



Conservation NGO's: Whose Interests are They Really Protecting?



India. Ridan Sun. Focus on the Global South.

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This Bulletin articles are written by the following organizations and individuals: Avispa Midia, the Mulokot Foundation Suriname, Rainforest Foundation UK, All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM), The Oakland Institute and members of the WRM international secretariat

Conservation NGO's: Whose Interests are they really Protecting?

Our Viewpoint

Beyond Forests: Conservation NGOs have Turned into “Companies”



India. Ridan Sun. Focus on the Global South.

Before, conservation organizations were focused on raising money to create protected areas in forests supposedly threatened with destruction; today, they constitute a **bona fide transnational “industry” that manages and controls areas that go far beyond forests.**

The World Rainforest Movement (WRM) firmly believes that **it is not possible to separate forests from the communities who depend on them.** This vision is in contrast to that of conservation NGOs, which defend an environment without people, inspired by the national parks model created in the United States (1). That is why the creation and expansion of protected areas without communities has been a constant concern for WRM.

It is a fact that destructive projects—such as logging, mining or agribusiness—cause terrible impacts for forests and communities. However, **conservation parks also expel communities and/or prohibit them from using what they consider to be their home, where they obtain almost everything they need. Conservation parks do this by imposing restrictions on human occupation,** using the perverse argument that it is communities that cause forest destruction.

The real destructive forces advanced on forests at the same time as conservation NGOs. **These organizations were crucial in constructing the neoliberal idea that nature will only be saved if a price is placed on it**, since it is providing “services” for which someone must be paid. This is how “market environmentalism” was born.

Polluting industries liked this: now they have permission to continue polluting while presenting a clean image. They can “offset” part of the emissions they generate from burning oil, gas and coal; by paying to “protect” a forest or install a tree plantation. And instead of reducing their emissions, which are the cause of climate change, they advertise their “good deeds.”

Contrary to what common sense might suggest, conservation **NGOs are some of the biggest beneficiaries of forest destruction**: they managed to gain considerable access to this new source of resources from industries and the governments of the most polluting countries—by being at the forefront of projects that harm communities who are using and protecting forests. “

A clear demonstration of this is **the role of NGOs in REDD+ projects** around the world (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). These NGOs include The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Wildlife Works Carbon (WWC). According to these organizations, the REDD+ mechanism not only responds to the climate crisis, but also benefits communities in project areas. Yet, the prevailing vision of REDD+ programs and projects—which are promoted by these organizations—is that communities are obstacles and represent a threat to forests; hence, their access to and use of forests ends up being prohibited or restricted (2). “

Even after ten years of experience in which REDD+ has failed to reduce deforestation, the idea has not died. The mechanism is not only alive, but is now steering programs in much larger areas, far beyond forests. **Landscape-scale REDD+ programs, as they are called, encompass entire jurisdictions, such as an entire province or state within a country.** WWF, for example, administers the main jurisdictional REDD+ program in Africa—in the province of Mai N'dombe, Democratic Republic of the Congo—with World Bank funding (3).

Recent international agreements and mechanisms to influence climate change end up perpetuating this logic. The so-called “**forest landscape restoration approach**” guides the actions of the Bonn Challenge (4), which today is the largest international initiative that aims to “restore” 350 million hectares of forests and landscapes in favor of the climate (5). However, in order to “restore” forests in such a large area, it is only possible to think about large-scale tree plantations, of which there are already tens of millions of hectares in the world.

In this way, the forms of territorial appropriation that these organizations use to expand their influence are multiplying. In Indonesia, they are moving into areas that in the past were already granted to deforesting companies, such as oil palm plantation companies. On the island of Sumatra in Indonesia, the conservation NGOs, WWF and the German Frankfurt Zoological Society,—with funding from the German development bank, KfW,—created the company, ABT, to develop a “restoration” project near the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park. With no access to information about what this company really intends to do, the Kubu community is resisting. **The inhabitants of Kubu, who have a strong**

relationship with the forest where they live and which they firmly protect, are engaged in a struggle for control of the territory. Concessions covering almost 600,000 hectares have already been granted for “forest landscape restoration” in Indonesia (6).

Another mechanism is the creation of **projects to “offset” the destruction of biodiversity.** The argument is that the loss of a destroyed forest can be compensated by conserving another, supposedly threatened forest, with “similar characteristics.” For example, mining company Rio Tinto—which caused the destruction of a forest in Madagascar through ilmenite mining (7), decided to pay a local “subsidiary” of the NGO, Birdlife International, to protect another “similar” forest. The NGO restricted the local community's use of the forest, and the community was forced to farm in another, less fertile area that was further away.

The strengthening of national funds for biodiversity conservation, through public-private partnerships called “conservation trust funds,” is headed in the same direction. For example, the Biofund in Mozambique was created, whose members include WWF, the WCS and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (8). One of its functions is to validate destructive projects: companies can “offset” the destruction they cause by investing resources in the maintenance of protected areas or in the creation of new protected areas in the same country. This is what the World Bank suggested be done in Liberia (also in Africa), due to the large mineral reserves in that country—which are extremely attractive to the world's large mining companies (9).

Creating a Conservation “Industry”

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently accepted a complaint presented by the NGO, Survival International, to investigate alleged violations of human rights against the Baka indigenous peoples. The violence was exerted by so-called “eco-guards,” financed by WWF, in a protected area in Cameroon (10). It is important to note that the OECD's decision was unprecedented, in that it usually only accepts complaints against companies (often multinational). This time, WWF was the offender.

What is very concerning is the spread of the “win-win” commercial logic of “market environmentalism,” and with it, the alliance between destructive forces and conservation NGOs. This logic is based on the principle that **there will be more protection only if there is more destruction.** These organizations also provide other services to destructive companies: Through the use of certifications and “green seals,” they legitimize and declare some activities to be sustainable when they are undeniably destructive.

In this perverse logic that is gradually destroying forests, something *will* be conserved: the interests of “conservation” companies and the amount of resources to which they have access. Will we keep calling these organizations “non-profit”? With this alliance between the industries of conservation and destruction, those who are losing are indigenous, traditional and peasant communities—whose territories and forests are being threatened by these industries' increasingly larger projects.

Many communities have undertaken struggles against these conservation projects. In India, for example, thousands of people are resisting eviction from territories that their communities have had for hundreds and even thousands of years. This is taking place within what are now considered to be tiger reserves. These struggles help strengthen a contrasting vision: that **the best way to conserve forests is to ensure that the communities living in,**

and taking care of, forests can exercise control over them and their way of life. These struggles—in different ways—have led to the conquest of their own territories, where the forests are. Nonetheless, the threats continue, and the struggle for social and environmental justice is ongoing. Let us join it—now and always.

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- (2) REDD: A Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies, WRM, <https://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/>
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The Conservation Industry: a for-profit sector?



Drawing by activist Rini Templeton. RiniArt.com

It is common to see advertisements and campaign brochures with the logo of an international conservationist NGO, like WWF or Conservation International, together with that of a company, such as Coca Cola, Shell or Rio Tinto. But, how can organizations that are recognized around the world as watchdogs for protecting the environment establish an alliance with those actors that destroy and pollute that same environment? This, in fact, raises another crucial question: **Which type of “solutions” are conservationist NGOs and their corporate partners aiming to reach and for whom?**

It is very telling that these conservationist groups' headquarters, just as those of their corporate partners, are generally based in urban hubs of the global North. **Why do they have the legitimacy to decide how to and who should best preserve a specific forest area or a particular specie?** What about the knowledges of local groups? And most importantly, what about the communities that have coexisted with those forests and guarded them for countless generations?

Protecting forests from whom?

Protected or conservation areas were created under a philosophy that originated in the global North, in the United States (US) in the late 1800s, which led to the establishment of national parks around the world to preserve areas of "wilderness", mainly for elite hunts and the enjoyment of scenic beauty. **This postcard idea of "wilderness" did not include any human presence; even that of traditional or indigenous groups.** The national parks Yellowstone (1872) and Yosemite (1890) in the US, which forcibly emptied their indigenous inhabitants, established *the* conservation model applied around the world.

By advocating for and assisting with the creation of such parks, conservationist NGOs deepened the **racist and colonial assumption that "nature" -understood as untouched or pristine "wilderness"- is and should be separated from any human activity that could change or impact it.** These NGOs then also helped in portraying local groups as unruly invaders, "poachers" and "encroachers". (1)

Forest-dependant populations living in and around national parks are in consequence forcefully evicted or their livelihoods and cultures severely and violently restricted. Hunting, fishing or harvesting for sustaining a livelihood is mostly forbidden in these areas. **Forest peoples are regularly blamed for deforestation or/and accused of "poaching" because they hunt for their food - a convenient justification for the evictions carried out in the name of conservation.** They face arrest and beatings, torture and even death. (2) Ironically, western scientists, NGOs, park rangers, military troops, "eco guards", anti-poaching squads, philanthropists, safari tourists, visitors and many other so-called "experts" are very much allowed into these areas. Fee-paying elite hunters are even encouraged in some. **Safari hunters, however, who are mostly rich and white, are of course never called poachers.** Conservation practices have in fact deepened the racist division of forest access and have further imposed colonial models and ideas over forest peoples. Conservationist NGOs are at the centre of this.

