



A FUNCTIONING

ANARCHY?

Essays for

RAMACHANDRA

GUHA

Edited by SRINATH RAGHAVAN
and NANDINI SUNDAR

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THE AUTHORITARIAN BIOLOGIST RELOADED AND DEEP ECOLOGY REDUX: CONSERVATION IMPERIALISM AND THE CONTROL OF KNOWLEDGE, MONEY AND SPACE

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IN 1989 AND 1997 respectively, nearly ten years apart, Ramachandra Guha published two critiques of prevailing and emerging paradigms in environmentalism, which were of immense significance to India and the Third World.¹ Both essays warned against the pitfalls of adopting a universal ethic, especially an anti-human one that ignored the diverse social and cultural foundations of the developing world. In this essay, we query what (if anything) has changed in the decades since.

Throughout human history, human–environment interactions have taken many forms that have resulted in a range of outcomes from over-exploitation to sustainable use to ‘conservation’. The sequestration of resources by the wealthy and the powerful has also been a feature of human societies in recent history, beginning with agrarian and pastoral societies that restricted access to land and resources from competing groups. In India and elsewhere, strategies of enclosure were implemented by local rulers and were further formalized and scaled up during the

colonial period.² In fact, the recent trajectory of ‘conservation’ is deeply interlinked with that of European colonialism. Conservation, as it is currently defined and operationalized, owes its origins to settler excesses in these regions as well as responses to the scarcity induced by commodity extraction and the legacies of the Industrial Revolution. The European tradition of exclusionary hunting preserves and exclusive rights in favour of the elites also aligned closely with practices in other parts of the world, including Asia.

In North America, the early 1900s witnessed the birth of the notion of pristine wildernesses, as conceived and romanticized by those such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau.³ This was not only a radical shift from the utilitarian approach of American forestry (and its proponents like Gifford Pinchot), but also different from anthropocentric approaches adopted by the British and princely kingdoms in places like India. While some American conservationists such as Aldo Leopold promoted a balance with agrarian systems, and recognized that the value of natural areas also lay in services such as hunting and fishing, a strong movement for exclusionary conservation developed from their ideas, representing a biocentric view of ‘nature for its own sake’. Ironically enough, the areas that they considered as untouched by human hand, such as the vast landscapes of California and Yellowstone, turned out to be consequences of centuries of ‘manipulation’ by native American peoples.⁴ In many locations, low population densities of indigenous communities as a consequence of prior contact with Europeans and disease produced seemingly pristine landscapes that masked prior human influence.⁵ In places such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, the removal of indigenous communities paved the way for the first national parks. Elimination, eviction and dispossession of native communities, and the ‘idealisation of uninhabited landscapes’⁶ have been the hallmarks of the American conservation movement.

However, the problematic history of the origins of conservation has largely been neglected in the contemporary conservation arena. On the whole, global conservation continues to be dominated not only by a limited understanding of history, but also by Western paradigms of protection that adhere to narrow frameworks of knowledge and ethics. Following the establishment of the crisis discipline of ‘Conservation Biology’ in the 1970s, conservationists of all hues have portrayed themselves as saviours of the planet, and have assumed sanctimonious postures about their role in society. In particular, ecologists and biologists

have assumed the mantle of leadership in conservation decisions based on the (often misguided) premise that good science axiomatically translates to good management. In an attempt to be apolitical, these groups also tend to project conservation as a wholly righteous exercise without its attendant politics and continuing dispossession. Further, despite the fact that sustainable use is one of the three main tenets of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), protectionist paradigms find widespread support in this community which continues to disproportionately campaign for human-free spaces, exclusionary conservation, and a call to end many forms of use that were once commonplace and continue to be crucial to human existence.

In the first ('Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation'⁷) of the two landmark papers, Ramachandra Guha critiqued the emerging, yet powerful American deep ecology movement, which he warned, was 'a radical trend within the wilderness preservation movement' that aimed to shame the anthropocentric stance of traditional conservation discourses into a biocentric one. He questioned its applicability and argued against its adoption in countries such as India. The second ('The Authoritarian Biologist and the Arrogance of Anti-humanism'⁸) critiqued the self-proclaimed role of biologists as the flagbearers of science and the arbitrators of wildlife conservation. He called out various luminaries such as David Ehrenfeld and Dan Janzen who had been at the forefront of the conservation movement and who accorded a central place to biologists in environmental decision-making. Guha also called into question the policies of many large conservation NGOs and their impact on people.

