

# Environmental Conservation and Indigenous Communities

## A critical Assessment of the Effects of Environmental Conservation on the Indigenous Communities.

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**Riassunto.** Negli ultimi tempi è aumentata l'attenzione verso la protezione e conservazione dell'ambiente. Ma anni di leggi e regolamenti, spesso infruttuosi, hanno evidenziato il diverso concetto che le ONG ambientaliste e gli indigeni delle aree protette hanno della natura e del rapporto dell'uomo con essa. Nonostante la retorica sulla "esclusiva partnership con gli indios", del "difendiamo i loro interessi" dell'importanza che riveste la loro immagine nella raccolta fondi delle organizzazioni per la protezione dell'ambiente, la definizione di "aborigeno" e di "stile di vita naturale" delle ONG ambientaliste implica la totale estraneità delle popolazioni con attività che non siano quelle tradizionali. Ma, come nel caso degli Achè e dei Guaranì, spesso accanto all'attività di caccia e raccolta viene praticato anche il lavoro salariato e l'agricoltura, cosa che li esclude automaticamente dall'essere considerate popolazioni indigene. Per contro queste definizioni sono state sfruttate da gruppi minoritari per difendere i propri interessi, aiutati anche dalla romantica concezione della "conoscenza indigena" e della loro presunta saggezza ecologica. In realtà il loro approccio all'ambiente è utilitaristico e antropocentrico e la difesa dell'ambiente è per loro il solo modo di continuare a vivere nel loro ambiente atavico. E' bene ricordare che la moderna politica ambientale dovrebbe basarsi sulla premessa che gli uomini sono contemporaneamente parte della natura e della società, e non che quest'ultima sia una parte a se stante o al di sopra della nozione di natura.

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### Introduction: Think Locally, Act Globally

On the closing day of the Fourth Russell Tribunal, held in Rotterdam in 1980, its chairperson, Mr. Mario Xuruna, a Xavante leader, at last succeeded in getting a passport from Brasilia and joined the Tribunal. Albeit a human rights landmark, the event also was the forerunner of a relatively short honeymoon between the environmental movement and the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian Basin. While the alliance, however, was fruitful for both sides, it rested actually on the shaky foundations of different concepts of what is "nature", and of the relationships between human beings and the surrounding animal, vegetal and mineral entities/beings of the land people dwell on (INGOLD 1991, 1993).

In all events, in the 1980s, every Town Councillor asked for a feathered, colourful and scantily clad Amazonian Indian to show to his/her constituents. Once I was frowned upon when I said bluntly that I had no Indians on sale for an exhibition in an Italian commune. The "symbolic capital" (BOURDIEU 1977, 1979) of Indian images was important for NGOs' fund-raising, eco-firms' sales (for example the Body Shop and Shaman Pharmaceuticals), and eco-tourists' journeys. The later event at Altamira, in 1989, seemed to be the embodiment of Varese's fortunate phrase "Think Locally, Act Globally" (1991). Those who were not certified as "indigenous peoples" did not fare as much well, however, and were evicted from their lands either as a threat to the environment or as an obstacle to development (or both).

The development politics pursued by colonial and post-colonial governments have not only been economically unsuccessful more often than not, but they have also frequently been harmful to the environment. In the scramble for the African Eden, for example, what is to blame, for the dire prospects of human survival in the long term, is the prominent role of specialists, such as economists, biologists, agronomists and so on, with their narrowly conceived academic or ideological preoccupations

framed within Euro-American paradigms (ANDERSON & GROVE 1987), moreover, this technocratic perspective tends to shun questions of morality, values and limits, as well as grass-root people's worldviews and indigenous knowledge. O'Riordan (1976) remarks that many "hard line" solutions proposed by environmental agencies' officials *à la* Hardin (1968) to environmental problems are economically and socially regressive

### Shepherds, peasants, and other ecologically undesirable people

The critique of Western worldview in the 1980s and 1990s reshaped and broadened our definition of a rights-bearing individual not only to categories of people such as women or indigenous minorities, but even to members of another species. Kalland demonstrated how environmental and animal rights groups "have skilfully played on our susceptibility towards whales and created an image of a 'super-whale' by lumping together traits found in a number of species.[...] In Lévi-Straussian terms, whale society has become a metaphor for the lost human paradise or utopian world, and caring for whales has become a metaphor for kindness, for being 'good'" (1993:4).

