalition uses a variety of tactics to urge TIAA-CREF to engage in shareholder advocacy to influence the practices of corporations involved in environmental degradation and human rights and public health violations and to divest and/or exclude certain corporations from TIAA-CREF portfolios. The coalition's successful efforts have led to (1) the fund's establishment of its Social Choice Account (a socially responsible investing option with positive as well as exclusionary screens), (2) the creation of a Director of Social Investing position and Department of Social and Community Investing, (3) its engagement in shareholder advocacy, and (4) the fund's divestment of all World Bank bonds. Through its Web site, the coalition offers ample opportunities for involvement in its campaigns, and its tactics could easily be adopted by conservationists seeking to target TIAA-CREF action with respect to other corporations or issues.

Promoting Equity: Engaging Local Perspectives

Moving beyond our own direct links of responsibility, another lens that is fundamentally crucial to considering the politics of participation is that of a local and/or non-Western perspective on conservation. This is necessary to seek to understand, respect, honor, and promote traditional conservation strategies and structures and to ensure equity and participation in resource management. In short, we must ask: Who has a seat at the table when land and other resource use decisions are being determined?

For some of us, conservation might mean setting aside parkland or ensuring the continued survival of a particular species. For local communities in many of the world's most environmentally sensitive areas, the definition of conservation often is quite different.

In speaking about his people's struggle to survive the onslaught created by Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold, Inc., on lands forcibly expropriated from the Amungme people, Amungme leader Tom Beanal put it this way: "When we say that the environment for us is our 'mother,' we mean that human beings are an integral part of the environment and therefore each one of us has to be mindful of and accountable to the limitations of the environment" (Beanal 1997).

Beanal notes that "Modern people do not recognize the special relationship of indigenous people to the environment. But for the indigenous people, their view of their natural surroundings teaches them ecologically sound principles to care for the environment in a sustainable way. For the indigenous people, destroying the environment means damaging the lives of human beings" (Beanal 1997).

This strong connection to and sense of place is pervasive among many indigenous, traditional, or local communities throughout the world, along with the fundamentally practical acknowledgement of human communities' utter reliance on the ecosystems in which they live (Borrini-Feyerabend and others 2004).

Although it is crucial not to idealize local communities, we can actively seek to understand and promote the effective management practices that they have developed and to strengthen communities' positions as central decision makers in the political processes that determine how their traditional lands and resources will be treated. We can ask ourselves: What are we learning from local communities? What influences, lessons, and values do they bring to us? Do we respect and honor local communities' deeply held connections to and reliance on the natural environment? Do local communities have a central role and effective participation in the use, management, and conservation of resources?

I believe that in most healthy communities, i.e., those not ravaged by conflict, foreign exploitation, disease, or other destabilizing factors, there are well-developed and sustainable management strategies and systems. Indeed, there is growing recognition, at the international level, of the strong link between cultural and biological diversity and integrity. In *Sharing Power: Learning-by-Doing in Co-Management of Natural Resources throughout the World*, Borrini-Feyerabend and others write that "by preserving cultural integrity, the conditions for maintaining a specific type of interaction with the environment and natural resources are also maintained." Recognizing this crucial link, the Convention on Biological Diversity compels its contracting parties to "respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity ... " (Article 8j). As Borrini-Feyerabend and others argue, these "considerations should involve not only respecting the cultural identity of indigenous and traditional people, but also ensuring mechanisms that guarantee fair communication and consultation processes, continuity and/or revitalization of their traditional lifestyles (as deemed appropriate by the traditional societies) and the active education and enrichment of non-indigenous partners concerning traditional values, knowledge and practices."

One example of such a healthy community whose cultural integrity is intricately entwined with biologic conservation is Haruku village in Indonesia's Maluku Islands. Formal conservation practices—known collectively as *sasi*—have been part of the community's culture since at least the 1600s. Lauding the efficiency and performance of *sasi* in Haruku, researchers attribute the management scheme's success to legitimacy of the *kewang* (in essence, a type of conservation commission).