When Baka indigenous land in Cameroon was stolen from them for creating "protected areas," the NGO WWF played a key role in dividing up the territory which included safari hunting concessions, logging areas and national parks. Since 2000 WWF has been funding **anti-poaching squads who mostly abuse indigenous peoples, while the real problem – commercial poaching – goes largely unaddressed.** WWF has also acted as consultant to the logging company that operates in the Baka's forests. (3)

To enforce some conservation objectives, conservationist NGOs often employ **military services to guard the national parks they manage** on behalf of governments; a practice often called as "green militarism." WWF, for example, turned to the Maisha Consulting Company, a private military company, to deliver security operations. This company offers military training for anti-poaching squads in Garamba National Park, DRC, and has provided security advice and installed a network of remote surveillance cameras in Dzangha-Sangha National Park in the Central African Republic. (4)

Ironically enough, **many national parks are surrounded or even overlapped with licenced projects**, like mining, oil or gas extraction. Others are bordering industrial monoculture plantations, logging concessions or large-scale infrastructure projects. But this does not seem to be enough for conservationist NGOs to target these corporate actors in their conservation efforts. Quite the opposite.

Partners in crime

The US-oil and gas multinational ExxonMobil has drilled in the Stabroek exploration area off the coast of Guyana since 2015. Recent discoveries have led the company to estimate that Stabroek's oil reserves could be worth more than 200 billion dollars. (5) Of course, what the company does not advertise are the many impacts that these activities have to marine diversity, mangrove forests and fisher communities; not to mention its enormous contribution to climate change and local pollution.

Despite this, in August 2018, **the NGO Conservation International in Guyana accepted a 10 million dollars grant from ExxonMobil's Foundation**. The stated objectives are to advance sustainable job opportunities; expand community-supported conservation; expand conservation areas in the Rupununi Wetlands; offer aid mangrove restoration and support improvements to community-based fishing, a sector the government of Guyana identified as critically important to the wellbeing of the Guyanese people. (6)

But, what is the real objective behind the fact that a fossil fuel corporation gives large sums of money to an international conservationist NGO? This "investment" - as the company likes to put it - aims to generate some kind of benefit to the company. And **nothing like an international public relations campaign led by a well-known conservationist NGO to try to greenwash what in fact is the biggest and most undeniable cause of climate change: fossil fuels extraction**.

Unsurprisingly, this undeniable conflict of interests is not an isolated case. Conservation International also has partnerships with companies like Chevron, Monsanto, Nissan, Walmart and many others (7). And this NGO is not alone.

In 2007, the **WWF accepted 20 million dollars from the Coca-Cola company**, despite the serious accusations against this company for depleting local water sources around the world. This "investment" was another greenwash strategy. (8) WWF has also partnered with furniture company IKEA, despite the company's expanding logging activities in forests (9), as well as with the Toyota Motor Company, clothing retail company H&M, financial institution HSBC, pulp and paper company Mondi, among many others. The Nature Conservancy, another conservationist NGO, also has partners such as mining company BHP, agribusiness Cargill, oil-giant Shell, Pepsi and Walt Disney.

Moreover, these organizations' board of directors, whose members are supposed to provide guidance and advice for their work, are a blunt conflict of interests. **The Nature Conservancy's board, for example, is full of people from the corporate world**, including financial companies JP Morgan Chase and the Blackstone Group, multinational Dow Chemical Company, e-commerce conglomerate Alibaba group and many others. (10) And the list goes on and on.

NGOs or companies?

The bottom line is that corporations can provide large amounts of funds to these conservationist NGOs. Yet, at the same time, these NGOs have increasingly become active participants of the financial market, which is bound to the capital accumulation logic, which in turn depends on fossil fuels. (11) **Some of the largest conservationist NGOs invest in fossil fuel companies directly.**

As author Naomi Klein explained: “Now it turns out that **some green groups are literally part owners of the industry causing the crisis** they are purportedly trying to solve. And the money the green groups have to play with is serious.” (12) The Nature Conservancy, as Klein uncovered, has 1.4 billion dollars in the US financial market, and the Wildlife Conservation Society has a 377 million dollars of endowment, while the endowment of WWF in the US is worth 195 million dollars.

These large amounts are also used to cover the enormous salaries of their executives. Research by Canadian journalist Donna Laframboise, found out that in 2012, Carter Roberts, the CEO of the US branch of WWF, was paid a salary of 455,147 dollars in 2009. By comparison, the US President has a base salary of 400,000 dollars. In other words, the head of the US branch of the WWF earns more money than the US President. (13)

A direct consequence of conservationist NGOs establishing partnerships with corporations has been their evident willingness and amount of effort put into market-friendly and consumer-driven choices. It is no coincidence that **the biggest conservationist NGOs that invest in fossil fuel companies are also amongst the biggest promoters of forest carbon related policies**, such as REDD+: The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, WWF and the Wildlife Conservation Society. (14)

Evidently, promoting programs and policies that are aligned with the interests and activities of corporations is a good way to keep their funding, projects and investments expanding. The “New Generation Plantations Project”, led and coordinated by WWF, is one example of this.

Participants in the Project are well-known monoculture plantation companies, including Mondi (South Africa), Stora Enso (Finnish-Swedish), UPM (Finland), Forestal Arauco (Chile), Kimberly Clark (US), Suzano (Brazil), The Navigator Company (Portugal), The New Forests Company (Mauritius) and CMPC (Chile). These companies have an extensive record of denunciations by local communities, which the WWF has chosen to ignore. On the contrary, the Project promotes the expansion of tree monocultures and helps to greenwash the well-documented destructive consequences of these companies’ activities. At the same time, the Project legitimizes FAO’s misleading definition of forest, which includes monoculture tree plantations. (15) Meanwhile, **consumers are being deceived by these types of programs (as well as many other certification schemes) that are run and promoted by conservationist NGOs.** By giving destructive activities a possibility to have a green façade, companies can continue and expand their operations – and profits.

It seems that conservation and developmental projects (mega dams, mines, fossil fuel extraction, industrial monocultures, etc.) are, in a way, two sides of the same coin. Top-down impositions over communal territories determined by outsiders, and mostly enforced in a

violent manner. **Far from protecting forests, conservationist NGOs have become an industry that legitimates the expansion of destructive economic policies.**

Joanna Cabello, joanna@wrm.org.uy

Member of the international secretariat of the WRM

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- (2) See, for example: Protected areas in southeast Cameroon have progressively robbed the Baka “Pygmies” of access to their ancestral lands. They are regularly harassed, arrested and even tortured by wildlife officers and the soldiers that accompany them. The Cameroonian government relies on powerful conservation organisations, including the WWF, to equip its “anti-poaching” squads. Read further on this and other cases and sign a petition here: <https://www.survivalinternational.org/about/southeast-cameroon>
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- (13) <https://nofrackingconsensus.com/2012/03/28/the-enormous-ceo-salaries-behind-earth-hour/>
- (14) <https://redd-monitor.org/2013/05/03/naomi-klein-why-arent-environmental-groups-divesting-from-fossil-fuels/>
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Indigenous Baiga women in India: “Our story should be heard”



1. Baiga women. Phs Ridan Sun/Focus on the Global South.

2. Under Clause (i), Section 3 of Forest Rights Act 2006. **COMMUNITY FOREST RESOURCE**. Claimant: President, Forest Rights Committee. Village: Fulbaripara (meaning: the house where flowers live - ful is flower and bari is house). Village Panchayat (self-local government): Baheramura. Development Block: Kota. District: Bilaspur (State Chattisgarh). Proposed and Approved by Fulbaripara Gram Sabha (village assembly). On 02/03/2017. Claim Submitted to Block Level Committee, Kota on 16/03/2017. Ph: Larry Lohmann/The Corner House

“This forest is our mother. We have territorial rights”.

This sentence is written on boards that women from the Fulwaripara village raised across their land. They are declaring to the government and other relevant actors that the forest they depend on belongs to them. The Indian Forest Department keeps denying this. Its guards have destroyed the boards many times – even though some were made of concrete, and many times the women raised them again. Because of this, ten women have been put into jail in the last two years.

Fulwaripara is located in the Chattisgarh state, central India, where many communities live with the forests and face threats of eviction due to conservation units, like tiger reserves, which are often linked with destructive projects, like mining. **The NGOs WWF and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) support the Indian Forest Department in this region, providing training, patrol resources, vehicles and other equipment to the foresters who are conducting the evictions. (1)**

After having faced many evictions over the last two centuries within their own territory, a dam displaced them once again 40 years ago. They ended up living in Fulwaripara, at the edge of the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve.

