

JUNGLE BOOK: Authoritarian Conservation and its Alternatives

Transforming Cultures eJournal,
Vol. 3 No 1, February 2008
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>

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Making Conservation Work: Securing Biodiversity in this New Century, edited by Ghazala Shahabuddin & Mahesh Rangarajan. Ranikhet (Uttaranchal): Permanent Black, (298 pages).

There is a crisis in Indian nature conservation. For years now community conservation has seemed to many of us to have been consolidating its position as the only ethical and workable model for conserving biodiversity in the developing world. The fortress conservation model whereby protected areas are garrisoned for total exclusion of local people and their extractive activities had been thoroughly critiqued and seemed to have been consigned to a place in history along with colonial game reserves. Yet we are now witnessing a swing back to exclusionary thinking on the part of many conservationists.

It is not difficult to see why. The picture of continued species loss and habitat degradation of protected areas in the non-Western world is indeed alarming and is causing panic in some quarters of the conservation movement. And it has been too easy simply to reject fortress conservation as morally unjustifiable and practically unworkable. In fact, it does work. As Arpan Sharma and Asmita Kabra in the opening chapter of the present volume urge, we need to be quite clear about this.² Drawing on their experience in Kanha Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh, they can attest that the violent displacement of tribal people from the sanctuary has not been incompatible with

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² Sharma, A. and A. Kabra, 'Displacement as a conservation tool: lessons from the Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh'.

its status as one of the best-managed reserves in India.³ They thus back anthropologist Dan Brockington's seminal point, based on his study of the displacement of Maasai from the Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania, that conservation can be imposed from above to the detriment of local people and, indeed, it commonly is imposed from above, frequently with the complicity or support of international conservation bodies.⁴

They, like Brockington, reject this approach. But they argue that it is not sufficient any longer simply to claim that protected areas cannot work without the support or acquiescence of the local people who depend on these environments for their living. What is needed is a more thoroughgoing argument for the positive value of community conservation and more on-ground trialed and proven methods for making it work. And this is where *Making Conservation Work* comes into its own: the chapters in this volume are not theoretical essays by conservation commentators, rather each chapter is rich in case-specific detail on management practices and histories of how relations between conservationists, government officials and local communities have developed in particular local areas of India over time.

The outlook might look bleak for marginalised forest dwellers but there is actually great hope to be taken from the changes that are occurring in India at a broader level. The country is on a pathway of rapid economic development that appears to be sustainable for perhaps decades to come and this has brought dramatic improvements in healthcare, education and infrastructure as well, presumably, as swelling the treasuries of the central and state governments. And this is happening in one of the world's most notable participatory democracies, one with a great tradition of critical public debate.

In the early 21st century, India is clearly an exciting place to be and it is in the spirit of optimism that Sharma and Kabra conclude their chapter:

With the growing role of civil society actors like NGOs and community organizations in the conservation and social justice arenas, however, chances of communities being mobilized will increase and rehabilitation packages and practices adopted by the state will be put under increasingly careful scrutiny. It

³ *Ibid*, p. 43.

⁴ Brockington, D. (2002) *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania*. Oxford: James Currey. See also Brockington, D. (2004), 'Community conservation, inequality and injustice: myths of power in Protected Area management', *Conservation and Society* 2(2), pp. 411-32.

will become less easy to coax, cajole, and brow beat local communities into giving up their traditional sources of livelihood.

...With deepening democracy and increased penetration of remote areas through the spread of transport and communication, it is likely that people living inside PAs will increasingly resist involuntary displacement and reject poorly designed and ill-implemented rehabilitation packages. The most important emerging challenge for PA managers in poor countries is to evolve more inclusive paradigms to balance local livelihood needs with conservation objectives.⁵

In laying the groundwork for the volume, Ghazala Shahabuddin and Mahesh Rangarajan, the editors of *Making Conservation Work*, are emphatic that ‘conservation *without* parks is unthinkable. Areas free of permanent human settlement or biomass extraction are indispensable as refugia for representative species and ecosystems’.⁶ It seems unlikely though that these inviolate areas would exceed more than one or two per cent of the Indian landmass. In most of India’s protected areas, which by 2001 covered over five per cent of her landmass, the reality is that ways must be found to enact conservation in a way that does not deprive millions of people of their livelihood.