A few years later, Dan Brockington's critique of fortress conservation became a rallying call for conservation social scientists to tear down the walls that biologists had built.⁹ In 2003, Mac Chapin addressed an article to 'Big International Non-Government Organizations' (BINGOs), titled 'A Challenge to Conservationists' where he called on them to devise strategies that could simultaneously address conservation issues without sidelining marginal communities and their livelihoods.¹⁰ And in 2005, Mark Dowie labelled conservation as one of the biggest causes of human rights violations (after war) that had resulted in an extraordinary number of conservation refugees.¹¹

In general, the role of large Northern NGOs in setting conservation agendas, particularly for the Global South, came under fire.¹² Conservation social scientists also critiqued neoliberal conservation, an

emerging conservation paradigm incorporating free market ideologies and privatization, and forging links between unlikely ideological partners, particularly NGOs and private corporations.¹³ These led to the emergence of the field of political ecology in conservation.¹⁴ Building on the prior analyses of political ecologists who critiqued the nexus between knowledge and power in Third World environmental research,¹⁵ many of these essays called into question both the ideology of the conservation movement as violating human rights, as well as the movement's ability to be effective, creating as it did a wide swathe of 'victims' who were opposed to the idea of conservation itself. Social scientists pointed out the problematic consequences of 'war by conservation'¹⁶ and described these as proactive, interventionist militarized responses, whereby conservation agencies engaged in violence and use of force against people who were identified as poachers with links to terror networks in areas that were of geostrategic interest to the US-led war on terror.¹⁷

The parallel and intertwined histories of the engagement of large conservation organizations and conservation biologists in the latter half of the twentieth century has its roots in certain ideologies, which while originating in the West, found a happy resonance in urban elite conservationists across the world (the local whites). This imperialism has manifested itself in three forms—knowledge, money and space. We examine each of these in the course of this essay. Given the changing paradigms of conservation over the years, we ask what has changed in the decades since Guha's seminal papers. Has the politics of conservation evolved? What do the offshoots of the deep ecology movement look like? Have biologists become any less 'authoritarian'? And what does it mean for developing countries like India?

INCURABLE TYRANTS AND OVERGROWN INFANTS

The idea that knowledge is power dates at least to Plato's *Republic*,¹⁸ and is generally attributed to Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries (though it also appeared in sixth-century Islamic literature¹⁹). A modern scientific interest in the natural world was then already over 200 years old, and developed into the fields of biogeography and evolutionary biology. This interest further broadened into studies of animal behaviour and ecology. However, despite directly addressing questions relating to natural landscapes, flora and fauna, ecology as a

discipline remained somewhat separate from movements related to nature preservation till the 1970s.

Modern conservation has its origins in the evolution of the environmental protection movement in the US. Here, environmental measures adopted to counter the Dust Bowl and ecological impacts linked to the Great Depression—followed eventually by concerns surrounding industrial pollution (pioneered by Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring'²⁰)—drove the emergence of conservation, and consternation, at a national scale. As the cause gained traction globally via the establishment of several NGOs such as World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), there was a rapid development of a priestly class within this enterprise. Further, since the conservation discourse was dominated by Western biologists and ecologists, this 'crisis discipline' began to spread the self-serving rhetoric that these two areas of research were central to conservation.²¹ With this machete in hand, biologists from developed countries (US and European mainly) invaded the rest of the world, in pursuit of a particular kind of knowledge (biology or science), not of course for any personal gain, but to benefit the greater common good, namely conservation.

What followed the ordainment of biologists as the high priests of conservation was something akin to a gold rush. The first was disciplinary: from population biology to community ecology to genetics, the case was made for their contribution to conservation. Several journals were started—*Biological Conservation* in 1968, *Environmental Conservation* in 1974, *Conservation Biology* in 1977—and many textbooks were written during this period, establishing conservation biology as a new discipline.²² In particular, Michael Soulé (the 'father of conservation biology') championed the development of this new field and the idea that good conservation was based on biology.

