The Conservation Industry's Agenda in Times of Crisis

The environmental, climatic and social crisis has been a reality for many for a long time. Yet, rather than acknowledging their contribution to this crisis, corporations and allies use the pandemic to amplify their push to expand Protected Areas, presenting it as a "global solution" to the environmental crisis.

This bulletin was planned long before the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) broke out. Its objective is to highlight and warn of the marked tendency to expand so-called Protected Areas, and the risks that this entails—both for forests and the peoples who depend on them. The idea of conserving forests and biodiversity is a very noble goal. So then, what is the problem with the conservation model governing existing Protected Areas, and the plans to expand them?

Large conservation NGOs that promote the expansion of a model of "forests without people" are still tied to the colonialist ideals with which they were founded. Most of them have alliances with the companies and governments driving deforestation. These organizations, which have expensive advertising campaigns, and which described 2020 as a "super year for nature," have been promoting the expansion of Protected Areas—despite the evidence of abuses and violence to forest peoples that are linked to this model of conservation (1). In the name of conservation, a profitable industry has been created.

By the end of 2020, the world's governments were expected to adopt a new set of targets for biodiversity "protection" during the meeting of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). These targets are part of the so-called "**Global Deal for Nature**" that scientists proposed in 2017 to complement the UN Paris Agreement. In 2019, proponents of this "Global Deal for Nature" called to **"protect" half of the Earth's surface**. I*n line with demands from several conservationist NGOs and the* International Union for Conservation of Nature (*IUCN), the first draft of the decisions to be adopted at the CBD conference establishes (among other things)* ***that at least thirty per cent of the world's oceans and land be designated as Protected Areas or set aside for other conservation purposes by 2030****. The CDB's draft paper also includes a 2050 Vision for Biodiversity with five long-term goals. The first goal is to achieve* **"no net loss" in biodiversity** ***by 2030 and an increase in biodiversity of at least 20% by 2050*** *(2). Meanwhile, the UN climate negotiations this year were expected to move forward with national targets to address pollution levels, with heavy promotion of the so-called* ***Nature-Based Solutions****.* The CBD draft paper also promotes the use of Nature-Based Solutions, which *are based on mechanisms to supposedly compensate pollution and destruction, and large-scale "reforestation."*

"High-level" meetings and policy documents (like the CBD negotiations or the UN Paris Agreement) are based on biased analyses of what is causing biodiversity loss and deforestation or what might be stemming this destruction. While sounding the alarm and promoting so-called "solutions"—so that their financial backers and the general public think that "something is being done,"—these very actors and forums continue to promote and facilitate the direct and underlying causes of forest and biodiversity loss.

The current COVID-19 pandemic, however, has forced most of these international meetings to be postponed. Announcements are beginning to circulate about the “global need” to avoid another pandemic like the current one, through the creation of more Protected Areas. This argument fits in perfectly with the agenda that was already in the wings for the “super year for nature” of 2020. Aren’t these calls just an easy way of displacing responsibility for a problem that clearly has deeper structural causes? The goal of creating “more Protected Areas” not only hides the true culprits of deforestation and industrial-scale monoculture and livestock production, it also deepens the imposition of a colonialist vision of conservation that separates “nature” from “human beings.”

There have been numerous promises to align conservation activities with human rights, or with a community- and participatory-based approach (3). However, at the core, the anti-people approach of entities that fund, promote and manage Protected Areas has not changed. None of the proposals that aim to make conservation appear more people-friendly have gotten to the core issues of **who controls land** in Protected Areas, or who decides whether a location is declared to be protected, and what that means. Also, there has been no real recognition of **the underlying colonial and racist roots upon which the dominant conservation model is founded**. As a result, the management of Protected Areas continues to be linked—directly or indirectly—to forced evictions, harassment, violence and sexual abuse of women and children, human rights violations, deforestation and militarization of forest peoples' territories, and the list goes on.

A Global Deal for Profit

The other side of Protected Areas and prevailing conservation activities is their direct contradiction: **they allow destruction of forests and biodiversity to continue, both within and beyond their limits**.

Mining companies, for example, are operating in several so-called Protected Areas around the world. Despite regulations that forbid mining in Protected Areas in Cambodia, mining licenses have been granted in said areas—including in large sections of Virachey National Park. In Namibia, the government allows exploration and extraction of minerals in National Parks. In Ecuador, the government has opened about 13 percent of the country to mining exploration, with many concessions in previously Protected Areas. Even so-called World Heritage Sites are under threat in Venezuela, Mexico, Peru, DRC, Indonesia, Guinea, Cote d’Ivore and South Africa, among others. The reality is that industrial-scale logging, mining, fossil fuel extraction and monoculture production have been destroying thousands and thousands of complex co-relationships and inter-dependencies in forests, including with and among forest peoples.

COVID-19 is therefore not an isolated event. **The pandemic has only worsened the ongoing environmental, climatic, social and economic crisis**. While governments are currently occupied with mitigating the worst impacts of the pandemic on their population and health systems, they are doing everything possible to return to “normality” as soon as possible. But **this “normality” was already a crisis for the millions of people** threatened by evictions, violence, poverty, marginalization and destruction; meanwhile, climate chaos was already severely affecting people, forests and other living spaces.

The current pandemic further increases the risk that governments, industries, conservationist NGOs and financial investors will amplify their **narrative of an expansion of Protected Areas** worldwide as **a “global solution” to what they describe as separate climate and biodiversity crises**.

Let’s not allow for the imposition of structures and powerful actors who—once again under the guise

of the language of crisis—are causing the catastrophe itself.

The call for more Protected Areas addresses neither the root causes of destruction nor does it tackle the threats to which indigenous peoples and peasant and traditional communities are exposed as a result of this destruction. Radical solidarity with those communities facing destruction of their territories requires subject-changing conversations. As activist-researcher Larry Lohmann said, when someone asks: “How is this forest to be preserved?”, they should be answered with another question: “**How can we find out from communities the best ways of contributing to their struggles to defend their own forest practices, including subsistence cycles?**”

(1) See for example, WWF in the DRC’s Salonga National Park: Torture, murder and gang-rape, WRM Bulletin, 2019
(2) See, Campaign For Nature; and CBD, Zero Draft of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework,
(3) See, for example, Conservation International, Partnering with communities, institutions and governments