
When conservation goes wrong. Is conservation always compatible with human rights?

Abstract

There is an increased expectation that communities will take more responsibility for what happens in their place and that refers to local governance, decision-making, environmental & landscape stewardship and much more besides. This is a consequence of a combination of factors, different in each location, including dwindling public resources, system failure and over-reliance on short term project activity which fails to tackle the issues it sets out to resolve.

Caught up in this mix, natural and cultural heritage conservation measures can seem to further complicate the every-day realities of local or indigenous populations. For example, the formal or legal designation of areas to be protected, for whatever reason, can have consequences for the livelihoods of local populations, negative as well as positive: prohibiting people from utilising their local resources, even removing them from their homeland and making individuals and / or groups feel like museum exhibits or scientific specimens to be studied at any time.

The challenge is to come up with a form of conservation (natural and cultural) for the 21st century and beyond which is co-produced by those with relevant expert knowledge not only in the natural environment or cultural heritage management, but also in the community in which that activity is taking place. The aspiration should be to build resilient self-supporting communities and for conservation decisions to become more nuanced to their needs and in the best interests of their places.

In this knowledge-café we will reflect specifically on the IUCN criteria and tools and how they relate to the issues we have just described: are they still fully fit for purpose, have they become overcomplicated, disengaged from the life-ways of people, are they inadvertently causing harm or ignoring issues of greater significance to local interests, can they be improved and, if so, in what ways?

Specifically, we will ask where is the balance between nature conservation and human rights and who should have the final say in answering that question?

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