For example, there were heated debates surrounding the use of island biogeography, a theory proposed by Robert MacArthur and E.O. Wilson (1967),²³ to explain species richness on islands, to create conservation rules. One such rule, based on the idea that smaller islands would have fewer species, was called the SLOSS dilemma,²⁴ i.e. should conservation reserves consist of Single Large or Several Small patches? This idea became so dominant that it is considered almost axiomatic today that larger areas are better for conservation. However, not everyone supported these ideas;

not only was there considerable disagreement about what ecological theory suggested in this regard, but also about whether some of these rules were based on that theory at all.²⁵ Needless to say, there was, and is, a need for informed decision-making, but for decades, this was largely centred on a single discipline, namely biology.

PARACHUTE SCIENCE

At the same time, there was a geographical consequence of the spread of conservation biology. Biologists were already keen to pursue their trade in different parts of the world, a tradition long part of the field, even before the voyages of Darwin and Wallace. For Northern/Western scientists, the allure of the tropics with their vast diversity and countless endemics continued. Increasingly though, it was being frowned upon as ‘parachute science’²⁶ where biologists or ecologists could drop into other parts of the world, collect data or samples, and disappear, sometimes leaving not even footprints or memories. However, conservation now legitimized the presence of these parachute scientists: much as the incursions of large political powers into other parts of the world have been justified as being in response to terror, so has conservation biology found its way there through the narrative of crisis.

This domination over knowledge and science has been facilitated through bilateral state arrangements, support from philanthropic donor agencies and state funding for Western universities, as well as by the presence of large multinational NGOs in many countries. Recent changes in policy leading to greater regulation of such research by developing countries such as India and Indonesia point to increasing concern about this practice.²⁷ As in economics and health, conservation solutions too are being sourced from Western institutions leading to a mismatch in knowledge as well as context.²⁸ There are of course exceptions to this, and in many instances, Western researchers are unaware of such asymmetries in power and in most cases are not deliberately exploitative.

When the CBD was ratified in 1993, it sought to bring about a more democratic ownership of intellectual property along with an equitable sharing of benefits. Many nations enacted laws within the framework of the CBD which aimed to restrict biopiracy and increase access to benefits for local communities. An unfortunate side effect of these laws in many countries (including India) is that the free exchange of biological

material between scientists (in particular for taxonomic or genetic analysis) has been greatly restricted. The scientific community has felt so inconvenienced by these laws that they have repeatedly endorsed their repealing.²⁹ While it is certainly true that these laws do pose constraints for legitimate collaborative research, the role of the ‘outpost scientist’ who serves as a source or conduit for research samples to First World entities is equally worth examining.³⁰ Moreover, the notion that laws aimed at greater benefit sharing should be changed or dispensed with to serve ‘science’, disregarding traditional societies who may benefit from Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), only serves to demonstrate the arrogance of the scientific community, and the very anti-humanism that Guha spoke of.

THE AUTHORITARIAN BIOLOGIST RELOADED

In the last couple of decades, the social sciences have breached the bastion of biologists, creating an alternate rhetoric that calls for an explicit recognition of rights, especially of marginalized communities, in conservation. Deriving from the academic disciplines of anthropology, sociology, economics and environmental history, this has had such an impact that the body of knowledge is now largely referred to as ‘Conservation Science’. The catalyst for this relabelling came from two respected academics in the conservation field, Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier, who in a compelling article (titled ‘What Is Conservation Science?’) called for a global broadening of the discipline to include other disciplinary inputs (especially from the social sciences) as well as the critical importance of balancing biodiversity conservation and human well-being.³¹ This was met with an unprecedented series of vitriolic, and often personal attacks on these authors, their humanistic viewpoints, and their questionable moral standing. Stalwarts of conservation biology promptly denounced their anthropocentrism. Michael Soulé himself launched a scathing attack on the ‘chimeric’ mistake that was ‘new conservation’, providing counterarguments with examples from the US as if nowhere else mattered.³² Richard Primack, then editor of *Biological Conservation*, wrote a similar response along with Philip Cafaro;³³ they were joined by a chorus of conservation scientists.³⁴ Most of the participants in this debate were from Northern institutions and chided Kareiva and Marvier for losing sight of their morals.