The Forest Rights Act was approved in India in 2006; it is a historic law that recognizes the rights of forest dependent peoples to their territories (2). Since then, **the Fulwaripara village has faced all kinds of harassment from the Forest Department guards, who tried to**

prevent them to submit their claims for recognition of their tribal land under the Forest Rights Act.

But the guards could not stop them. To inform the Forest Department officials and guards about the submission of their claim under the Forest Rights Act, the women wrote the claim number on the boards in their fields. However, a recent Supreme Court decision could order that the communities that have their claims under the Forest Rights Act rejected might face eviction. **As a result of a petition made by a handful of conservation NGOs, including the Wildlife Trust of India, the Nature Conservation Society, the Tiger Research and Conservation Trust and the Bombay Natural History Society, together with retired forest officers, the Supreme Court could order the eviction of more than one million forest dependent people from their land.** (3) Fulwaripara's claim was not allowed to be completed; like more than 50 per cent of the rejected cases. (4) In consequence, **Fulwaripara faces the threat of eviction, once again.**

In the Fulwaripara village, **women have always been at the frontline of the struggle.** When asked why, they simply answered: "men are afraid to do so". They are part of an indigenous Baiga community that continues to practise the traditional use of controlled burning to grow their crops, under what they call the "Bewar system", a type of shifting agriculture. **Bewar is heavily criminalized by the government and conservationists.**

This is the testimonial of a Baiga woman from the Fulwaripara village (5)

The History of Our Settlement

The Adivasi (indigenous) Baiga people that are settled in Fulwaripara have lived in this region for more than 200 years. Yet, they have been displaced numerous times. As far as we can remember, our ancestors settled in Belghana some 200 years back. This used to be a hilly area before the railway line was built. We used to live in what is the current market area in Belghana. Later, the construction of roads and a railway line destroyed our heritage and we settled in Behramuda. Initially, seven households (3-4 families each) settled there, five were Baiga families and two were Gonds. From that moment on we started losing our land.

The grandfather of Phuleswari, one woman from the village that has been twice in jail due to this struggle, had mortgaged 9 acre (almost 4 hectares) of land for Rs 140 (around 2 dollars) during the famine era. Later, false papers of the land were made. I remember that we had just harvested paddy rice and brought it to the threshing floor, at the time that land grabbers took it away.

The names of the villages in the area also make reference to the Baiga history and their relation with the tigers in the region. The *Mata Choraha* was a worshipping place in Behramuda for Baigas and every year we performed rituals. But **we lost our worshipping place**, as it was taken over by others when we were forced out. The day before the annual paddy rice harvest celebration, called *cherchera* (or *poush puni*), each household gave an offering to the gods and contributed to sacrifice a goat. The goat was beheaded and placed at the foot of the gods- "*budadev*". We ate meat along with new rice and celebrated. Each household also gave offerings to the village elder (*mukadam*) who would bless the houses by chanting mantras and offering holy water. This ritual, we believe, brings good rainfall for the coming season. A form of resin from the sal tree (*Shorea robusta*) is burnt as incense in

Hindu ceremonies and is offered, together with coconut and betel nuts, by the Baiga elder to *budadev*.

In *Akti*, we used to celebrate the annual spring festival and again we worshiped the *budadev*. This worship is to ask for good harvests of mushrooms. We sowed *kanki* (broken rice), maize, *kodo* (a type of millet), *kutki* (a type of millet), paddy rice, *jowar* (a type of millet), all sorts of *bewar* seeds and also *kheera* (cucumber). We offered liquor and the *Bidri* ceremony for the blessing and protection of crops was carried out. Each household gave some donation as well as 1 kilo of rice.

We used to do our traditional Bewar cultivation but later, influential people with links to the governmental administration and especially to the Forest Department threw us out. At the end, that land was occupied by other communities practicing settled agriculture. The Baigas have always been a peace-loving community and we avoid confrontation so that is the reason we have always been at the receiving end. Baigas have always been subjugated so they left their homes and hearths and moved further inside the forest.

Then, as we were again uprooted, we made our huts in the area where the dam, "Madhav Rao Jalasaya", came up. After the dam was built, we had to move again and for the last 35-40 years we have been in Fulwaripara. The families have also grown in this period.

Our relationship with the forest

Baigas used to always fear the government's Forest Department guards. We are bamboo artisans but were not able to make our bamboo crafts at that time. **Forest guards would climb the hills and go inside the forest to catch us.** We, women, would stay inside the forest and make our products and come back home late in the evening. **Our children knew where we would be so they went inside the forest to warn us not to come out until the forest officials had left the site.**

We used to hide our bamboo baskets inside ponds or pits filled with water. On Saturdays and Sundays we would bring our products down for trading them, to buy and collect products. We would keep the products in a small abandoned hut in the forest and, if caught, we used to deny it was ours. But now the situation has changed, we are no longer afraid of the Forest Department guards. **We decided to give 5 Rs per household (less than one dollar) to the guards in exchange for bamboo.** Bamboo harvesting has been a major bone of contention between us and the government's Forest Department.

Since there is a law for the Forest Rights, **we struggle for our rights on our land and forest, from which we have been eking our livelihood since ages.** This is not that much land, but **we have guarded this land and forest like our children**, and our ancestors are also buried on this land.

The Bewar cultivation: an integral part of our livelihood system

Baigas used to grow 8-10 varieties of millet, corn and five varieties of legume, spread over small plots. **The Bewar system, a form of shifting cultivation, comprises mixed cultivation.** We used to cut small plots of degraded jungle where men and women both would go. Then, on that plot, we would burn back the shrubs and other grown plants and later place the seeds in the burned piece of land.

This would be mostly completed in summer and the sowing would take place in May-June, after the first rain, with *kutki* (a type of millet). In July, we used to sow *sawan* and *selar*. *Sawan* was harvested in September-October and *kutki* in October-November. *Sawan* was first to cut and then *kodo* and *kutki*. *Kutki* and *sawan* are ratoon crops [meaning that most of the above-ground plant is cut while the roots and the growing shoot apices are left intact] and the same plot yielded twice and thrice. *Kutki* would be harvested all over the area. When the fire was good, we would get good harvests.

The government used to give us tools, like “*tangiya*”, to clear the plots for Bewar cultivation (known as *kheti*). Before we had basic tools like hoe, dao, and the digging stick and used our family labour. But later, the government asked us to stop Bewar agriculture when our population was growing and big trees were cut down. **The government passed a ban on Bewar and asked the Baigas to settle down on plain land and start practicing permanent agriculture.**

The monsoon season used to be good at that time, lots of rainfall. But now, **the dams have come up; they do not allow the water to go to the ocean.** As a result, the waves have become less and less, creating less tidal pressure and rains have become less. Through the ocean, the water climbs up and then the rain falls. Along with the rains, lots of fish/crabs and snakes used to appear. We remember playing with snakes which would spread all over the land with the incessant rains. With the government ban on Bewar, the rainfall has also become less. Nowadays, we do not even see that much water in the ponds.

Our traditional Bewar cultivation should start again, as it increases the abundance of the forest and its resources and also it increases the rainfall.

We used to cook in earthen pots and have *bedra* (a type of legume) many times. There was no public distribution system at that time, which now gives us some free rice. We had very little money at that time and had very little to eat. **Nowadays, our food does not have the same taste as our food back then.** Now we have more pulses and rice, but the taste is different. In many areas *sawan* and *kutki* are still continuing.

The tigers, our ancestors

We have only heard that the government is trying to increase the number of tigers inside Achanakmar National Park [close to their community] by displacing villages and people. Six villages were displaced some years back, and the government says that they gave them land and compensation. But **money as compensation is not the solution.** The government should give **fertile land and rights to the forest to the Baigas for their livelihood and existence.**

We have lived with tigers since our existence and **we worship the tigers as our ancestors.** We do not have any problems with tiger conservation and we believe that **only by us staying in our villages, the tiger will survive.** Not by displacing the people from their villages. The Baigas know how to ward off tigers through our mantras and worshipping, so we do not have any problems. There were more tigers before, but now they are hardly seen.

There is a need for international solidarity for the *Adivasi* (indigenous) communities in India. Our story should be heard and that should create pressure on the government. We must get our land and forest back for which we have struggled and even gone to jail.

This testimonial was made by Devijit Nandi from the All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM)

- (1) See Survival International, Tribal Peoples illegally evicted, <https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/10631> and Tiger Reserve Tribes, <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/tigerreservetribe>
- (2) For more information on the Forest Rights Act in India, see the article “India: Forest struggles at the crossroads”, WRM Bulletin 205, 2014, <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/india-forest-struggles-at-the-crossroads/>
- (3) See All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM) press releases: [22 February 2019](#) and [28 February 2019](#)
- (4) Supreme Court reports on rejected forest rights claims from states, Down to Earth, February 2019, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/sc-seeks-reports-on-rejected-forest-rights-claims-from-states-63233>
- (5) The testimonial was made in the Fulwaripara village on February 2019. The name of the woman who gave the testimonial remains anonymous due to security reasons.

