
The Conservation Industry: a for-profit sector?

Conservationist NGOs are increasingly making partnerships with companies that, in fact, are the main drivers of environmental and social disasters. Even worse, they portray their corporate partners as the willing participants of the “solutions”. But, which solutions are they seeking? And solutions for whom?

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 supposed to be 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, from which indigenous inhabitants were forcibly removed, 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 overlap 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 on 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; contribute to mangrove restoration and support improvements to community-based fishing, a sector the government of Guyana has 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 fuel 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, have 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 explain: “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 uncover, 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 legitimizes the expansion of destructive economic policies.**

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(1) See, for example, the documentary “[target="_blank" rel="noopener" data-saferedirecturl="https://www.google.com/url?hl=es&q=Conservation's"> Dirty Secrets](https://www.google.com/url?hl=es&q=Conservation's)”, Oliver Steeds, 2014

(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.** Survival International. (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.](#)

(3) Survival International, [A history of land theft. Southwest Cameroon.](#)

(4) Duffy Rosaleen, [War by Conservation](#), October 2014;

Survival International, [The two Faces of Conservation](#), 2015

(5) REDD-Monitor, [ExxonMobil strikes US\\$200 billion offshore oil reserves in Guyana. Gives US\\$10 million to Conservation International.](#) August 2018

(6) Conservation International, [ExxonMobil Foundation invests US\\$10 million in Guyana for Research, Sustainable Employment and Conservation](#), February 2018

(7) [See all corporate partners here.](#)

(8) The Verge, [Coke claims to give back as much water as it uses. An investigation shows it isn't even close.](#)

(9) EJ-Atlas, [Excessive forest logging Lithuania](#), August 2018

(10) [See all corporate partners here.](#) [And the board of directors.](#)

(11) Adams W, [Sleeping with the enemy?](#), Journal of Political Ecology, Vol.24, 2017 252

(12) Klein, Naomi, [Why aren't environmental groups divesting from fossil fuels?](#), The Nation, 2013

(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/>

(15) [No to the WWF New Generations Plantations Project](#), RECOMA