What were the responses from the Global South? For the most part there was silence, because, unless you paid a subscription (to the publishing giant Elsevier),³⁵ *Biological Conservation* was not accessible to the less fortunate academics, non-academics and others who simply did not care as there were more pressing priorities. To many of us embedded within research and conservation in the developing world, Western conservation biologists opposing the need to address human well-being tend to come across as ignorant relics unmindful of the folly of brushing aside the coupled social-ecological systems that now dominate the planet. They also came across as sympathizers of colonial fortress conservation approaches that have led to large-scale exclusion, translocation and marginalization of local communities. In an earlier era, those opposed to people's participation or more inclusive approaches could dismiss the entire movement as uninformed or unscientific. However, from the 1990s, a large number of social scientists, ranging from environmental historians to political ecologists and anthropologists, had been pointing to the problematic aspects of exclusionary conservation via the protected area approach.³⁶ Thus, in contemporary conservation milieus, biologists were no longer arguing with so-called 'placard carrying activists' or 'unwashed social workers', but with respected academics sitting in universities.

In the conservation biology camp, the political ecological critique of conservation spawned a range of new movements that purported to be based on rigorous science. One of these was initiated by the eminent ecologist, E.O. Wilson, who argued that half of the earth needed to be set aside for nature.³⁷ This has generated support largely from biologists and those of biocentric orientation, with the proponents claiming evidence from ecological studies that this is the only preventive to large-scale extinction.³⁸ The response from the conservation social science community argues that this approach, first, ignores the sources of resource extraction, consumption and environmental impact, which would continue to operate unchecked; second, would have a significant social impact, affecting mostly economically weak and politically marginalized communities; third, does not provide clarity about who would control this biodiversity half; fourth, fails to recognize the value of human–environment relationships; and fifth, offers no path forward for biodiversity in the human half.³⁹

While these critiques are based on social, political and economic realities, there are also alternate ecological frameworks, such as

reconciliation ecology⁴⁰ that have not received sufficient attention from the proponents of pristine spaces. Based on ecological research on the relationship between the number of species and area (the species–area curve), Michael Rosenzweig suggested that the way forward would be to increase the ecological suitability of human-dominated landscapes, i.e. reconciliation between human needs and nature.⁴¹ Such reconciliation landscapes would enhance biodiversity through providing more habitat for species, and through connectivity across habitats for others.⁴² Moreover, while they may not protect all biodiversity, the ecological integrity and functionality of such landscapes would obviously be greater than heavily degraded spaces.

For many conservationists however, Half-Earth seems to be a straightforward win with a potential to sequester more land for conservation than they had previously dared to express. Displaying an appalling lack of awareness or acknowledgement about the problematic history of conservation including, most significantly, its repugnant links to colonialism, many biologists have been quick to sign on, questioning neither the science behind this arbitrary figure, nor its practicality. For instance, how would Half-Earth be operationalized by developing countries struggling to even minimally increase land under protection? Would this not entail the forced removal of people? Reflecting an even narrower ethic, a select group of conservationists demands that ‘intraspecies justice’—justice for people—should not come at the expense of ‘interspecies justice’.⁴³ How would interspecies justice translate on the ground for a country like India? Referencing a classic philosophical scenario, does this mean that they would pick the last tiger over a human baby?

The difference between these approaches is not, as conservation biologists would have you believe, that one (Half-Earth) is based on science while others are not. In fact, the difference seems largely normative.⁴⁴ Do we want to promote policies that are likely to cause social injustice or those that integrate humans with their environments? Do we believe that being connected to nature is an integral part of human culture and should be extended equally to all, which might create better support for conservation? It is richly ironic that biologists believe that science should (or does) provide all the answers when different camps within biology itself advocate (almost) diametrically opposite approaches. This would be amusing if it did not have such dire consequences.