Although the International Whaling Commission was forced to rethink its approach to subsistence whaling and devised a new management scheme for aboriginal whaling, things are not that simple, because, Kalland (1994) remarks, four criteria must apparently be fulfilled in order to qualify for aboriginal subsistence whaling. One must be a descendant of the first known inhabitants of an area, be non-White, be dominated politically by outsiders, and depend on simple technologies without being properly involved in the world economy<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, terms like "aboriginal", "native", and "indigenous" imply a static view of a people and its culture, although they have been used by minority groups themselves in order to muster support for their struggles to gain recognition as distinct peoples<sup>2</sup>.

An instance of top-down conservation policy coupled with unsuccessful development programs is offered by Weaver's (2000) study of the federal government forestry policy in Northern Mexico from 1960 to 2000. Decades of new laws and regulations with poor or no enforcement and inadequate funding, the creation, restructuring, and decentralization of agencies, and an economy which cannot support high-minded plans and utopian ideologies have done little to improve conditions for production and the environment or the rural poor, mostly Tepehuan and Tarahumara Indians. Weaver concludes: "*Human rights violations, environmental degradation, reduced forest production, relegation of indigenous and poor people to the lowest socioeconomic ranks, and damage to the export economy of Mexico have been the result of the inadequate management of forestry production*" (2000:10)<sup>3</sup>. Weaver, however, cautions against focusing in a special way on underlying factors such as population overgrowth and poverty, because the outcome may be another instance of "blaming the victim" (2000:13). Yet, this has happened in many parts of the world, as the case of the Khunjerab National Park (KNP) illustrates (KNUDSEN 1999). National parks, "*despite imposing heavy burdens on local people, are implemented primarily for the high conservationist profile this alternative offers*" (1999:2), argues Knudsen, who criticizes in particular "*the IUCN (The World Conservation Union)'s preservationist approach to the KNP which studiously ignored the organization's own guidelines for mountain protected areas*" (ibidem).

This author remarks that in the KNP the Pakistani government implemented an outdated conservationist model (the Yellowstone model), and the IUCN actively supported this strategy long after it was clear it was doomed to failure. As Knudsen puts it, "*the planning exercise was a lesson in how not to gain popular support for a park*" (1999:23). In fact, the plans violated the customary use-rights of the Wakhi people, who carve out a living from combining pastoral animal husbandry with some work migration and, recently, trekking tourism. Therefore, the Wakhi villagers staged a successful civil disobedience campaign, refusing to comply with the strict rules governing the park. While the "exclusionary principle" is neither new (from the aristocratic game reserves to the enclosures of the Industrial Revolution) nor the environmental agencies and NGOs' invention, part of the blame for the failure of the KNP must fall, according to Knudsen, on the IUCN, the WWF, and other organizations, "*whose global mission for protecting wildlife has failed to address the needs of local people who, mostly against their will, become involved in wildlife conservation*" (1999:24).

Another example of this kind of conservation policy is that of Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) in northern Tanzania, where «the powerful international wildlife conservation lobby,» as Homewood and Rodgers call it (1987:125), was going to expel about 19.000 pastoralists and their livestock because of environmental degradation and their impact on conservation values. In another

instance Lindsay (1987:161) describes some of the pitfalls attending the combination of pastoral development and wildlife conservation using the case of the Amboseli Park in southern Kenya. The Masai living around Amboseli had little incentive to remain out of the Park, and strong reasons to return; direct economic benefits from the Park were limited and interrupted, and agricultural expansion adjacent to the Park introduced new divisions between the local population and park officials. Lindsay concludes that "*perhaps the chief drawback to all the programmes in Amboseli was that they approached the issue by attempting to graft conservation onto a changing pastoralist society without addressing the nature of the change itself*" (1987:164).

Overstocking, overgrazing, and desertification have become self-reinforcing concepts, and the general outcome has been that large areas of pastoral rangelands have been expropriated for exclusive wildlife conservation use (HJORT 1982, HOMEWOOD & RODGERS 1984, 1987, DRINKWATER 1992). As more and more scholars have pointed out (for example Horowitz 1979, Sanford 1983, Homewood and Rodgers 1984, 1987, Little and Horowitz 1987, Little 1994, 1999), the universal applicability of the concepts of overgrazing and desertification have been seriously questioned. Moreover, Homewood and Rodgers (1987:126) stress the political nature of environmental impact studies which, as in Somalia, focus on potential pastoralist-induced degradation of the riverine environment and omit to mention the serious threats to conservation of spreading cultivation, commercial livestock production, and the impact of toxic chemicals during tsetse elimination and control. Additionally, following Sandford (1983), Drinkwater (1992:179-184) shows convincingly how an opportunistic strategy in tropical savannah areas is economically more efficient, in terms of returns to farmers, than a governmental strategy based on the concept of carrying capacity. He concludes that the evaluation of conflicting perspectives thus becomes both political and technical and demands that a more serious consideration is given to farmers' knowledge.