This is the ‘middle ground’. The motivation of Shahabuddin and Rangarajan in producing this volume has been to explore this middle ground between fortress conservation, the preservationist approach, and community or participatory conservation. They begin their introduction to the volume by citing the aftermath of the shock discovery in 2005 that the tiger had been exterminated in Sariska, a high-profile tiger reserve in northern India. Despite a government inquiry finding that what was needed was a more ‘nuanced’ approach to community conservation than what had already been tried – for instance by giving local occupants a share in tourism revenues, the government instead reacted by proposing to move all 27 villages out of the park.

The focus in the first part of the book is on the issue of displacement – the resettlement of forest-dependent people out of PAs. What is striking here is the closely intertwined fate of displaced people and endangered species. The rise in the expanse of the PA system in India has been achieved at the cost of a parallel rise in the numbers of ‘conservation refugees’.⁷ Most of these people are not just poor, they are those most

⁵ Sharma and Kabra, *op cit*, p. 21.

⁶ G. Shahabuddin and M. Rangarajan, ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

⁷ Sharma and Kabra *op cit*. pp. 46-47.

marginalised in society. In the case of the Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary in Central India, fully 90 per cent of the 5000 people displaced from the sanctuary after it was chosen as a refuge for translocated Asiatic lions (*Panthera leo persica*) are Sahariya, members of a Scheduled Tribe that 'has historically been almost completely dependent upon forests for survival'.⁸ While their dependence on the collection of non-timber forest products for sale and domestic consumption has in recent years declined as they have taken up agriculture, even here they rely partly on the forest for fodder for their stock and for wood. Discriminated against by higher status groups in society, these people are economically marginal, socially marginalised and marginalised from the geographical space occupied by mainstream society. Their situation thus oddly mirrors that of threatened species such as the lion – with everything to lose, both struggle for survival in the remnant pockets of land on the 'edge'. And the Sahariya now find themselves displaced from their forest habitat because the powers that be have decided they are less important than threatened animal species.

It would be mistaken, though, to portray people like the Sahariya as pitted against threatened species in an ever-tightening competition for survival. One of the ironies of their situation is that the forest-dependent communities live in the most intimate day-to-day relationship with the natural environment. The intimate knowledge they have of forest biodiversity is accumulated, of course, in the context of their dependence on it for their sustenance. But as anthropologists like Anna Tsing and Nancy Peluso have so vividly shown in the case of forest-dwelling minorities in Southeast Asia, they also map the topography of their habitat with their songs, with detailed narrative histories, and with a depth of spirituality in which trees are not merely known individually, they, like the animals of their forests, are believed to have their own spiritual existence putting them on a par with people and bringing them into the ambit of human relations.⁹ It is relevant to note in passing that the spiritual or, indeed, the social texture of the lives of the forest-dwelling people discussed in the chapters of *Making Conservation Work* is rarely visible. The volume's focus is solidly on the politics and economics of community conservation and its particular value stems from the on-ground knowledge and experience the authors have of these matters. The authors write on the basis of

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 26.

⁹ Peluso, N.L. (2003) 'Fruit trees and family trees in an anthropogenic forest: Forest zones, resource access, and environmental change in Indonesian', Charles Zerner (ed.), *Culture and the Question of*

detailed long-term experience of conditions in protected areas in different parts of the subcontinent and often of direct involvement in initiatives to engage with local communities living in or close to PAs.