THE DEEP ECOLOGY REDUX

In their effort to argue for the preservation of their favourite species and ecosystems, Northern conservationists have been quick to form a mutually reinforcing nexus with ideologues of the animal rights and liberation fronts, claiming ecocentrism as the ethics of choice. This unholy alliance has spawned new movements such as ‘compassionate conservation’⁴⁵ and ‘just preservation’.⁴⁶ Borrowing heavily from the political theory of animal rights,⁴⁷ just preservation aims to give voice to non-humans, youth and futurity (future generations of both human and non-human beings) through courts and other legitimate arenas of adjudication.

Compassionate conservation, one of the most prominent of these movements in recent years, is defined by the idea that individuals (of species) matter and amounts to the outcome that animals must never be harmed or killed. Critiquing this framework, Meera A. Oommen et al. have argued against the application of a single universal moral code for conservation.⁴⁸ They also point out that the approach could have fatal consequences for people affected by conflict with large dangerous animals such as elephants and crocodiles. There are further concerns about compassionate conservation with regard to its science and rationality. First, its proponents ignore insights from a range of disciplines especially the social sciences, thus using knowledge in a selective fashion.⁴⁹ Second, despite the rash of inconsistencies with conservation strategies that various authors have pointed out, they insist that it is not a version of animal rights. But, compassionate conservation cannot accept hunting as a strategy for conservation, even when it has been shown to have social and economic benefits in many contexts.⁵⁰ Thus, compassionate conservation may have its place as a value (based on the rights of individual animals) but cannot be argued to be based on conservation science.

Ethical overreach in the guise of science is a widespread feature of Western conservation interventions in places such as Africa. For example, Amy Dickman et al. caution fellow conservationists against the pitfalls of moral relativism and ‘misguided respect’ for local cultures and traditions in less developed countries, and instead urge the adoption of science-based universal principles to guide conservation.⁵¹ In their words, ‘What sympathy should we grant for tradition, whether for cutting down trees in a UK woodland, or for the killing of threatened species for cultural reasons? A lion may represent one man’s trophy, another’s photo opportunity,

another's threat or nuisance, and the ghost of another's enemy . . . the last view in this list represents a traditional yet baseless belief . . .⁵² While no doubt well intentioned, the idea of biologists and conservationists assuming the role of adjudicators of local cultural practices and social contexts outside their own remains problematic.

To be fair, animal-oriented politics in academia is not confined to biologists but affects a larger body of academics, mostly derived from the Global North. A host of sub-disciplines variously known as critical animal studies, more-than-human geographies, etc. have come into vogue in the last few years, with its proponents reinforcing each other. Another feature is their selective dependence on information from the developing world and spiritual traditions elsewhere. For instance, by pointing out the existence of equivalent terms for compassion ('ahimsa' in the Indian context) in multiple languages, Arian D. Wallach et al.⁵³ advance it as a core ethic that automatically translates into a universal value. However, their attribution of India's (questionable) conservation success to inherent compassion and 'progressive' animal protection laws is not only naive but amounts to tacit support for the country's fundamentalist political factions that promote violence against communities that deviate from mainstream consumption norms. Guha's caution about the misrepresentation of eastern traditions in support of a particular ethical position is still very much valid.⁵⁴

GRAB THAT CASH WITH BOTH HANDS

Viewed as another global socio-economic enterprise, conservation is affected by the same forces as the rest of society. Just as large multinationals sequester markets and funds, so have large NGOs (BINGOs) such as Conservation International (CI), TNC, WWF, IUCN, Greenpeace and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) cornered a lion's share of conservation funds.⁵⁵ With budgets larger than some small countries, one can legitimately ask whether their primary goal is environmental conservation or self-preservation? With offices in dozens of countries, including real estate in Geneva, Washington DC and New York, these organizations are not cheap to support. Further, overhead costs and bloated executive salaries add to costs.⁵⁶ Fundraising for survival is in fact one of the key challenges for NGOs worldwide, both large and small. However, many large organizations have pursued and received funds from large corporate donors with dubious environmental credentials. In 2013, the

partnership between IUCN and Shell came in for much criticism and was described as ‘greenwashing’.⁵⁷ In fact, many instances of funding support for environmental projects by corporations have been described as blood money (payments made to victims, here the environment), conscience money or as explicit greenwashing (paying to improve their image).