### From Doing Good to Doing Worse

In an important article on indigenous knowledge and applied anthropology, Sillitoe (1998) reminds that indigenous knowledge research is, by definition, small-scale, culturally specific, and geographically localized: "*It is this limitation of perspective that renders people prey to outside political interference in the name of conservation of biodiversity, land resources, or even global environmental protection*" (1998:233). Besides, the increasing focus on marginal and fragile environments, which are more diverse than better-endowed regions, make generalization and the search for widely applicable solutions difficult. Sillitoe emphasizes the fact that anthropological research "*has transformed the stereotype of feckless rain-forest-destroying peasants in need of modernization to greater respect for local land managers, whose practices have undergone rehabilitation in*

some development circles as *environmentally sustainable and locally appropriate*. [...] *It is increasingly recognized that development initiatives that pay attention to local perceptions and ways are more likely to be relevant to people's needs and to generate sustainable intervention*" (1998:224). In contrast, Burnham makes a list of buzz-words, such as "'sustainable' (as in sustainable forest management), 'participatory' (as in participatory development or participatory rural appraisal) 'indigenous' peoples, and 'primary' or 'pristine' rainforest" (2000:45). He notes that conservation and development projects have failed to conceptualise the regional political economic forces impact on rural peoples, and, in addition, have exacerbated it through the "participatory rural appraisal" or "rapid rural appraisal" methods favoured by many development agencies.

Milton (1996) warns against romanticizing the knowledge of non-industrial peoples and, in particular, the foragers. For many years hunter-gatherer societies were generally seen both within and outside anthropology as those who modify their environment less, in comparison with pastoralists and agriculturalists. Outside the discipline, this misconception helped to generate and sustain the myths of primitive ecological wisdom. Environmentalists fail to distinguish between culture and the things people do, and they remain largely ignorant about the ways in which non-industrial peoples understand and interact with their environments. As a matter of fact, Milton argues, non-industrial peoples do not think like environmentalists and ecological balance, where it exists, is an incidental consequence of human activities and other factors. In a seminal article, Ellen (1986) illustrated how most "green" ideologies draw from European religious as well as secular degenerative theologies of the origin of human society and the process by which foraging peoples were chosen as archetypal primitives. On the other hand, the anthropic character of the so called "pristine" environment has been recognized in anthropologic literature. Irvine (1989), for example remarks that swidden agriculture is now seen as the first stage of a larger agro-forestry system, rather than a temporary and insignificant opening of the forest canopy, which is soon abandoned after crop harvest. Indigenous Amazonian Indians have had an important impact on rain forest structure and composition through a process which Irvine calls "succession management", which favours the distribution of species used for fruit, lumber, construction, medicine and firewood. He concludes that tropical rain forest peoples exert considerable control over their environment and on the distribution of forest resources available to them (1989:224). These conclusions are confirmed by the works of Posey (1982, 1985) in the savannah-forest boundary of the Xingù, of Alcorn (1981, 1984) in the tropical rain forest in Mexico, of Denevan and Padoch (1987), Uhl et al. (1982), Uhl and Jordan (1984) in the Venezuelan Amazon, only to quote some Latin American examples. Notwithstanding the significant impact of the Amazonian peoples on the distribution and abundance of plant resources, environmen-

talist discourses used the Amazonian Amerindian groups as a yardstick by which to measure the degree of unspoiled "indigeneness" people must conform to. Burnham reminds that "*recognizing the majority of the rural inhabitants of an African country as indigenous is not what such international organizations (the World Bank, the ILO, the IUCN and other international or non-governmental organizations) have in mind*" (2000:47). In fact, the Bank's definition of indigenous forest peoples excludes all agriculturalists from the "indigenous peoples" category; commenting the situation in Cameroon, Burnham (ibidem) points up that the millions of people inhabiting the forested zones of West and Central Africa, with the exception of some few tens of thousands of Pigmy hunter-gatherers, could be passed over in the environmental planning of the region.

