

# It's time to embrace community-led conservation vs. the colonial kind (commentary)

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- Conservation NGOs often enter countries like Fiji and advise local and Indigenous communities on how to protect their land and sea territories, or worse, acquire land and preclude the traditional residents from it.
- More NGOs are embracing community-led conservation, though, and we must embrace this, a new op-ed by a former Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji argues.

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When I lived on the remote island of Beqa, in Fiji, I watched as foreign-based NGOs entered villages and told Fijians how to live their lives, saying things like “no more eating *ika bula* (sea turtle),” and “it is time you stop fishing *kawakawa* (grouper).” These environmental NGOs had good intentions, of course, but their work was ineffective.

Why would a Fijian man who has been eating *ika bula* for traditional occasions since childhood suddenly stop because some white guy who spent three days in his village told him to? Why do international conservation organizations often ask Indigenous people to halt their traditional and sustainable practices instead of focusing on larger issues at play, such as the bycatch of giant fishing vessels?

I went into conservation to answer the call to better our planet. People like me who want to dedicate their career to help this earth and all of its species will not accomplish anything by allowing any sort of continuance of traditional conservation. Most of our current models of international conservation are dated and ineffective. If we want to make real change, we need to change our mindsets. We need to challenge current conservation practice.

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The village of Naceva, Beqa, Fiji on a cloudy day. Image courtesy of Audrey Moreng.

Some of international conservation today still takes on a new form of colonialism. Colonialism is the exploitation of people, often Indigenous, by a foreign power. It usually involves taking resources, making the colonizer more powerful, all while furthering the objectification of the colonized. Today, it looks like NGOs from high-income countries entering low-income countries under the guise of conservation and bettering the planet. NGOs are coming into communities of people who have inhabited biodiverse lands for centuries and telling them how to change, how to help save the planet from the mistakes their own countries have made. Many NGOs will buy up land, or advise governments to create national parks, or protected areas. Most of the time these actions result in 'conservation refugees,' ineffective conservation, and an imbalance of power. Some NGOs are embracing community-led conservation, and we must embrace and push for these organizations.

When colonial forms of conservation are present, it can result in communities having to [fight for their rights](#), especially in the face of conservation's favorite: the so-called protected area. Although there is a growing recognition among many institutions and academia that conservation must move in a more equitable direction, Indigenous communities, like the Maasai, are [still fighting](#) against international conservation decisions.

While many people from high income countries are on board for 'saving the planet,' many Indigenous communities who have not been part of the problem, are [left out](#) of problem-solving conversations. It is time to put this colonial form of conservation to bed. It is time to look towards successful examples of community-led conservation.

Fiji is not the first, and will not be the last, place to be the focus of international 'assistance' that results in offensive and misdiagnosed conservation initiatives. My three years in the Fijian Islands taught me a lot, but when it comes to the environment, I learned about the power of community-led conservation. Fiji does not need new ideas on how to protect their *iqoliqoli* (marine areas). Instead, Fiji has a lot to teach the rest of the world.

Fiji is home to a diverse population of both Indo-Fijians, and iTaukei (native) Fijians. There is a wealth of knowledge concerning both the land and sea within the Indigenous communities. The inhabitants of villages across Fiji have an intimate awareness of both what is changing in their ecosystems and what can be done about it.

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Lau banded iguana (*Brachylophus fasciatus*), a species endemic to the Fijian archipelago. Image by Rhett Butler for Mongabay.

[The Fiji Locally Managed Marine Areas \(FLMMA\)](#) is a successful example of what community-led conservation looks like when it is properly supported and managed. FLMMA is a network in Fiji that is made up of marine conservation partners. It takes after the Locally Managed Marine Areas ([LMMA](#)) model, which is an evolving network consisting of communities, conservation organizations, research and training institutions, and government departments in the Pacific and Asian region. In Fiji, they have embraced and evolved this model, and were the first country to formally [adopt the model](#) in their government. FLMMA takes local knowledge and traditional resource practices and formalizes them as part of a country-wide learning initiative.

[This study](#) demonstrates one such example of a *tabu* – a ban on fishing during certain parts of the year in certain places: a ‘taboo’ area. Taboos have been [used for centuries](#) throughout the Pacific Islands, and in Fiji are controlled at the will and expertise of the village elders. Though these bans on harvesting [look different throughout the world](#), these practices are doing a lot for local conservation. FLMMA combines [traditional ecological knowledge](#) (TEK) such as this, with modern science, and monitors outcomes through economic, social, and biological means. It is a holistic approach that concerns the entire system.

