

Reclaiming Eden

Biological and Cultural Conservationism

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They are called paradises on earth, but all is not well in the protected areas of the world. Regions considered protected in government statistics and maps sometimes lack real protection in fact, while many of the protected areas that do exist face a variety of threats, including illegal poaching, plant extraction, logging, mining, pollution, and climate change. "Protected" areas are often in need of protection themselves, and many indigenous people living inside these areas are also threatened.

With the World Parks Congress set to take place in Durban, South Africa, in fall 2003, *Squandering Paradise?*, a freely available report produced by the World Wildlife Fund, is as pertinent today as when it was published in 2000. From the volume's introduction, one expects to find a balanced account of the current state of the world's protected areas as well as a discussion of indigenous peoples' roles in the establishment, maintenance, and support of these special pockets on the earth's surface. Set out in five parts, the report opens with an overview of the extent of the global protected-areas network,

identifying the degrees of threat to these areas, examining the phenomenon of "paper parks" and also investigating the underlying causes of threats to protected areas. It then details the growing threats to the world's protected areas, focusing on land-use changes and the rise in the extraction of resources such as oil, gas, gold, and copper. The authors also discuss external threats including indigenous resistance and civil wars.

This section is followed by a summary of previous surveys of protected areas. Among the most interesting is the work undertaken by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in its Parks in Peril (PiP) program launched in 1990. Initiating a broad analysis of the ecological, social, and political issues faced by parks in the PiP portfolio, TNC emerged with a report that showed that virtually all the parks studied were vulnerable to large-scale threats that had their origins far from the park boundaries. These threats include pollution, mining, road construction, timber poaching, tourism development, telephone and electricity infrastructure, agricultural expansion, overgrazing, and

government-sponsored colonization. In other studies, the clear challenge that emerged for managers of protected areas was the reconciliation of the local community's demands for resources and incomes from the protected area with the requirements of biodiversity conservation. National laws often officially prohibit access to almost all the resources in a protected area. However, some local communities have been managing these resources long before the establishment of the national park or sanctuary and have few other options. Suddenly restricting their access to land and resources they regard as their own causes hostility and sometimes severe hardship.

The volume ends with a detailed set of case studies undertaken by the authors and selected to illustrate the somewhat theoretical issues addressed in earlier sections of the book. The 26 cases cover a broad geographical range from North, Central, and South America, Africa, Europe, and Southeast and South Asia to New Zealand. Of these, two case studies in particular relate the concerns of indigenous peoples or local communities to dif-

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difficulties in managing the land as a nature preserve: Ethiopia's Simen Mountain National Park and Pakistan's Khunjerab National Park both face serious threats to their well-being. In Ethiopia, human settlement within the park boundary is regarded with deep concern. Originally, nearly 75 percent of the indigenous inhabitants of this region were forcibly relocated to other areas. During the civil unrest of the 1980s, however, these people returned to the mountain park, leaving conservation authorities with a considerable "ethical challenge to balance the needs of highly threatened species such as the Walia ibex with those of displaced and impoverished human communities." In the case of the Khunjerab National Park, indigenous residents' rights and traditional access to resources were ignored when the park was established in 1975. The local communities' centuries-old grazing rights to the central-lying lands of the newly created park were never addressed, but neither was a ban on their access successfully implemented. In this case, the lack of consultation with and recognition of local communities' rights to grazing exacerbated the situation to the point of having a negative impact on the very species the park was established to protect.

Concerns regarding the inclusion of indigenous communities in the conservation process from the very beginning are not the main focus of the book, which comes as a disappointment. Most conservation efforts in the 20th century were based on romantic notions of pristine wilderness, and consequently people inhabiting areas identified for protection were regularly removed on the assumption that the presence of people is harmful to nature. For decades, indigenous

A dead fish lies by the Guadianar river after a 1998 toxic waste spill in southern Spain seeped into ground water in Donana Park, one of Europe's largest wildlife reserves.



peoples have suffered land expropriation and outright expulsion at the hands of national and international agencies bent on establishing reserves and parklands to protect habitats and prevent species extinction. Questions have begun to arise about some of the underlying assumptions concerning the exclusion of people from protected areas. This volume does ask these questions, but in a muted, almost peripheral way. It focuses instead on how to ensure that biodiversity schemes continue to work, unfortunately relegating local and indigenous to the proverbial back seat. Local people are lumped together as a single unified category of life. In the description of the Khunjerab National Park, for example, the authors simply write that local people have traditional land holdings; in contrast, they make an effort to provide the common and scientific names of the endangered species.

The failure to differentiate and acknowledge the uniqueness of peoples and their culture is not the fault of the authors, but rather the material they are dealing with. Derived from many sources, it fundamentally represents the perspective of the natural sciences that dominate conservation work. However, the recognition that conservation cannot work without the cooperation of local and indigenous peoples requires the acknowledgment of the vulnerability of human cultures as well. Many societies, with their special languages and cultures, are also threatened by forced removal, dispersal, or restricted access to traditional lands. The quest for the partnership with and participation of local residents in defending the needs of "protected areas" demands a further rethinking and perhaps rebalancing of the needs of both threatened human cultures and endangered flora and fauna. ■