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Conservation: Linking Ecology, Economics and Culture

Dan Brockington
Oxford University

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BOOK REVIEWS

Conservation: Linking Ecology, Economics and Culture

MONIQUE BORGERHOFF MULDER AND PETER COPPOLILLO

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, PRINCETON, 2005

XVII + 347 PP. \$79.50 HARDCOVER, \$39.50 PAPERBACK

REVIEWED BY DAN BROCKINGTON

This is an ambitious book. Its bold title alone portends much material, and the heated debates it has to summarize make its work difficult. The unproductive split between strong conservation activists and the human rights lobby has made interdisciplinary approaches to conservation hard. Indeed the authors contend that “even writers who sincerely strive for balance end up stacking the deck one way or the other” (p. xiv). Their goal, therefore, is to provide a uniquely even-handed account of the main debates in the conservation of natural resources, which will make interdisciplinary learning and clear debate possible.

The result is, in many ways, a treat. It is wonderfully written. The prose is clear and well structured; complex concepts or complicated histories are fully comprehensible. It is also calm and reasoned, ably tackling most fraught debates with a good blend of common sense and unarguable logic. It is also incredibly rich, by far the best available for diversity of case material. The text is well illustrated with detailed boxes, good pictures and clear, legible figures and tables.

The book comprises eleven chapters. The first three introduce the arguments examined, histories of conservation, and examine changes in ecological thinking behind changing conservation thinking. The bulk of the text is devoted to six substantive chapters

on burning issues in conservation debates—the role of self-interest, indigenous peoples, collective action and local use in conservation, as well as insights from political ecology and the influence of international policies and economic approaches. The final two chapters examine diverse solutions, both common and innovative, to conservation dilemmas.

The quality of discussion is almost universally strong. Frequently the authors’ achievement in these pages is to refocus attention away from unproductive contentions to much more interesting, and more productive, questions. The high point is the chapter on self-interest, which examines conservation behavior from an evolutionary perspective. For anyone interested in evolutionary anthropology, this is a must. Other strong points are the discussion on collective action, ecological theory and the final examination of different attempts to address conservation problems. The authors repeatedly go right to the cutting edge, particularly with respect to ecological issues. They rightly observe that evaluations of community-based conservation have not really monitored their ecological outcomes, and that the crucial ecological comparisons between traditional parks and new conservation measures (pp. 50 and 240) on the impacts of hunting (p. 95) and collective action (p. 129) have yet to be undertaken.

Yet there are weaknesses. Despite the centrality of protected areas to this book (p. xv), its data on protected area establishment are seriously dated; the substantial recent revisions to the World Database on Protected Areas are absent (<http://sea.unep-wcmc.org>). More seriously, given its intended scope and even-handedness, there are some surprising omissions. There is no mention of the role of ideology and myth in shaping conservation policy; Cronon (1995), Adams and McShane (1992), and Brockington (2002) are not in the references. It does not engage with recent disagreements about poverty and conservation, and, astonishingly, there is no mention of the controversies surrounding the role of international conservation organizations or the problem of accountability in non-governmental organizations (Jepson 2004). This is part of a wider

silence on the role of civil society in affecting the social changes upon which conservation depends. And this in turn is part of a lack of detailed discussion about devolution. These can be key components in new conservation measures, and readers will require a better introduction to them.

Occasionally the balance is lost. Despite observing the lack of rigorous ecological comparisons between protected areas and alternative conservation strategies (pp. 50 and 240), the authors still conclude that “establishing protected areas remains the front line of the battle to conserve biodiversity” (p. 241). When discussing park outreach programs, they fail to clearly ask whether their benefits meet the costs parks can impose. Perhaps most seriously, they are just plain wrong about work on the social impacts of protected areas. There is not, as the authors claim, a “massive cataloguing of past, recent and ongoing abuses” of protected areas (p. 36). The complaints against protected areas are shrill and prominent, and undoubtedly appear ‘massive’ to some conservationists. But actual studies are few (particularly compared to the number of protected areas), and good research more rare; the noise conceals sparse data. Indeed a systematic cataloguing of the social impacts of protected areas (benefits and costs) is precisely what is now required (Brockington and Schmidt-Soltau 2004). And when the authors state that “[c]ontinuing attempts to displace resident populations, now through enticements rather than threats, will need very careful monitoring” (p. 36), I infer that eviction will no longer be the norm. But we simply cannot tell how the issue of continued widespread human residence inside strictly protected areas will be resolved in different parts of the world. These flaws mar an otherwise strong chapter.

In all, however, these problems are not too serious because bias is unavoidable. We can strive for balance but ultimately have to throw in our ideas for criticism, which the authors have done. All they have really failed to do is to declare their backgrounds (where have they got their authority from? what experiences drive them?) and reflect on their predilections. So what if subjects are missing? There are plenty of social scientists better qualified

to introduce them. The challenge now is for them to do so and to match the clarity and balanced tone of these writers. So if, given its ambition, this may not be the book its authors would like it to be, their failure still leaves conservation much richer. With its diversity, logic and straightforwardness, this book is the benchmark in the field. If subsequent writings can even attempt these standards then the interdisciplinary co-operation the authors foster will undoubtedly become easier.

Dan Brockington, Department of Geography,
Oxford University

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