Since traditional resource use practices such as *tabu* have been used in villages for centuries, it makes sense to follow the hierarchy that already exists. The *tabu* restrictions align within iTaukei culture. Since iTaukei culture values community highly, there is little concern that people will not follow it. Getting caught [breaking a tabu](#) could result in a ceremony of public apology, where the offender would have to present *yaqona* (bundle of kava) to the village.

The success of FLMMA is in large part due to the formal adoption of the program by the Fijian government. This is because the government plays a prominent role in [returning ownership of coastal areas back to traditional \*matagali\*](#) (clans). By situating power within small village communities and having this power both supported and strengthened by government support, FLMMA is demonstrating [polycentricity](#). In other words, this is not simply a top-down approach. Neither the government nor NGOs are telling these small village communities what to do, instead their decision-making is reaffirmed by the Fijian government.

Although we know there is no such thing as a panacea, and conservation is not a ‘copy and paste’ field, we can learn a lot from Fiji. We can also take notes from Conservation International who have [played their role](#) well here, not by telling Fijians what to do in terms of conservation, but by providing funding so that local researchers could better understand why FLMMA is successful.

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Fijian fishers come ashore. Image courtesy of Audrey Moreng.

This leads me to takeaway number one – support local conservation efforts, because there has never been a need to reinvent the wheel. Bottom-up, locally-driven conservation is where we need to refocus our efforts. To do this, we must both erase the [‘white savior mindset’](#) and embrace the knowledge held by the world’s Indigenous people.

Takeaway number two is to enhance the use of TEK in conservation. FLMMA has not created novel conservation practices. They have instead highlighted what different villages throughout Fiji are doing, identified why they are successful, and helped to share information across the country, so success can be replicated.

Finally, we need to remember how essential people are in conservation efforts. Social empowerment and [poverty reduction](#) are just as important in FLMMA as species conservation.

Takeaway number three is that conservation must include people. People are the ones who are going to make change, they are at the forefront of conservation. The people who know their land best should drive these efforts. The choice is not people or conservation, it can and must be both

Community-led conservation is not only possible, but when supported properly, is extremely successful. [It is already happening](#), and has been happening for centuries, but many communities around the world may not have the funding, access, or networking to be able to learn, share, or finance projects. These are not situations where NGOs should come in with money and power, just to further inequality. These are opportunities to enhance the rights of Indigenous communities, to listen, learn, and observe what is being, or has already been, done. We need to move away from ‘saviorism,’ and towards true empowerment.

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The Fijian island of Yanuca lit up by a South Pacific sunset. Image courtesy of Audrey Moreng.

When I was a volunteer in Fiji, I listened over morning tea as my host aunt explained which day of the month was best to hunt for mud crabs. I nodded to my friend five meters underwater as he advised me against shooting for a small fish, later explaining that the fish had growing to do. I smiled and *obo* (respectful cupped-hand clap) before downing a *bilo* (cup) of grog, hearing about how things used to be from the village elders, hearing both their hopes and fears for the future of their island.

The next time you are thinking about donating to a conservation organization, do your research. Does the organization support community-led conservation, or are there stories of local Indigenous communities losing out?

Get involved in your own community's conservation, it's all around us!

*Audrey Moreng is a graduate student studying conservation at Colorado State University. She was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 2018-2020, and after being evacuated in 2020, moved back to Fiji in 2021.*

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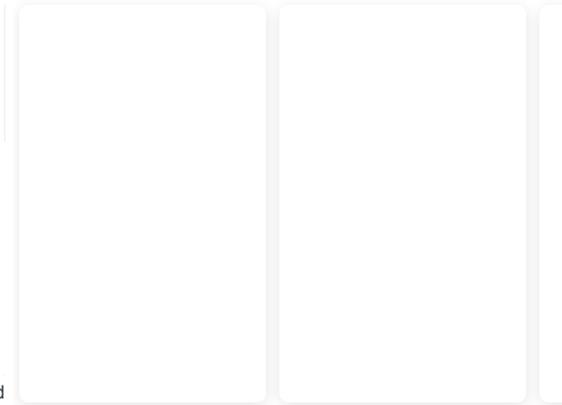
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I think all people should protect their local environment while big groups protect the lands that are neglected or don't have the resources to help the ecosystems nearby.

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Same way most NGO are looking at Amazon Jungle! Not mucho need for new interpretation for tropical forest protection but take into consideraci3n life long tradition from its original inhabitants.

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