The money game interlinked with that of increasing corporate partnerships is also evident in the sudden emergence of conservation strategies that are linked to business solutions. In recent years, philanthropic donors, especially those tied to large, powerful corporations have been at the forefront of a more entrepreneurial ‘philanthrocapitalism’⁵⁸ that seeks to involve features such as venture philanthropy and certain tech-based solutions in social projects related to conservation. Despite being somewhat untested in this sphere, there is a sudden surge in philanthropic interest in supporting these and a concomitant disinterest in conventional interventions.⁵⁹ In these contexts, funding support is decided not by experts in the field of conservation, but by prominent business and investment professionals who are confident that successful models in the business sector can be replicated in the environmental field. Problematic interventions that include hidden persuaders or behaviourally engineered compliance strategies such as ‘nudge’⁶⁰ are sometimes actively pursued.

Apart from creating a nexus between corporations and NGOs, fundraising imposes other constraints. Large-scale funding often needs greater visibility which makes it necessary for organizations to practise one-upmanship in the public sphere. This then begins to define, first, the kind of work that organizations do, and second, how they portray themselves in the media. As funding for charismatic species is easier to obtain, the efforts of a large number of organizations are geared towards this. Thus, approaches to on-ground work which need to be discretionary, low-profile and to share credit with local partners are not pursued as they contribute little to the public profile of organizations and restrict their ability to raise funds.

In both Africa and Asia, a disproportionate amount of funds are received for large, charismatic vertebrates such as elephants, rhinos, tigers and lions, and these are often preceded by creative media campaigns that embellish facts or can be characterized as less-than-candid portrayals of one’s work and impacts. For instance, John Mbaria and Mordecai Ogada ask the interesting question of who makes the most money out of elephants in Africa—the government, the poachers, investors in

tourism, or conservationists?⁶¹ According to them, '[T]he NGOs' hunt for donor cash starts after a selection of catchy, attractive, and widely used buzzwords that resonates well in a world that stands accused and—to some extent—feels guilty for being unable to live and let other residents of the planet live.'⁶²

THE TEMPLES OF '*PRISTIANITY*'

Last but not the least, in their zeal for the preservation of wild nature, many biologists and NGOs have colluded with the state in the protectionist paradigm for the creation of exclusionary protected areas, a pursuit of pristine spaces that could be called '*Pristianity*' for the religious fervour with which it has been pursued. Given the severity of war and pestilence, it is no mean achievement that conservation has become one of the largest causes of displacement worldwide.⁶³ Large NGOs have been accused of human rights violations in many of the places where they work. In Africa and other parts of the world, they have been accused of colluding with national governments that have a record of abusing human rights and/or turning a blind eye to rights violations. In many instances, it is alleged they have provided funds, support and even arms to the government.⁶⁴

The land grab can occur in two ways. One is direct ownership. The Nature Conservancy in fact started with the idea of purchasing land for conservation. While this continues in many parts of the world, the economics of landownership has somewhat derailed this strategy. The second type of '*colonization*' occurs by control, typically with the state owning the land, and biologists and conservationists determining what should and should not happen on them. There are innumerable examples of collusion between white conservationists from the Global North and the state in creating these new '*colonies*'. Perhaps most symbolic is the role of Richard Leakey in the creation of Kenya's national parks.⁶⁵ More recently, '*Space for Giants*' and similar initiatives in Africa aim to acquire land for species such as elephants using top-down strategies with strong policing of such spaces.⁶⁶

Pristianity has been kept alive by two new movements, *Half-Earth*⁶⁷ and *Nature Needs Half*,⁶⁸ which have argued for a radical increase in protected areas around the world. While there is no doubt that development needs to be curbed, the argument of these movements is flawed on multiple grounds as previously detailed. In terms of geography, it is clear that the

creation of such areas will affect the developing world significantly more (the Global South, the tropics, etc.). In those parts of the world, it will affect indigenous and marginalized communities significantly more than the wealthy. There is no talk of rewilding London, New York or even Mumbai.