The Wayana Indigenous Peoples in Suriname and the Conservation NGO’s: A “true love” story?



Ph: Mulokot Foundation, Suriname

The Wayana indigenous peoples mainly live in the South of Suriname (they also live on the border with French Guiana and in a small area in the North of Brazil) in approximately 30,000 km² (3 million acres) of tropical rainforest. The total Wayana indigenous group consists of approximately 2,500 people. In Suriname, they live in three small settlements near the river, namely in Kawemhakan, Apetina and Palumeu. In French Guiana they live in eight small villages and in the North of Brazil they live more dispersed with other indigenous peoples. Recent excavations show that **indigenous peoples lived in this area for more than 4000 years**. Their livelihoods depend on agriculture and fisheries.

Because of the limited infrastructure in this area and the dense jungle of the Northern Amazon territory, the Wayana were never colonized. At the beginning of the 20th century there were a few adventurers and employees of the Dutch colonizers searching for the gold in the Wayana area. But they (almost) never interacted with the Wayana people. Although the contact was limited, the Europeans brought numerous diseases like influenza and tuberculosis. Each of these diseases brought destruction through sweeping epidemics. This got worse when the Wayana decided to go to the capital of Suriname to buy/trade the so much desired iron tools directly from the source, bypassing the middle men, the Maroons of Suriname. (1) The Wayana were decimated to the brink of extinction. Around 1960 there were only 500 to 600 Wayanas left (we estimate that there must have been more than 4,000 Wayana in the beginning of last century). The only reason the Wayana still exist is the intervention of the Church in the decades of the 1950-60. The missionaries gave them medicines for the new diseases. The problem was, of course, that the Church also introduced new rules and forbade certain cultural expressions. Today, the Church is still present, but there is a kind of combined symbiosis belief, with church traditions and traditional knowledge/culture.



Some advantages of the (until recently) isolated existence of the Wayana are that we still speak our own language, we have retained a large part of our culture heritage and we are strongly aware of our roots. The disadvantage is that there is little formal education and therefore **hardly anyone speaks a foreign language**. Unfortunately, **both the government and the "conservation" NGO's have taken advantage of this situation**. Many promises have been made and many Wayana people have signed documents in foreign languages (which they could not read) but nothing really changed to our benefit. On the contrary, the situation in our territory just became worse.

The new settlers: Conservation and dispossession

The pressure on the Wayana communities has started to increase recently, with so-called conservation NGO's operating in our area: **the WWF, Conservation International (CI) and the Amazon Conservation Team (ACT)**. These organizations come as "new settlers" to our area, pretending to want to help us with "development". Rather the opposite is true. Where we first lived without problems and in a sustainable co-existence with our forest, **we now have to deal with new rules. We can no longer perform some of our traditional activities. For these NGO's it is just a money-making business, but for us, it is our life!**

The way these NGOs communicate with the indigenous communities is without any respect. Our right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is not implemented, even though they claim that they do so. The "Informed" part they execute indeed, but not the rest. **They have a top-down approach**. They always assume that we, the indigenous peoples, will not understand it anyway, so they take the decisions. **They assume they know what is good for the indigenous peoples (but they are only thinking about their own profits).**

With beautiful photos of meetings and by telling fantastic stories to their donors, they want to prove that all indigenous peoples have agreed with their project plans. A good example is the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that ACT signed for the creation of the Guiana Amazonian Park. This Park is a conservation area on the border of French Guiana

and Suriname. Because the Wayana people live on both sides of the river, a part of the population is living in this Park now. There are all sorts of restrictions inside the Park, special hunting and agriculture areas and so on. The Wayana on the Suriname side do not want to live in a restricted area, controlled by the government and NGOs.

The MOU was signed in my village, which is on the border of Suriname and French Guiana. They took a group picture including my Paramount Chief, Ipomadi Pelenapin, the day they signed the MOU, as if he also had signed and agreed with the MOU, which he did not. **Till this day we do not know the content of this MOU, even though we have asked them several times for a copy.** We only know that it is about activities in the area of my Paramount Chief, but we do not know what they are going to do or what to expect.

Power inequalities

Since 2015, CI, ACT and WWF collaborate to “save” southern Suriname with the SSCC project: the South Suriname Conservation Corridor. This protected area constitutes about 70,000 km². Only 3,500 indigenous peoples live in this area (Wayana and Trio) but **we are forbidden to cut trees for making our houses or canoes.** There is no infrastructure and the area is only accessible by airplane or several days' travelling by boat. So communicating with the 9 different villages within this large area is a huge challenge. On paper, they have created an organization that seems to show that we, the indigenous, have ownership over the project. However, in practice, that is not so. The indigenous peoples in the project organization have no tools or ability to communicate among each other. The only times they come together (a few times a year) is when **the NGOs organize meetings. And so, the NGOs are always present, they determine the agenda, they facilitate the meetings and especially important, they determine the speed of decision-making.**

There is never enough time to discuss things among us in order to understand the different subjects. Because there is **a language barrier**, it takes a lot of time to translate and to explain the subjects in detail. The current Trio and Wayana indigenous leaders speak their native languages, only a few of them understand a little bit of Dutch or Surinamese. One would expect that the NGOs would take that into account, but that has not been the case. There are interpreters present but they are not provided with information on the subject in advance. How can an interpreter translate or explain buzzwords like 'sustainable forest management' or 'cultural biodiversity' during the meetings? Recently, the indigenous leaders found out that **the word "development", a word that is used very often by the NGOs, was literally translated in the Wayana language as "help me".** When I heard about this, I started to make a list to standardize the translation of the buzzwords that are used in these meetings.

NGOs and indigenous peoples do not communicate on the same level. And the **NGOs are not willing to put in time and effort to properly train interpreters.** Presumably they do that on purpose, as **it is cheaper and quicker this way.** We are proud indigenous peoples and are not always willing to tell NGOs that we do not understand them.

Protecting forests or protecting a model?

A recent negative experience is with the NGO WWF. In the beginning of 2018, we asked WWF to help us with the mapping of our territory. For 6 months, all Wayana communities intensively worked with WWF to prepare the start of the mapping project (with GIS software

and LiDAR technology). We also planned to start a field research to validate the data and verify the stories mainly the Elders told us.

The thing the Wayana people need the most is legal land rights and demarcation of our territory. Up until now, **the government of Suriname does not recognize our rights**, despite that the Organization of American States (OAS) condemned the State of Suriname several times. **We considered the project with WWF as an ideal way for us to get proof (including archaeological research and findings) that the Wayana have been living in this area for thousands of years**, so that we can start the dialogue with the Government. We also wanted to use the data against the illegal gold mining in our area. **Banning illegal gold mining is one of our priorities**. This activity brings all kind of consequences, like mercury pollution in the rivers, overfishing, deforestation and increase of violence mainly towards women due to the presence of the "*Garimpeiros*" (gold miners from Brazil who are mining illegally). **However, the Government and the conservation NGOs have shown, to our surprise, no interest in solving this problem.**

After we did all the preparations, in consultation with WWF (training the young people to use the computer and the mapping software, etc.), the project plan was written. To our surprise, after 2 months, we received an e-mail with one sentence: "we will not finance this because it does not fit within our WWF Forest program". No further explanation. **Further reflection led us to conclude that we are too critical about the SSCC program (which is also a WWF project in our territory), and that they think we are not accountable enough.** My Paramount Chief has indicated that WWF as well as ACT and CI are no longer welcome in this territory. He said: "Let them conserve the forest in Paramaribo", the capital of Suriname.

Also, none of the NGOs seems to be bothered that **some of the Wayana villages have no school at all**. The only option is to send the children to French Guiana (daily by boat), but the French Government only tolerates this till 5th grade. Then, only the parents who have a French nationality (or both) can send their children to a school far away from home, in a boarding school. The costs are more than 4 times an average Surinamese income (for people living in the cities), and this while there is hardly a money economy in the villages. In addition, children get an education in the French school-system and not in the Dutch one (Dutch is the official language of Suriname). For children to proceed with their study in Suriname in a language they cannot speak nor write and succeed is nearly impossible. Besides this being barely payable for parents.

"We are going to do it ourselves"

In April 2018, our Paramount Chief created the Mulokot Foundation. He had enough of all the disappointments and insults to the Wayana people. **The Foundation - from and for the Wayana people - enables the participation of the traditional leaders**. With this, he wants to bring our own "development" and decide which projects have priority and which ones should not be implemented. The NGOs, and to a lesser extent, the Government, do not take this seriously, but we do. They also openly call into question the quality and level of the members of the Foundation.