The notion of "indigenous peoples", which figures prominently in the advertisements and the campaigning literature of the above mentioned organizations as well as environmental NGOs at large, developed in the context of the 1980s. It was in this period that NGOs became aware of the dangers posed to their fund raising activities in the Northern countries, and their relationships with the Southern ones, of appearing to care more for animals than for people (BURNHAM 2000:48). Notwithstanding the rhetoric about "*close partnership with indigenous peoples and defending their interests*", the WWF, other environmental NGOs and international agencies support a very restrictive definition of the category "indigenous", with serious political consequences. As Fisher (1997:439) puts it, "*the growing numbers, changing functions, and intensifying networks of non-governmental organizations have had significant impacts upon globalization, international and national politics, and local lives.*"

Fisher, opening his article, aptly quotes D. H. Thoreau: "*If I knew someone was coming over with the expressed intention of doing good, I would flee*" (1997:439). Later on, speaking of the idealization of NGOs as disinterested apolitical participants in a field of otherwise implicated players, he reminds Milton Friedman's remark that "*the power to do good is also the power to do harm*" and that "*what one man regards as good, another may regard as harm*" (FRIEDMAN 1962, quoted in FISHER 1997:442). Fisher also observes that, although NGOs may present ethical judgments as neutral standards of judgment that stand outside political contest, these judgments are essentially political (1997:458).

### **The Rain Forest Card is Stronger than the Indigenous Card**

The Xavante leader's trip to Rotterdam, albeit important, had little symbolic value outside Brazil. Moreover, Xavante changing lifestyle re-oriented towards ranching in order to facilitate land demarcation, with the sponsorship of the Catholic Church, was frowned upon in the environmental circles with the slogan *a vaca come o mato* (the cow eats the forest). Acting in the post Liberation Theology political environment, the

Amazonian Kayapo, supported by anthropologist Darrell Posey<sup>4</sup>, went to Washington DC and staged a media spectacle at Altamira in 1989, succeeding in stopping Brazil's hydroelectric dam projects and getting legal rights to a vast territory (TURNER 1992, 1999). Thanks to Sting and other pop stars they also became stars: so strong was environmentalism's public appeal that a number of human rights groups recast their campaigns in terms of it (CONKLIN & GRAHAM 1995). As human rights advocates put it, "*we've moved into ecology ... clearly, it works better*" and "*The rainforest card is stronger than the indigenous card. ... and without that, indigenous peoples wouldn't have a chance in hell*" (BRYSK 1994:36, in CONKLIN & GRAHAM 1995:698).

Turner (1999), however, highlights the fact that the non-Indians "lost in translation" the symbolic meaning of the main event in Altamira: the ritual chopping down of a great tree to make a bench<sup>5</sup>, evocative of the reproduction of Kayapo society through the appropriation of the powers of the natural environment (domestication) according to Kayapo mythology. The honeymoon between the Kayapo, the "greens" and the media broke up later on the charge of Kayapo complicity in mining and logging and misuse of profits. The Kayapo, however, were only faithful to their own cultural categories; furthermore, as Pálsson (2000) argues, nowadays and for much of recent history, practically all production is somehow involved in the world capitalist economy. In 1994 the Kayapo evicted the miners to protect their environment, and permitted only the logging for mahogany, whose impact is minimal (TURNER 1999).

The case of the creation of the Mbaracayù Forest Natural Reserve in Paraguay further illustrates how the goals of Indian societies and environmentalists are different. Anthropologists Reed (1995, 1997) and Hill and Hurtado (1995) tried to protect the rights of the Guaraní and Aché Indians<sup>6</sup>, but unfortunately these indigenous peoples were not as picturesque and as much media-friendly as the Kayapo. Initially these Indians were expected both to have access to land for traditional use and to be involved in managing and maintaining the park envisaged by the US-based conservation group The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Paraguayan Fundación Moisés Bertoni (FMB). The TNC accepted the anthropologists' proposal because this way it had a chance to internationalize its work, and the Paraguayan dictatorship favoured the park because it was image-conscious. The Guaraní and the Aché, who had supported the park as a means of acquiring a title to what they considered their ancestral land, soon discovered their power to influence the project was non-existent. In fact, only those who conformed to the TNC definitions of "indigenous peoples", running a "traditional", "natural" lifestyle, that is few Aché, were granted limited access to the reserve. Those who failed the TNC litmus test, that is the Guaraní and most Aché, living on a mix of shifting cultivation, foraging, wage labour and petty commodity production, were dubbed as "peasants" and evicted permanently. The Indians, on the other hand, perceived the TNC and the FMB as the latest

of outsider *latifundistas*, almost indistinguishable from previous ranchers and multinational corporations (FRANK 1969, HUIZER 1973). Even when the short-term objectives of indigenous peoples and the environmental groups are similar, their respective long-term goals are often very different (REED 1997, MILTON, 1996, ELLEN 1986, ANDERSON AND GROVE 1987, BURNHAM 2000, LINDSAY 1987, CONKLIN AND GRAHAM 1997, TURNER 1999).