It has been shown that there are long-term social, cultural and psychological impacts of displacement on individuals and communities.⁶⁹ Moreover, disconnecting people from nature seems to be the exact opposite of all that is done in the name of environmental education. Ironically, while many conservationists run programmes where they sensitize urban children to nature by taking them out of the city, the same groups attempt gentrification projects in the name of education that propose to take communities that are far more connected to nature away from their roots, and cut those ties.

(NOT AN) INDIAN SUMMER

The effectiveness of the wilderness ideal which guides environmental research in many parts of the world has been questioned as a paradigm for conservation in the developing world in general as well as for India in particular.⁷⁰ In India, conservationists' preoccupation with fortress conservation and the preservation of species has been well-documented.⁷¹ The domination by this narrow group is particularly problematic in a country with a diverse array of human-wildlife relationships. Although the subcontinent has a rich tradition of traditional management (many of them regulating common property and resources), exclusionary strategies have been the mainstay of conservation.⁷² Additionally, conservationists have been reluctant to examine alternate strategies that are holistic in their treatment of coupled social-ecological systems.

Modern India's conservation history is steeped in its colonial legacy. Precolonial utilization of forests already had significant elements of exclusion (e.g. hunting preserves), but colonial forestry brought about enclosures on an unprecedented scale. Legal support for this was secured under the Indian Forest Act (1927) which empowered the government to declare any area a reserve forest, regardless of the history of occupation. Post-Independence conservation further strengthened this framework via the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which enabled the creation of protected areas. The conservation fraternity, largely drawn from the

upper classes, reinforced these demands, resulting in more protected areas as well as the exclusion of people.⁷³ Following long-running human rights and social justice campaigns, the Forest Rights Act (FRA)—the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act—was passed in 2006 aiming to correct historical injustices towards communities who were expelled from forests in the past. However, before and after the Act was passed, there was and continues to be a cacophony of breast-beating from conservationists and wildlife-focused NGOs, claiming that this would spell doom for Indian forests and wildlife.

As in other parts of the world, the field of conservation in India has been influenced by home-grown conservationists as well as by influences from conservation biology and deep ecology.⁷⁴ To this day, both conservation practice and biology in India remain a largely elitist preserve. If one were to construct a profile of its proponents, these conservationists would largely be college-educated, well-to-do individuals from urban, non-agricultural, most likely upper-caste, affluent backgrounds, some with regional affiliations, or caste and class histories (e.g. the liberal sprinkling of conservation professionals from feudal backgrounds). Similar trajectories of the evolution of environmental consciousness and environmentalism attributable to city dwelling, urban lifestyles, leisure, class, etc. have been discussed.⁷⁵

The contrast between ‘agrarianism’ and ‘wilderness thinking’ as pointed out by Guha⁷⁶ is critical if we want to understand contemporary conservation perspectives relating to the following questions: Why do certain philosophies of conservation find favour while others (often more widespread ones that are tied to utilization) are considered anathema to conservation? Why, despite a long history of utilization and existence of extensive commons, has the preservationist paradigm taken hold? Could these trends be linked to the fact that representation from the vast majority of rural, lower and middle classes—including tribal and Dalit groups, i.e. those with extended ties to the land, forests and land-based occupations and different environmental philosophies—is wholly or partially missing?

We argue that the anti-hunting, animal-rights-based philosophies of Northern deep ecologists have struck a chord with upper-caste/class, urban groups which are religiously and/or culturally embedded in non-exploitative backgrounds (in relation to animal consumption). There have also been romanticized claims of environmentalism originating

in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and other eastern religions. Indian environmentalism in general has undergone shifts towards Sanskritization, Brahminization and Saffronization as is evident from the politics of Anna Hazare, Sunderlal Bahuguna and numerous others.⁷⁷ This trend of the primacy of conservative Hindu ideologies and a more or less complete failure to address Dalit values and environmentalism is reflective of a larger trend.

