

Review: Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples
By Mark Dowie

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Dowie, Mark. *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009. 341pp. ISBN 9780262012614. US\$27.95, hardcover. Alkaline paper.

Conservation Refugees is a careful and nuanced look at the relationships between transnational conservation efforts and native peoples—relationships that are anything but careful and nuanced. With a wealth of empirical detail, Dowie demonstrates how conservation of the natural world has often resulted in the displacement and impoverishment of local peoples. In many such instances, the removal of native peoples in order to maintain biodiversity has had the unintended consequence of degrading conserved lands.

Dowie emphasizes three central problems in the relationship between transnational conservation and local peoples. The first is that the natural world is in part a product of the social world. Transnational conservation organizations—Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, and the Worldwide Fund for Nature, for example—have been slow to understand this fact. Contemporary ecosystems are deeply entwined with human activities, and simply removing humans from “nature” ignores the various ways humans are integral to the functioning of many ecosystems.

The second, related problem is that Big Conservation tends to elevate values of biological diversity above values associated with local self-determination. Rights of indigenous peoples become subsumed by presumably transcendent values of ecosystem preservation. Because habitat preservation is perceived as the greater good, removal of local peoples from their homelands becomes a lamentable necessity, but a necessity nonetheless. Such removal tends to be not of a few thousand, or even a few tens of thousands of people, but of several million. The destruction of a 15,000 year old Forest Pygmy culture and displacement of thousands of Pygmy families, as the outcome of the creation of a mountain gorilla preserve, is a typical example.

Dowie draws his examples from the experience of indigenous peoples in Africa, India, Thailand, Brazil, and Western North America. These peoples include, among others, the Miwok, Maasai, Pygmies, Karen, Adivasi, Basarwa, Ogiek, Kayapo, Basarwa, Ogiek, Mursi, and Akoa—names of cultural groups that are undoubtedly less familiar to westerners than the environments these people inhabit. This points to an unfortunate western bias: while the more than 100,000 protected areas on the planet are seen as a triumph of conservation efforts, the cultural loss of people displaced from these selfsame areas is barely noted.

The third problem Dowie addresses is economic. Big Conservation, he argues, has become increasingly tied to a market mentality, in which economic relations may come to trump both environmental coherence and social and cultural stability of indigenous peoples. In the process, many environmental groups act as pious smokescreens for extractive industries, throwing up an atmosphere of doing good for the planet all the while it is business as usual. For example, in the state of Karnataka, India, the Adivasi were displaced from ancestral lands—ecologically sensitive areas—with the aim of preserving wildlife. These lands, however, were then used as industrial plantations for teak and eucalyptus trees.

Big Conservation’s ties to the market take many forms. The example I found particularly jarring was of Conservation International’s 2002 fund-raising trip to Milne Bay along the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea. CI leased a \$25,000/day luxury yacht to provide a close-up look at coral reefs for potential funders such as H. Fisk Johnson, CEO of S.C. Johnson Company, who is one of the richest people in the U.S., and Stone Gossard, guitarist for Pearl Jam, whose apparent interest in CI was to explore ways to mitigate the 5,700 ton carbon footprint of a world tour. CI’s CEO Peter Seligmann was host and pitchman.

Yet the nearly \$6.5 million spent on conservation efforts over the next four years in Milne Bay was almost entirely wasted, resulting in little if any conservation.

Conserving biodiversity is a prominent concern in the modern era, as humans continue to degrade environments. Dowie provides a useful corrective to the myths of conservation that pervade popular notions of habitat preservation. His book will be of interest to specialists, general readers and funders of conservation organizations who seek ways to leverage their donations.

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Electronic Green Journal, Issue 30, Spring 2010, ISSN:1076-7975