Along with the traditional leaders, we developed a vision with three main goals:

- **Sustainable territorial management by the Wayana people** starting with mapping our territory (in order to define our limits, rights and autonomy);

- The establishment of an **Indigenous Education Institute** (combination of western and indigenous knowledge, data collection and documentation of our heritage and culture) for our youngsters and our future; and
- **Food sovereignty** with different ways of agriculture, domestication of wildlife, etc.

The most remarkable thing is that **most NGOs do not want to support our Indigenous Education Institute**. The argument is that to construct a building, one needs to use wood from the area, which seems to be worse than the lack of education in our communities and to help providing an education that uses our indigenous knowledges. We understand that our forest is essential for the future, indeed for the future of all. However, **our people have been living in this forest for generations and the forest is still thriving, what are they so afraid of?**

Now our Paramount Chief has decided to stop all ‘conservation’ NGOs that are active in our area. We are going to do it ourselves and we will look for partners that fit with our way of thinking and living. **It will not be easy, but our whole existence never was.**

Our motto: **Nothing About Us Without Us!**

Miss Jupta Itoewaki, mulokotkawemhakan@gmail.com
 Chairperson of the Mulokot Foundation

(1) Maroons are referred to the African descendants in America who formed settlements in the forests escaping from slavery.

Displacement and Dispossession in Tanzania: How “Conservation” is Destroying the Maasai



Maasai man with his cows in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. Ph: The Oakland Institute.

“It has been estimated that 50 per cent of protected areas worldwide has been established on lands traditionally occupied and used by indigenous peoples.” – UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz (1)

While today, Serengeti National Park is a household term to many around the world – evoking images of the great wildebeest migration, sweeping savannah landscapes, and iconic acacia trees – for centuries the region has been home to pastoralists, including the indigenous Maasai. Despite this long history of co-habitation and stewardship of the land, for the past 80 years the Maasai in northern Tanzania have faced resettlements, forced evictions, marginalization, violence, and on-going oppression – all in the name of conservation. (2)

The origins of Serengeti National Park date back to 1940, when the British colonial government passed a Game Ordinance to support the protection of wildlife in the area. (3) While the law contained restrictions on human settlement in and use of the region, it exempted people born or residing in the park from these rules and thus did not initially impact the Maasai. (4)

But in the years after its creation, **pressure mounted to further restrict human activity, including from international conservation groups such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Frankfurt Zoological Society.** (5) By 1957, a British-led “Committee of Enquiry” put forth the suggestion to split the then-Serengeti National Park into two regions. One region would become present day Serengeti National Park, where all human habitation, including by the Maasai, would be prohibited. (6) The second region would become known as the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) and was proposed as a multiple land-use area with three goals: conserving natural resources, protecting the interests of indigenous groups, and promoting tourism. (7)

In order to enforce these plans, **the colonial government needed to persuade the Maasai, who had resided in the Serengeti for centuries, to vacate.** In exchange for leaving the plains, the Maasai were told they could inhabit the newly formed NCA and were promised, among other things, the development of better water resources. (8) They ultimately agreed and their promises to vacate the Serengeti were enshrined in two pieces of legislation passed in 1959. But the promises of the colonial British were never legally recorded, and instead only made verbally. (9)

In the following years, **international conservation organizations doubled down on their efforts to control and influence the Serengeti region.** In 1961, amidst fears that African independence would upend colonial conservation projects, the IUCN, with funding from UNESCO and the FAO, sponsored an international conservation conference in Arusha, Tanzania. (10) A report prepared by the IUCN on the conference elaborated these fears: “An impartial assessment of worldwide wildlife conservation problems had led the IUCN to the conclusion that the accelerated rate of destruction of wild fauna, flora and habitat in Africa ... was the most urgent conservation problem of the present time ... These great and unique faunal and floral resources could become exhausted merely because the indigenous people had not had adequately demonstrated to them the methods to maintain maximum economic and cultural benefits from them.” (11) The outcome of the conference was the Arusha Manifesto, which, amongst other things, created a specific role for international conservation organizations to provide technical expertise in the planning and management of conservation areas across Africa. (12) **These groups lobbied for increasing restrictions on cultivation, grazing, and movement within the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA). Throughout the 1960s, enforcement of these rules increased, including imprisonment, fines, and the confiscation of property of the Maasai.** (13)

The 1970s saw additional “victories” for conservationists. The 1974 Wildlife Conservation Act forbade grazing cattle without a permit in game reserves [large areas where wild animals can be hunted for sport] - restrictions that would eventually further marginalize the Maasai. (14) The 1975 NCA Ordinance Amendment banned all forms of cultivation within the NCA, (15) dealing a serious blow to the Maasai who, for centuries, have relied on subsistence farming combined with cattle grazing for their livelihoods and food security. (16) And in 1979, without consultation or the consent of the Maasai, the NCA was classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, adding additional conservation pressures. (17)

These actions, together with the continued marginalization and silencing of the Maasai from NCA governance processes (18) had a massive impact, bringing death and starvation to the Maasai in the following years. (19) These actions also set the foundation for the repression that continues to plague the Maasai today, all in the name of conservation.

On the part of international organizations and conservation groups, the additional UNESCO Heritage designation that was awarded to the Ngorongoro region in 2010 was once again done without the consultation and free, prior, and informed consent of the Maasai. As detailed in an article by William Olenasha in 2014, **the legacy and actions of UNESCO, the IUCN, and others have continued to be a disaster for the Maasai.** (20)

The Tanzanian government has likewise continued the colonial legacy of marginalization, refusing to identify the Maasai as indigenous, (21) continuing to pass laws that negatively impact the Maasai, and launching numerous violent evictions of Maasai villages over the past decade. (22) **One of the most recent evictions took place in August 2017, reportedly damaging 5,800 homes and leaving 20,000 Maasai homeless.** (23) These evictions led to courageous action by four Maasai villages who, in September 2017, took the Tanzanian government to the East African Court of Justice (EACJ) to try to secure their rights to their land once and for all. While a recent injunction awarded by the EACJ to the Maasai is positive news, (24) those on the ground have reported that the government has repeatedly violated the injunction, bringing continued harm to the Maasai. (25)

In recent decades, **another actor in the plight of the Maasai has emerged – safari tourism companies.** With tourism representing 17.5 per cent of the country’s GDP and 25 per cent of its foreign currency earnings in 2016/17, (26) this sector holds significant power in the country. As detailed extensively in a recent report by the Oakland Institute, two safari companies have had a particularly negative impact on the Maasai – Tanzania Conservation Limited, a company owned by the same couple that owns the award winning, Boston-based Thomson Safaris, and the United Arab Emirates-based Ortello Business Corporation (OBC). (27) Allegations regarding the two companies include that **the Maasai have been denied access to vital grazing areas and watering holes, face intimidation and violence from police who are sometimes called in by the companies, and, in the case of the OBC, collaboration between Tanzanian government forces and company security guards to violently evict Maasai communities.** (28)

The present day impact of this so-called “conservation” on the Maasai has been disastrous. With restrictions on grazing and cultivation on-going, malnutrition lurks around the corner for many. (29) **Evictions have continued, with intimidation, harassment, and violence being used by the Tanzanian government against those who resist and speak out.** (30) Meanwhile, over a million tourists from around the world flock to Tanzania each year to catch

a glimpse of the exquisite flora, fauna, and landscapes that have been protected by and integral to Maasai life for centuries. (31)

While devastating, perhaps the greatest tragedy is that the story of the Maasai is one that is all too familiar to indigenous groups worldwide. As noted by UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, “for over a century, conservation was carried out with the aim of vacating protected areas of all human presence, leading to cultural destruction and large-scale displacements of indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands in the name of conservation.” (32) This has happened with the collusion of conservation organizations, governments, multilateral organizations like UNESCO, and today also tourism companies.

But the story is not over. While the Tanzanian government continues to prioritize supporting groups like the Ortello Business Corporation, who use the Ngorongoro region as their personal hunting playground, (33) **the Maasai continue not only to steward the land but also to wage their courageous campaign for the rights to their land, lives, livelihoods, and culture.** It is time for the rest of the world – in particular former-colonial-turned-donor governments, conservation organizations, and safari companies – to get behind this and honour the true stewards of the broad Serengeti region: the Maasai.

Elizabeth Fraser, efraser@oaklandinstitute.org
Senior Policy Analyst, The Oakland Institute

*This article is based on the Oakland Institute’s report “Losing the Serengeti: The Maasai Land that Was to Run Forever.” For full information, citations, and accompanying documentation, please see: Mittal, A. and E. Fraser *Losing the Serengeti: The Maasai Land that Was to Run Forever*. The Oakland Institute, 2018. <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/tanzania-safari-businesses-maasai-losing-serengeti> (accessed January 22, 2019).*

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Guatemala: Conservation Perpetuates the Plunder of Forests



Sierra Lacandón, Guatemala. Ph: Santiago Navarro

“In the northern lands of Petén, Guatemala, a project is being developed by a group of international NGOs, together with their local partners and the financial support of institutions like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These NGOs include The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, Rainforest Alliance and World Wildlife Fund. Using a discourse of combating global warming and protecting forests, this project aims to profit from the indiscriminate sale of forests.

The creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in 1990 (RBM, by its Spanish acronym) generated the conditions to insert this territory—which covers 70 percent of Petén department—into national “sustainable development” plans. These plans are based on the exportation of commodities alongside conservation projects, and **they exacerbate the seemingly contradictory nature of these initiatives: The Mesoamerica Plan for infrastructure and economic-energy integration with its extractive projects; and its “green version,” the Protected Areas of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.** Both of these land management models are financed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

These models, which advertise “sustainable forest management” projects within the Reserve as conservation success stories, seek to shape the Guatemalan regulatory framework to include a new commodity for export: carbon credits. These credits come from so-called offset projects—in which contamination or destruction of one place is offset with a project in another place that claims to protect a “similar” area, or “recreate” what has been destroyed. This not only allows all industrial activity to continue—as long as its destruction is “offset”; it also causes double land grabbing: in the area of the industrial activity and in the

“offset” area. In a context of growing militarization, these plans intend to **continue the forced displacement of peasant and indigenous populations who have been living in Petén for decades.**

“In all the Protected Areas, basic services are restricted: health, education, food, infrastructure,” says a peasant who lives within the area demarcated as Laguna del Tigre National Park (PNLT, by its Spanish acronym), which is also within the Reserve. “It has been worrying for us to see how **powerful business sectors have been destroying nature in what they call Protected Areas.** After we have been robbed of our lands, they end up in the hands of other people; and legally, they can belong to a company. We are outraged that they hassle us about so many things; yet we see the oil bids in Laguna del Tigre, where there is also (oil) palm...**Why do they have the right to be here? If they actually are contaminating nature!**” asks a peasant. He is from a community that conservation NGOs and the National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP, by its Spanish acronym) criminalize, using a discourse that blames communities for deforestation.

Displacement: State Policy

On Friday, June 2, 2017, 111 peasant and indigenous communities fled their lands in the face of the threat of 2,000 army and National Civil Police troops. The troops were headed toward their community—known until then as Laguna Larga—with the sole purpose of reducing it to ashes. To this day, 450 people are living in a humanitarian crisis context on the border between Campeche, Mexico and Petén Guatemala. The case of Laguna Larga and other **forced displacement that has occurred in the Protected Areas shows how the Guatemalan State uses violence as a way to “solve” territorial conflicts in Petén.** The main objective is to prohibit the presence of communities that do not adopt the only model allowed: that of forest merchants in the lands of northern Guatemala.

The Path Toward Privatization of “Conservation”

Since establishment of the Reserve, the official institutions tasked with enforcing the Law of Protected Areas have operated on limited budgets. This context led to the proliferation of conservationist NGOs to fill the institutional gap. “The kind of conservation these organizations promote can be seen as part of the neoliberal model, given the way in which Protected Areas are viewed economically. If the State wants to conserve, it has to pay to do so. **The State was clearly not going to have the technical capacity to manage these areas; they were always intended to be transferred to conservation NGOs.** One of the first to be created, the Foundation for Eco-development and Conservation, is owned by Marcos Cerezo. Marcos Cerezo is the son of Vinicio Cerezo, who was the president of Guatemala when the Law of Protected Areas was passed. This NGO manages geologically strategic areas, where there is gas and oil,” says Rocío García, an anthropologist from the University of San Carlos. She denounces the irregular way in which the management of Protected Areas was transferred to private investors, who thus have the ability to administer state resources in the future.

The case of Guatemala, explains García, is a clear example of the interrelationship between international environmental policies—based on conservation under the Protected Areas model—and the territorial planning policies of the Guatemalan government.

“Sustainable development is linked to Guatemalan territorial planning policies from the administration of Óscar Berger (2004-2008), when the *rural territorial development* policy was implemented. This policy was drawn up using an IDB-designed methodology, and its objective is to insert territories into markets using principles of demand.” **The objective is for peasants to no longer be tied to the land for agricultural production (mainly subsistence), and instead begin to produce for the market.** To this end, it incentivizes nation-states to reorganize local institutions in order to impose models designed for entry into the global market.

NGOs: A Relationship of Dependency

After the peace accords were signed between the Guatemalan State and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity—following 36 years of internal armed conflict—agrarian reform was enacted, with the World Bank’s influence. This imposed prohibitions on the granting of land tenure to peasant communities, despite the fact that in numerous cases they already possessed the lands—many of which had been abandoned forcibly during the war.

At the same time, **throughout the Reserve, the Guatemalan government reinforced the prohibition on land titling, and, with USAID funding, created the “forest concession” model** in areas assigned for “sustainable forest management.” Although 12 concessions were initially granted, they are currently only operating in nine communities (1). Meanwhile, there are two industrial concessions in the hands of the logging companies, Batel Comercial Ltd. and Gibor S.A. The total concession area is 485,200 hectares.

“What they [USAID] did was **place an NGO in each community** in order to advise the community on organization, manage funds and become legally registered as forest concession areas. They had to conduct an analysis of the territory to know how much potential it had for logging and other non-wood products, since that is all they have to work with.” says Rosa Maria Chan, a former Guatemalan official.

In 2001, USAID channeled its assistance through the BIOFOR Project, implemented by the NGO Chemonics International. This organization implemented a business vision to seek out new market niches and increase forest production in concession areas. Although the official discourse talks about respect for the determination of communities that are operating forest concessions, a 2007 analysis by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) reveals the **vertical and paternalistic formula in the relationship between NGOs and the population in northern Petén.**

“The NGOs took on a leading role in the process; rather than accompanying or facilitating, they became service providers...the relationship between communities and NGOs was unbalanced from the start, given that the NGOs were managing and administering the funds, without promoting community building and self-management...the **NGOs promoted relationships of dependency in order to justify their existence and continue receiving funding from donors.**” So underscores the context analysis about the Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP, by its Spanish acronym), an umbrella organization for the organizations operating the community forest concessions.

According to CIFOR’s analysis, between 1989 and 2003 alone, USAID, IDB, KfW (a German development bank) and counterparts in the Guatemalan government directly invested 92 million dollars in projects in the Reserve. “Of this total investment, only a modest portion

directly reached concessionary communities and their organizations. These resources have only deepened the dependency relationship between forest concessions and NGOs,” the report highlights.

Logging for “Conservation”

According to data from the NGO Rainforest Alliance, between 2007 and 2017, forest concessions generated US \$55 million from the sale of wood, *xate* palm, pepper, Maya nut and tourism services to European and US markets, in addition to creating 26,000 jobs. These numbers come from the project, *Climate, Nature and Communities in Guatemala* (CNCG), which was sponsored by the USAID and ended in February of 2018. The project received an investment of US \$25 million between 2013 and 2018, and is considered to be **part of the preparation phase of the Guatecarbón project—the local version of the REDD+ mechanism for the Central American country.**

CNCG is part of USAID's 2012-2015 Global Climate Change and Development Strategy, and was implemented by Rainforest Alliance in collaboration with the following organizations: the Nature Defenders Foundation (Rainforest Alliance's local partner that co-administers the Sierra Lacandón National Park); the University of the Valley of Guatemala; the Guatemalan Exporters Association; The Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). For the Association of Forest Communities of Petén, the positive results are evident, given the millions in income obtained through the sale of forest products. However, **even the Reserve's current Master Plan mentions “the ever-present danger that logging activities can eliminate critical components of the habitat with a resulting loss in animal populations.”** Despite these warnings, **USAID's global climate change strategy looks more like a sales strategy**, which fully matches the objectives that the Wildlife Conservation Society developed in its Master Plan.

The plan states that **by 2021, in un-concessioned, multi-use forest areas in the region with productive potential, “there must be some kind of forest product use in order to strengthen conservation [of the area].”** This means prioritizing, among other areas, the “Candelaria Triangle.” This is the region where the Laguna Larga community was located and where three other communities are under constant threat of eviction.

Despite profits obtained from the concessions, a USAID internal audit published in 2016 reveals **deep-seated problems in the planning and implementation of the CNCG project.** According to the document, Rainforest Alliance provided erroneous information on different aspects.

The main problem found at CNCG is that “Rainforest Alliance should have prepared a sustainability plan from the beginning, explaining how the organizations and companies that receive support from the program would be self-sustaining after the program activities have ended. However, two years after the program was implemented, there was still no plan.”

The fact is that the Protected Areas created in Guatemala have aimed to green capitalism through **policies that reorganize the territory and tenure of forest lands.** Communities that have been guardians and protectors of these forests are being dispossessed of their lands, rights and ways of life. Meanwhile, conservation NGOs have fattened their project portfolios by supporting and intensifying a development model that only benefits the market.