The lack of attention to the rights of marginalized groups is paralleled by a pushback not only against the use of species by local communities, but also in the treatment of problem species such as large carnivores, crocodiles, elephants and pigs. As protection regimes are successful, the spillover of wildlife into human-dominated landscapes and resultant conflict has been an emerging issue in India. However, the elimination of problem individuals (e.g. Avni, the tigress) or that of species causing large-scale agricultural disruptions (e.g. wild pigs) has been met with a great deal of opposition from a section of the conservation lobby rooted in animal rights philosophies.⁷⁸ Along with a call for stringent protection of animals, many of these groups often make a demand for disproportionate punishment to people who trespass into protected areas (e.g. shoot-at-sight orders in Kaziranga).

Both conservation practitioners and biologists have contributed to a narrowing of human–nature relationships in India. Though human engagements with wildlife were historically multifaceted, contemporary conservation’s limited perspective deems the use of most species of wildlife, however abundant, unacceptable. This appears rooted in the politics of social hierarchy, where the consumption of meat is considered as polluting by dominant vegetarian castes. Beyond the imposition of values, this has potential nutritional and health consequences for many communities, and therefore for their overall well-being.

THE POST-WAR DREAM

Through the lens of political ecology, these actions with regard to knowledge, money and space are typical of a political entity trying to garner control of resources through the exercise of power, namely imperialism.⁷⁹ Is conservation just another instrument in the race for power? And if so, how does one democratize conservation so that it can achieve its more utopian goals? We argue that the solution lies in the decentralization of

conservation, no different from other spheres such as politics or economics. All three domains—knowledge, financial resources and control over land/water—need to be democratized both at global as well as at regional and local scales for greater equity in benefit. This is not a new idea. In the late 1980s, David Western stated that ‘the best hope for all species is linked to a single, uncompromisable goal—the improvement of human welfare’.⁸⁰

The first step towards this democratization is to acknowledge the lack of a simple dichotomy between indigenous and scientific knowledge.⁸¹ The involvement of resource-dependent communities provides a pathway for more democratic knowledge generation and decision-making. For example, community-based resource monitoring can help bridge knowledge divides. It has been argued that modern science is the lingua franca of the state and therefore serves as a language of power that shapes discourses.⁸² Thus, being able to use the language of science can empower communities to participate in dialogue and decisions about resource management and balance the influence of the authoritarian biologist.

Similarly, community ownership of land, particularly the commons, is receiving increasing attention, in no small part due to Elinor Ostrom’s work.⁸³ These provide a pathway for the management of common resources, including land and biodiversity, that need not lead to depletion or degradation. Notwithstanding problems in implementation, the FRA does provide a model in community ownership that has potential positive outcomes for both people and the environment. In principle, this could be extended over even larger landscapes for joint ownership and stewardship that has material and cultural benefits for local communities, while providing provisioning services and accommodating the deep ecology aspirations of biocentric conservationists.

Conservation may best be served by a philosophical approach that lies between pure biocentrism and anthropocentrism, and stresses cultural values.⁸⁴ This approach is embodied in the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report’s* definition of ecosystem services, which includes cultural services in addition to the supporting, regulatory and provisioning services of nature.⁸⁵ Many conservation organizations have now explicitly incorporated sensitive approaches, but these may be more instrumental, i.e. purely for conservation benefits, than for rights-based concern for communities. We find that while the movement as a whole has begun to pay lip service to social concerns, there are a range of worrying signs that, globally, conservation continues to be an ideological and spatial

stronghold created by and for the privileged. The change in discourse does offer some hope that the conservation will be more inclusive, but the voices of protectionism remain.

In closing, we would argue that while the battlefields have been transformed, the terms of engagement have not. Authoritarian biologists and deep ecologists continue to attempt to influence conservation disproportionately but the resistance narrative has grown stronger. In addition to social scientists, human rights campaigners and community spokespersons, many biologists and ecologists have become strong supporters of community rights. Guha's classic essays were simultaneously a critique and a call to action. Both remain deeply relevant today and critical to the future of conservation.

Chapter 3: The Authoritarian Biologist Reloaded and Deep Ecology Redux: Conservation Imperialism and the Control of Knowledge, Money and Space

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Chapter 4: Nation's Body, River's Pulse: Narratives of Anti-dam Politics in India

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