There is the ethical question of whether it is legitimate or morally justifiable to sever people like the Sahariya from their local, intimately known worlds but there is also the question of how it can be justifiable to waste the kind of local knowledge these people have at a time when such knowledge is at such a premium in the nature conservation struggle. It seems a kind of madness to jettison this knowledge simply because forest-dweller lifestyles may no longer be sustainable. A number of the authors turn to examine ways that such local knowledge can be recontextualised in the rapidly changing world of India. The meaningful participation of forest peoples in ecotourism ventures always seems to hover attractively on the horizon but in practice locals rarely seem to share in the benefits, the profits being reaped by outside entrepreneurs and drawn off by corrupt officials. In one of the book's standout chapters though, Bahar Dutt, Rachel Kaleta and Vikram Hoshing, look at ways in which Jogi-Nath snake charmers and the Bawaria, known for their hunting skills, can find a livelihood in conservation-related activities.¹⁰ Both these groups are Scheduled Tribes and it is important to appreciate that snake charming and hunting, respectively, are not simply activities these people engage in but are central to their identity. As one Jogi-Nath leader put it: 'They want us to stop keeping snakes but this is our caste. What is the identity of a Sapera without a snake?'¹¹ Though a majority of Jogi-Nath still practice snake charming, the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act suddenly rendered snake charming and snake trading illegal. One NGO initiative has established a cooperative of snake charmers that employs them in the production of anti-venom and in disseminating advice about snakes to local farmers, helping the latter distinguish between venomous and non-venomous species and hence reducing the number of snakes killed in farmers' fields. There is also a tremendous potential to engage Jogi-Nath in 'street conservation

Rights, pp.184-218. Durham: Duke University Press; Tsing, A.L. (1993) *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ Dutt, B, R. Kaleta & V. Hoshing, 'The hunter and the hunted: conservation with marginalized communities.'

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 255. Jogi-Nath snake-charmers in Haryana are known as Saperas.

education' because of the extent of their knowledge about snakes, their itinerate lifestyle and their experience in entertaining the public.¹²

The danger of authoritarian, exclusionary conservation practice is that it will produce populations of local people alienated from the idea of nature conservation or even hostile to it. And we are not talking about small numbers of people here. One estimate has it that there are 300 million people in India who are wholly or partly dependent on forests and their products and that 200 million of these live below the poverty line.¹³ There are 196 'communities' (tribes, or minority cultures) that gain their livelihood by trapping birds and other animals.¹⁴

Australian readers of *Making Conservation Work* may find themselves comparing the situation of marginalised forest-dependent people in India with the historical position of Aboriginal people in Australia. Heather Goodall's recent commentary does just this.¹⁵ It is easy to see a broad similarity between forest people in India displaced to the margins of PAs and those Aboriginal people who through the course of the 19th century found themselves in 'fringe camps' tenuously perched on fragments of their former country not as yet occupied by colonial settlers and their activities. Goodall's closer analysis, however, points to key differences between the Indian and Australian situations. These include the fact that in settler Australia Aboriginal people continued to hunt and gather broadly across the settled landscape and it was only with loss of rural employment from the 1930s that they relied increasingly on the forest reserves and the other areas that from the 1960s became national parks.¹⁶ Australia, like North America, from the beginning adopted a garrison approach to park management that excluded Indigenous 'cultural' and subsistence hunting and gathering at the same time it excluded recreational hunters and other resource extractors from mainstream society. It has only been over the last decade or so that Indigenous people in these regions have been able to negotiate renewed access to the protected area system, extending in some cases to joint

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 242.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Heather Goodall (2006) 'Exclusion and re-emplacment: tensions around Protected Areas in Australia and Southeast Asia. *Conservation and Society* 4(3), pp. 383-95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 387-88.

management. Interestingly, as Priya Das notes in her chapter, the Government of India remains 'firmly opposed' to the idea of joint management.¹⁷

Making Conservation Work takes one on a tour of some of the more remote and exotic corners of the Subcontinent and leads one through a menagerie of animals that include tigers, lions, snakes and sea turtles. Though I knew I shouldn't, I found myself indulging at certain moments in the pages of this book in dreams of a far away, Kiplingesque India, the kind of place where protesting snake-charmers attempt to release live snakes into the state assembly of Orissa.¹⁸ These were momentary lapses though. What I came away from the book with was a feeling that over the next few decades India will be the source of some of the most influential and innovative thinking in the global field of nature conservation.

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¹⁷ Das, P., 'The politics of participatory conservation: the case of Kailadevi Wildlife Sanctuary, Rajasthan'.

¹⁸ Dutt, Kaleta and Hoshing, *op cit.* p. 241.