This article is part of the report, “Conservation Perpetuates the Plunder of Guatemalan Forests” [The Spanish version can be read here](#), and the English version will soon be available as well.

Aldo Santiago, editorial@avispa.org
 Avispa Midia, <https://avispa.org/portada/>

(1) There are two types of forest concessions: community and industrial. In order for communities to obtain a forest concession, it is necessary to carry out a legal procedure in which the community is not a subject of rights, but rather must be a legally registered organization. In other words, a community organized on its own terms cannot request a forest concession; rather, in order to operate as such, it must go through a legal maze and have the support and counsel of NGOs. Forest concessions establish a contract for up to 25 years between the Guatemalan State and a community organization. The community organization is guaranteed rights to use, access, manage and extract renewable timber and non-timber resources, as well as to carry out tourism projects. The property rights in these contracts belong to the State, and they exclude the possibility of sale or transference of concession rights.

The Human Cost of Strictly Protected Areas in the Congo Basin



"Eco-guards" burning down a suspected illegal camp in Republic of Congo, 2012. Ph. M. Goldwater.

In Africa's Congo Basin, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, the many promises of rights-based and participatory conservation have miserably failed to materialise. **For communities living in and around protected areas, the reality continues to be one of dispossession, impoverishment and widespread human rights abuses.**

At the World Park Congress in Durban in 2003, governments, conservation NGOs and multilateral organisations called for a “new conservation paradigm” (1), recognising past injustices and announcing that from then on, local people would be treated as equal partners

and their rights would be respected. Much lip service has been paid since. But in the Congo Basin's rainforests, the reality is far, far off the mark.

The Rainforest Foundation UK has been working closely with forest-dependent communities across the region for three decades. Every time we came close to a protected area, we found the same story: forest-dependant communities, who had been managing and co-existing with their ancestral forests sustainably for generations, had seen **their lands and primary sources of livelihoods and income stripped away by protected areas that were imposed on them without their consent**. Communities have also been side-lined in the management of the forests they depend on, and having to endure heavy-handed enforcement of rules that were not properly explained to them, with **armed park rangers arbitrarily and disproportionately targeting them for 'poaching' instead of going after the real criminals**.

We started documenting the situation more systematically (2), collecting qualitative and quantitative evidence of how the rights of forest-dependant communities were being overlooked in protected areas' creation and management, and how **gross negligence on the part of 'mega' conservation NGOs were allowing human rights abuses by aid-funded park rangers to happen**. These issues were discussed at length in a 2016 report, dissecting the impacts of 34 protected areas in the region. (3)

Guns, guards and rights abuses

Conservation organisations are quick to report figures on poachers' arrests and seizures and the numbers of park rangers who lose their lives protecting wildlife, including in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These often make the headlines. (4) But behind these numbers hides a much more complex and darker story. For every poaching network dismantled, how many innocent indigenous people hunting for their livelihoods have been arrested and thrown into prison with virtually no right to a fair trial? **For every park ranger that tragically dies defending endangered species, how many local people have been arbitrarily arrested, extorted, tortured, abused or killed by other park agents?**

Recently, we supported a team of local investigators to conduct an in-depth research within communities living around UNESCO-protected Salonga National Park in DRC. (5) The research team interviewed over 230 people affected by the park, and almost a quarter of them reported having been **direct victims of physical or sexual abuse by the park's 'eco-guards'**, sometimes acting jointly with DRC's army (FARDC). The team interviewed victims and eye witnesses, and collected material evidence of **shocking human rights violations**. The most serious ones include **a case of gang rape, two extra-judicial killings and many detailed reports of torture and mistreatment**. **Salonga's park rangers are supported by the NGO WWF**, which co-manages the park since 2015, and receive direct and indirect funding from a wide range of international donors, including **Germany's developmental bank KfW, US-AID and the European Union**.

The park is as big as Belgium and the research team only visited a fraction of the 700 villages that are believed to be directly impacted by Salonga's conservation measures. Therefore there are good grounds to believe that **the abuses uncovered are part of a much wider, systematic problem**.

While the situation in Salonga is particularly alarming, **military-style conservation has produced many more victims across the region**. In Republic of Congo, we documented the case of Freddy, an alleged poacher who was tortured and killed in November 2017 by 'eco-guards' supported by the NGO Wildlife Conservation Society. (6) During a field investigation around Lac Tele the same year, the country's only so-called "community reserve", we met indigenous Baka families who had seen their houses burned down by 'eco-guards' and today decried facing repeated mistreatment when entering the forest.

In a context of widespread police corruption and lack of trust in authorities, most human rights abuses go unreported. When they are, no steps are taken to provide redress to communities. **Conservationist NGOs who train and support 'eco-guards', when alerted of such human rights abuses, tend to shield behind the fact that 'eco-guards' ultimately fall under the responsibility of the State**. But, clearly, there is much more they could do to prevent, monitor and remedy violations that occur under their watch.

Land rights and livelihoods systematically undermined

Another deeply-rooted issue that conservation programmes often aggravate and largely fail to address is tenure insecurity, and related loss of livelihoods. One of the reasons why rights-based conservation has completely failed to materialise in the Congo Basin is that **local communities have virtually no legal rights to their lands and that customary rights are largely misunderstood and overlooked**.

Before setting up a national park, an obvious first step would be to document who lives there (and how they live), to ask if they consent and ensure they won't suffer from conservation-related restrictions on their traditional livelihoods activities. But this is almost never done in the Congo Basin. Our research into 34 protected areas across the region found no evidence of adequate documentation (such as mapping) of customary tenure taking place prior to, or informing, the protected area creation. (7) As a result, **protected areas are almost universally superimposed on lands that are customarily owned and used by local indigenous and farming communities – without their consent**. In an overwhelming number of cases, the creation of protected areas has involved some form of displacement of local communities, from physical relocation of entire villages to economic displacement of people who see their **access to land or resources limited or even entirely prohibited, with immense impacts on their economy, culture, livelihood and identity**.

One striking example of this is the Tumba Lediiima Reserve in western DRC. (8) When its borders were arbitrarily drawn in 2006, mainly to protect the local population of bonobos (a type of chimpanzee), nobody thought it was worthwhile to properly document who was already living there, and how these people would be affected by conservation measures. Moreover, there was no acknowledgement that **local ethnic groups in the area had taboos on hunting bonobos and were therefore already playing a key role in protecting the species**. Community mapping revealed that over 100,000 people live in the area that they largely depend on forests for their livelihoods. Because these communities did not have a say in the establishment and management of the reserve, they have been hit hard by the restrictions on hunting and fishing that were imposed on them by the reserve's managers, to the point that the World Food Programme had to intervene and provide food supplements. (9)

We found a similar story near Salonga National Park. Communities living in the so-called "Monkoto corridor", many of which were forcibly evicted from their forests when the park was

established in 1971, reported widespread malnutrition. They overwhelmingly attributed this problem to conservation-related restrictions on hunting and fishing. *“Every day we’ve wondering why they took us out of our ancestors’ forests and put us here, in this hell? We need to be able to access the park as everything we need to survive is there”*, one villager told us.

DRC has recently passed community forestry legislation, paving the way for greater tenure security and community-based forest management. (10) While this is a ground-breaking development, there is a need to ensure that these community forests are developed for and by the communities themselves rather than being appropriated by some of the large conservation agencies as ‘buffers’ to protected areas as some reports have shown.

Where do we go from here?

Top-down, military-style wildlife conservation, as it continues to be the norm in the Congo Basin, besides being socially unjust, is short-sighted and ultimately undermines conservation efforts. It **pits local communities against conservation, alienating the very people who should be conservation’s best allies.**

Moving forward, conservation NGOs and their donors need to do much more than applying sticking plaster onto a broken system – delivering one-off human rights training sessions to eco-guards or setting up a few ill-adapted alternative livelihoods programmes will not suffice to right the wrongs. **A complete overhaul is needed**, whereby forest communities’ rights and needs are integrated into all aspects of conservation planning and management.

Governments should seek to implement alternative conservation measures that have proven successful such as indigenous and community conservancies and (genuinely bottom-up) community forests. (12)

For international conservation NGOs, it means that transparent community-based monitoring and grievance mechanisms need to be set up and remedial action where violations occur. It means truly involving local and indigenous communities in anti-poaching surveillance (and re-considering the need for armed eco-guards altogether, at least in some contexts). International donors, on the other hand, need to shift funds and support away from traditional top-down approaches and towards more rights-based models. The adverse human rights impacts of the trend towards militarisation of conservation across the region, also urgently need to be discussed.

For civil society organisations, it means **systematically documenting and exposing conservation-related abuses**, and building capacity of grassroots and frontline activists to do so. Applied new technologies can greatly assist in making information on land and human rights issues in remote forest areas much more accessible to decision-makers and organisations.