### **Where Nature is Worshipped, Humans are Sacrificed or "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Animals"?**

These titles from two articles (WOICESHYN 2001, quoted in MORFORD ET AL. 2003, CASAL 2003) aptly summarize the conflicting worldviews which oppose Pálsson's (2000) Orwellian Ministry of Environmental Truth (lumping together international agencies and NGOs) to "indigenous" as well as grass-root people around the world. Theodossopoulos (1997:264, 2000) suggests that local resistance to the "ecologists" is related to social priorities and cultural values, as well as a well-established pragmatic approach to the physical world. Working with the Icelandic small-scale fishermen impoverished by the International Whaling Commission's regulations, Eirnasson (1995) found that their view of animals and nature is basically utilitarian and anthropocentric, with little room for romantic experiences of oneness with nature. Similarly, Turner (1999) argues that the Kayapo are not committed to the preservation of nature for its own sake, and have no spiritual reverence for individual trees and animals.

In order to solve the conundrum of conservation vs. people's needs, it is good to remember, following Pálsson (2000) and Ingold (1988, 1991, 1993, 2000), among others, that modern policy on the environment should be based on the premise that human beings are simultaneously part of nature and society, and it should not be based on the notion that a part of humankind is detached from, and above, nature.

### **Notes**

1. These criteria were devised to exclude both the Nordic peoples and the Japanese, as well as peoples like the Makahs. It is ironic, he argued, that some people are denied access to the world market by a majority of IWC government which usually are strong advocates of free trade and movement of capital.
2. These terms stem from the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropological literature, which viewed the "tribes" as representatives not only of a particular type of society, but also of a particular stage of evolution. Based on studies in North America, Africa, and Melanesia, these terms do not fit very well to Europe and Asia and, as Bêteille (1998:188) writes, the blanket use of the politically correct phrase "indigenous peoples", albeit well entrenched in academic discourse, is seriously misleading. To allow outsiders define what is "traditional" (WENZEL 1991, KALLAND 1994), therefore, gives the anti-whalers a way to control ethnic minorities and keep them in a position of dependency. Furthermore, it denies these people their right to define their own future, de facto freezing the situation and turning an evolving culture into a static museum object. In fact, "*a simplified notion of tradition [...] locks practices into an early contact-era snapshot, while many natives, anthropologists, and others consider innovation to be a legitimate and inherent aspect of carrying on traditions, as well as an important dimension of self-determination and sovereignty*" (SEPEZ-ARADANAZ 2002:152).

3. An important contribution on the Tarahumara and deforestation is "The Political Ecology of Deforestation in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Chihuahua" (n.d.) Report by Randall W. Gingrich, the Director of the Sierra Madre Alliance, at <http://www.sierramadrealiance.org/sierra-pol-ecol/Deforestation.pdf>
4. For a debate about the Kayapo as supposed Keepers of the Forest, see Posey 1982, 1993 and Parker 1992, 1993.
5. According to Turner (1999), Kayapo social reproduction subsumes the production of material subsistence, the production of the nuclear family and extended families. The production of food, shelter and utensils from natural materials forms a direct and continuous part of the production of human persons, families, and society as a whole are seen as aspects of the same process. The great tree cut down for New Corn Ceremony, which was the underlying symbolic leitmotif of the Altamira rally, represents the ancestral maize tree of the myth, and the New Corn Ceremony expresses, in sum, the Kayapo conception of the interdependence of society and nature.
6. The 40% of the Paraguayans are monolingual Guaraní and the 50% are bilingual Guaraní- Spanish. The Guaraní were chosen by the Jesuits as an example of "civilized" Indians. A recent article on the Jesuit missions is Crocitti 2002. A bibliography is that of a Jesuit Bishop who is considered the authority on the Guaraní, Batolomeu Melià et al. (1987). The Guaraní were also studied by Helène Clastres, Pierre's wife (1975). The Aché were made famous in the 1970s by French anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1972) and taken as an example of Society against the State (1974).

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