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Stephen Corry: conservation must work with, not against, indigenous peoples

Alice Bayer | 29th November 2014



Stephen Corry. Portrait by Wolfgang Schmidt / Survival.

From the creation of the very first national parks and game reserves, 'conservation' has always been about repressing and expropriating indigenous tribes, Survival International director Stephen Corry told Alice Bayer. And despite all the evidence that indigenous peoples are the best wildlife managers, old attitudes die hard ...

Since its inception, 'conservation' has pitted itself against tribal peoples, largely through taking their lands and forbidding their subsistence activities. This has included preventing local people hunting for food in order to conserve game for sport or trophy hunters.

Many conservation organizations now have more 'tribal friendly' policies on paper, but these rarely reflect the reality on the ground where conservation remains responsible for serious human rights violations.

Tribal peoples' lives and lands are being destroyed by the conservation industry, tourism and big business. We're fighting these abuses. We know tribal peoples are better at looking after their environment than anyone else.

What are you planning to do about it?

We are embarking on a very ambitious project, to press conservationists finally to abide by international standards on human rights and tribal peoples.

We believe that if that can be achieved, the partnerships which will result will eventually catalyze the most significant leap forward for genuine environmental protection in history. In its current form 'conservation' often doesn't work: it's failing to save many environments and it's harming people.

The key to its failure is that the benevolent image it presents to the public in industrialized countries is far from how it's perceived on the ground: locally, it's often

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seen as just another form of colonialism, profiting from land grabs, invasive tourism (marketed with an 'eco' label), trophy hunting, biofuel production, and even logging and mining.

What specific areas are you looking at?

To begin with - **Baka 'Pygmies' in Cameroon**, who are routinely and seriously abused by park guards that depend on financial support from WWF; **tiger reserves in India**, which are used as a cover for land grabs and logging; **Bushmen in Botswana** who are being forced off their lands supposedly to preserve game (though a diamond mine has been built there); and, more generally, the real story of **the suffering which national park creation** has inflicted on tribal peoples.

Don't you have to have conservation zones to preserve wilderness?

It's invariably claimed that tribal peoples' lands are wildernesses, but that's wrong. Nearly all conservation zones are in fact the ancestral lands of tribal peoples, who have been dependent on, and shaped, managed and controlled them for millennia.

Many of the benefits of this 'shaping' are only now being realized: for example, the deliberate and regular burning of bush by Australian Aboriginals increased biodiversity and stopped the huge, dangerous fires which now plague that continent.

“ The evidence shows that the most economical way, by far, to protect environments is to ensure tribal peoples control their own lands, the territories they have infinitely more expertise about than anyone else. ”

Far from being devoid of human influence, the world's most famous 'wildernesses' - including Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Serengeti - were home to tribal people, who were violently evicted when their lands were turned into national parks geared towards mass tourism and its businesses.

But at least these areas are now protected, aren't they?

Preventing certain human activities in some areas is normal, and is likely to be supported by tribal peoples. However, in many conservation zones, the apparent 'wilderness' is partly a stage set, where water holes are specially dug near hotels to attract game, land is cleared to create vistas for tourists, and fences, roads, hotels, camps, airstrips, study centers, and parking zones etc. are built.

In this way, the same voices asserting that the land should remain 'untouched' can change it more than ever. Many national parks nowadays are not empty areas, fenced off

from encroachment, they are crafted by conservationists in a particular image, and usually see far more human activity than they ever did.

But conservation has prevented species extinction, isn't that good?

Of course! The massive big game hunts pursued by the European colonists in India, and Africa are now more controlled (though hunting concessions are still regularly sold). However, the same species which were threatened a generation ago remain threatened today.

WWF says that Earth has lost half its wildlife in the last 50 years. Conservation simply isn't working, and that's partly because it alienates local people. It won't work until it brings them on its side, and it can't do that if it continues to be responsible for abusing them.

What do tribal people think of conservation?

Survival does not claim to represent tribal peoples, but it's clear that some now view it as one of the biggest problems they face. Some are employed by it, usually at the lowest level - putting on shows for tourists, working as servants in tourist camps and hotels and so on. Some are intimidated by it, and a few profit from it.

What's the evidence that conservation organizations are involved in trophy hunting?

The evolution of conservation ideas in the 19th and early 20th centuries was inextricably linked to trophy hunting. Conservation still routinely profits from it. WWF calls it a 'legitimate tool', a conservation 'incentive', even the best available option in certain situations. It has supported zoning in Cameroon which includes hunting concessions.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's largest environmental organization, supported an auction to hunt rhino, asserting, "*trophy hunting is a fundamental pillar of Namibia's conservation approach and instrumental in its success.*"

Several conservation leaders, such as the former King of Spain (ex-president, WWF Spain), the Duke of Edinburgh (ex-president, WWF International), and his grandson, Prince Harry (ambassador, United for Wildlife), have themselves been trophy hunting.