The Rainforest Foundation UK promotes a system called ForestLink, which allows communities to send near-instantaneous alerts of abuses, even in areas where there is no mobile or internet connectivity. (13) The Mapping for Rights initiative enables forest peoples to map their lands and livelihood activities, providing tangible evidence that **the lands earmarked for conservation, far from being “pristine wilderness”, are indeed human landscapes.** (14)

Until all this is properly considered and addressed, promises of rights-based conservation, in the Congo Basin context, will remain woefully unfilled.

Maud Salber, MaudS@rainforestuk.org

Rainforest Foundation UK, <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/>

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- (2) Rainforests, Parks and People, <http://rainforestparksandpeople.org/>
- (3) Rainforest Foundation UK, Protected Areas in the Congo Basin: Failing both People and Biodiversity?, 2016, <http://blog.mappingforrights.org/wp-content/uploads/38342-Rainforest-Foundation-Conservation-Study-Web-ready.pdf>
- (4) See related articles on Global Conservation, <http://globalconservation.org/news/over-one-thousand-park-rangers-die-10-years-protecting-our-parks/> and The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/weather/2018/apr/09/six-virunga-park-rangers-killed-in-drc-wildlife-sanctuary>
- (5) <https://salonga.org/>
- (6) Rainforest Foundation UK, Aid-funded conservation guards accused of extrajudicial killing, 2017, <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/aid-funded-conservation-guards-accused-of-extrajudicial-killing>
- (7) See RFUK (2016) and www.rainforestparksandpeople.org
- (8) See video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HHoSLEVoQk>
- (9) Tumba Ledima Nature Reserve, DRC <https://www.mappingforrights.org/files/38342-Rainforest-Foundation-Conservation-Study-Web-ready.pdf#page=78>
- (10) Rainforest Foundation UK, A National Strategy for Community Forestry in DRC, 2018, <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/a-national-strategy-for-community-forestry-2018.pdf>
- (11) Achi Targets, <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/>
- (12) See ICCA Consortium, <http://www.iccaconsortium.org/>
- (13) Forest Link: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/rfm>
- (14) Mapping for Rights: <http://www.mappingforrights.org/>

ACTION ALERTS

India: Your urgent support is needed! More than one million people at risk of eviction from their land and forests!

On February 13, 2019, India's Supreme Court passed an order that instructs state governments to evict forest dwelling communities if their claims to live in their forests have not been recognized under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). After forest movements mobilized against the order, on February 28, the Supreme Court has put on hold the evictions till next date of hearing, 24 July 2019. While the latest order by the Court brings some modicum of relief for the forest communities of India, this in no way dissipates the threat. Please endorse a letter that will be sent to the Indian Supreme Court and the Prime Minister of India urging them to stop this injustice! You can sign here: <https://wrm.org.uy/other-relevant-information/forest-dwelling-communities-in-india-urgently-need-your-support/>

Join the call for a new approach to conservation

The NGO Survival International has an on-going petition for a new conservation that respects indigenous peoples' rights and promotes human and ecological diversity. The aim is to reach 20,000 signatures and they need your help! Sign the petition here: <https://www.survivalinternational.org/petitions/tribal-people-the-best-conservationists>

Brazil: Support Cacique Babau and his family

Cacique Babau, from Serra do Padeiro Tupinambá community, state of Bahia, suffers repeated threats against him and his family. Faced with this worrying situation, people and social organizations, through a letter to Governor Rui Costa, demand that the state guarantee the integrity of the Cacique and his family. We urge you to sign-on the letter in

solidarity until March 15 here: <https://wrm.org.uy/other-relevant-information/support-cacique-babau-and-his-family>

India: Stop brutal “Shoot on sight”!

Park guards have extra-judicially executed fifty people in the last three years under India’s infamous “shoot on sight” national parks policy. Tribal people face being shot, beaten, tortured and killed at the hands of heavily armed park officials. All this in the name of conservation. There are plans to introduce this policy in tiger reserves across India. Tribal people are already being beaten and harassed into leaving their forest homes. Arming the guards would result in even more violence against India’s tribes. Please sign the petition for India’s Minister of Environment and Forests to ban the “shoot on sight” policy:

<https://www.survivalinternational.org/emails/shoot-on-sight>

Cambodian Peasants Against the Bolloré Group

After 11 representatives of the Bunong ethnic group in Cambodia were denied visas to go to France to attend judicial proceedings against plantation company, Bolloré, the hearing was postponed until October. In 2015, Bunong peasants in Cambodia sued Bolloré group for destroying several hectares of forest in order to grow rubber. This action deprived the Bunong of their means of subsistence. The Bunong, a community that practices “an animistic belief based on the sacredness of forests,” also blame Bolloré for destroying their places of worship and centenarian trees considered to be deities. The purpose of the hearing is to compel Bolloré and its subsidiary, “Compagnie du Cambodge,” to present documents proving that they exercised legitimate “operating power” over the areas leased for rubberwood. Read more about the grievance and the case (in French):

<https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/28703-des-plaignants-cambodgiens-contre-bollore-prives-de-visa> and

<https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/28742-paysans-cambodgiens-contre-bollore-audience-renvoyee>

Argentina: No to Genetically Modified Seeds!

The Secretary of Family Farming, Coordination and Territorial Development in Misiones, Argentina, signed an agreement to develop the cultivation of genetically modified corn with high productivity, in Misiones and Northeast Corrientes. The objective is to produce more than one million tons of corn from these territories and export them to Brazil. This jeopardizes the already-threatened biodiversity of native seeds in the province, as well as food sovereignty. Support the Declaration of Rejection to this Project (in Spanish) at:

<http://accionesbiodiversidad.org/archivos/232>

RECOMMENDED

WWF funds guards who have tortured and killed people

A recent BuzzFeed News investigation reveals that the World Wide Fund (WWF) funds vicious paramilitary forces to fight poaching. The authors write that “*In national parks across Asia and Africa, the beloved non-profit with the cuddly panda logo funds, equips, and works directly with paramilitary forces that have been accused of beating, torturing, sexually assaulting, and murdering scores of people*”. Read the report (in English) here:

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tomwarren/wwf-world-wide-fund-nature-parks-torture-death> and a REDD-Monitor article on this, here: <https://redd-monitor.org/2019/03/04/wwf-scandal-part-10-buzzfeed-news-investigation-reveals-wwfs-secret-war/>

India: Community Based Conservation Amidst Conflict

A report from the Indian organization Kalpavriksh documents community initiatives that protect biodiversity while ensuring their cultural, livelihood and food sovereignty in the Dooars region of North West Bengal. Indigenous communities in this area faced unjust forestry practices since colonial rule that led to the exploitation of forests and usurpation of their customary rights. After the 2006 Forest Rights Act, communities formed a number of forest protection and management committees and engage in activities like forest patrolling, prevention of poaching, illegal felling and clear felling coupe operations that threaten the biodiversity. Read the report here:

http://kalpavriksh.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Community-Based-Conservation-Amidst-Conflict-in-the-Dooars-region-of-North-Bengal_FINALDRAFT_3rd-December-2018.pdf

“The Big Conservation Lie”

Over the last few years, ecologist Mordecai Ogada has been engaged in examining the policy problems and prejudices that underlie the challenges in wildlife conservation, particularly in Africa. These are central issues in his book ‘The Big Conservation Lie’, co-authored with John Mbaria. At the 2017 Nature inFocus Festival, he spoke about how the conservation sector has created fertile ground for class and racial prejudices in ideas around wildlife and forests. See the video here: <https://www.natureinfocus.in/video/mordecai-ogada-and-the-big-conservation-lie>

“Salvaging Nature. Indigenous Peoples, Protected Areas and Biodiversity Conservation”

Although this WRM publication was first published in 1994 and then updated in 2003, it is still very much relevant nowadays. It includes an extensive review and analysis on issues such as wilderness and preservation, the politics of parks, society and biodiversity, Parks’ management alternatives, among many others. Read the publication: https://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Salvaging_Nature.pdf

“New Challenges and Strategies in Defense of Land and Territory”

What is happening with the land and natural wealth around the world, and to the people who depend on them? How are people responding to these trends, threats, and challenges? Aiming to address these issues, 12 articles with powerful analysis and narratives from Latin America, Asia and Africa testify to the continuing and perhaps, permanent struggles for people’s rights, land, territories, and livelihoods. Read the publication from Focus on the Global South in: <https://focusweb.org/content/new-challenges-and-strategies-defense-land-and-territory>

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Editor-in-Chief: Winfridus Overbeek

Managing Editor: Joanna Cabello

Editorial Assistants: Elizabeth Díaz, Lucía Guadagno, Jutta Kill, Carolina Motoki y Teresa Pérez

WRM International Secretariat

Avenida General María Paz 1615 office 3. CP 11400. Montevideo, Uruguay

Phone/Fax: +598 26056943

wrm@wrm.org.uy | <http://www.wrm.org.uy>