Eliza Kissya, head of Haruku's *kewang*, describes these practices as "a prohibition on the harvesting of certain natural resources in an effort to protect the quality and population of that biological natural resource (animal or plant)." He writes, "Because the regulations for implementing this prohibition also touch upon [humans'] relationship with nature and with other [humans] in the area affected by the prohibition, *sasi* is also an effort to maintain the patterns of social life through the equal distribution among all local citizens/inhabitants of the benefits or income from the surrounding natural resources ...." He writes that "*Sasi* is not a collection of rigid regulations. It continues to be dynamic and responsive to the changing times, as long as the essence of its spirit, soul or life (that is, the principle of conservation and balance in humans' life with other humans and in their relationship with the surrounding natural world) does not change and is maintained" (Kissya 1995).

Yet even in Haruku, destabilizing impacts threaten to undermine the community's cultural integrity, which is so integral to effective resource conservation and management. Harkes and others note that the exploration activities of two Canadian-owned mining companies on the tiny

island has created serious disharmony and conflict among the people of Haruku as two camps form: one concerned about the mining operation's environmental impacts and disregard for local land ownership and the other eager to benefit from imagined economic opportunities. Because the *kewang* generally supports the first group and the official central government–installed village head backs the second group, "a conflict between the two groups will negatively affect *sasi*. The role of the *kewang* will weaken dramatically and although the *kewang* is locally highly legitimate, its members may find they are no longer in the position to enforce the *sasi* rules" (Harkes and others 1998).

As so often occurs, the pressures of foreign exploitation—mining, in this case—threaten existing sustainable and equitable conservation practices. The example of Haruku highlights the predictable divisions that can occur within a community confronting externally introduced or imposed decisions regarding land or other resource use. It also underscores the complexities posed for the nonlocal conservationist in developing partnerships with local community members in the service of conservation.

Promoting Reflection: Where Do We Stand?

For a Western or other privileged conservation practitioner looking through the lenses of reflection, advocacy, and participation, the situation in Haruku suggests specific opportunities and challenges. Are there connections between the practitioner and the Canadian companies whose mining activities threaten to undermine Haruku's effective conservation management systems and to degrade the island's natural environment and human communities? What about connections between the practitioner's government and the Indonesian government? If so, how might the practitioner engage in advocacy, organizing, and other forms of participation to shift the dynamics of the situation to achieve more effective conservation that places local people, either locally elected or selected by way of credible processes, in the primary position of making decisions about the actions that will affect their lives, lands, and livelihoods?

Are there other ways that the practitioner might engage: for example, through strategic reporting and advocacy that amplifies the voices and positions of local people, through action based on the analysis of the power dynamics and revenue streams that facilitate the destabilization of local conservation systems, or through building relations with local actors based on mutual interest. By starting from the reflective position of asking what specific standing she or he might bring to bear, the conservationist may use her or his unique position to the greatest advantage in promoting effective conservation and resource management.

As the example cited previously suggests, the advocacy, politics, and reflection lenses offer key questions for consideration: If we engage in advocacy for conservation (and if we don't, why don't we?), does our work address a single issue—such as saving the spotted owl—or is it predicated on a more fundamental goal of promoting the right to a healthy environment or the right of communities to reject environmentally damaging activities? If we do focus on a single-issue conservation initiative, what is our analysis of the macro political, economic, and social dynamics that have created this particular conservation challenge? How do we inject that analysis into our work?

Are we seeking to incorporate local communities into our research agendas, or are we playing a support role to communities in determining and advancing their conservation goals? How do we use our privilege, voice, and political power to advance conservation?

Last, is our best work done on the ground in communities that are not our own or at home, seeking to dismantle the institutions, policies, and assumptions that wreak havoc on communities and the natural environment worldwide?

These need not be either/or questions. The challenge is to advocate and engage politically to ensure the most effective and equitable conservation management practices.

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