The view that such hunters make the best conservationists has long been widely held. Meanwhile, tribal hunters are **accused of 'poaching'** because they hunt their food. And they face arrest and beatings, torture and death, while fee-paying **big game hunters are encouraged.**

Aren't some tribespeople guilty of illegal poaching or helping 'organized' poachers?

Perhaps, in some places, but it's important to grasp the background. The first illegal act is that of governments and conservation organizations which steal tribal lands and prohibit their subsistence activities. The second is the persecution of tribes by those determined to keep them out.

With their means of survival eroded, it's not surprising desperate tribespeople can be recruited by 'organized' poachers. However, it's also true that this can be a **fabricated accusation**, used by governments and environmentalists to justify their own illegal acts (as is clear in Botswana).

Wouldn't it be complex and costly to involve tribal peoples properly and fairly in conservation projects on their lands?

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of organizations which claim to work for the environment. Every 24 hours, Conservation International receives \$290,000, the IUCN pulls in over \$320,000, WWF \$2 million, and The Nature Conservancy \$2.6 million: there is hardly a shortage of resources.

Were such funds to be deployed appropriately, in real and equal partnerships with tribal peoples, the latter are likely to prove far more efficient and better custodians of their own lands than anyone else.

The evidence shows that the most economical way, by far, to protect environments is to ensure tribal peoples control their own lands, the territories they have infinitely more expertise about than anyone else.

Aren't you ignoring the complex realities of the power imbalances and racism working against tribal peoples in conservation zones?

No, we fully recognize them: we're trying to change them. All too often the conservation organizations accept - even reinforce - them, or devise ineffectual projects to do no more than try and mitigate their effects.

Your criticisms of conservation have been denounced as a fundraising gimmick. Is this true?

No, probably most of our supporters see themselves as natural conservationists. By exposing the flaws in conservation we are prepared to lose support, and to be fiercely attacked by very powerful conservation organizations and their business partners.

The former include some of the world's most trusted 'brands', and we know it will be difficult to persuade the public that they need to change.

In addition, criticisms of such organizations - which often litigate when they feel threatened - are rarely covered by the media. We are setting ourselves a difficult, but

absolutely vital, task.

How can you claim tribal peoples are the best conservationists?

Survival has been very careful to make the claim after careful consideration of the evidence, much of which has only recently become available.

This includes: [satellite imagery of Amazonia](#) and other areas, which clearly shows how the Indian areas remain the most forested; game populations in the Kalahari, which prove that the Bushmen don't overhunt as claimed; studies of the effects of regular indigenous undergrowth firing, swidden agriculture, and hunter-gatherer activities which increase biodiversity; studies of the destructive impact of invasive species, which can increase when tribal peoples are evicted; research on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) which shows that earlier ideas about deforestation are probably wrong; tiger populations, which can be denser when tribal peoples have not been evicted; and countless testimonials of indigenous people themselves.

What do other organizations think?

Even reports from organizations which have been responsible for the removal of tribal peoples actually support this view. The World Bank has been one of the most destructive forces over the last generation, yet [one of its studies](#) shows less deforestation where tribal peoples live; [WWF asserts](#) that 80% of the richest 'ecoregions' are home to tribal peoples which "*testifies to the efficacy of indigenous resource management systems.*"

Isn't all this just more of the romantic 'noble savage'?

No, it's what the evidence shows. There is no doubt that tribal peoples have a profounder connection to 'nature' than industrialized society.

Their surrounding environment is not just a home but provides building materials, food, medicine, clothing, and all that is necessary for their families to thrive. They live largely self-sufficient ways of life, and depend upon their land for everything: it is their shelter, their supermarket, their temple, and their hospital.

More than anyone, their health, prosperity and survival depend on their environment, which makes them the best conservationists and guardians of the natural world. These are the facts which industrialized society has spent generations belittling with cries of 'noble savage'

Stephen Corry (b. 1951, Malaya) was projects director of Survival International from 1972, and has been its director general since 1984. He has worked with tribal peoples in the Indian subcontinent, Africa and, particularly, western South America, mainly Amazonia. In the 1970s, he promoted 'self-determination' in the debate about indigenous peoples which was then largely polarised around the poles of 'assimilation' or 'preservation'.

In the 1980s, he pushed to popularize tribal peoples' issues. In the 1990s, he led the opposition to ideas such as the 'rainforest harvest', which threatened to confuse economic issues with human rights. He was involved in the campaign to defend the land rights of the 'Bushmen' of Botswana, a country where he has been (wrongly) described as 'public enemy number one'.

His work now is centred around building a groundswell of support for tribal peoples, significant enough both to endure for decades and permanently change the false and harmful assertion that they are backward remnants, destined to disappear.

Stephen Corry is the author of 'Tribal Peoples for tomorrow's world', Freeman Press, 2011.

More information: survivalinternational.org/parks.

Alice Bayer is the Press Officer at Survival International, the global movement for tribal peoples' rights, where she has worked since 2009.

Alice studied Economics and Politics at Bristol University and has a Masters in Development Studies from SOAS, University of London, where she focused on indigenous-

led approaches to development in Mexico. She has visited tribal communities in India facing eviction from their lands.

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