

Nomadic Peoples, Migration and Biodiversity

By Dawn Chatty



For centuries the highly mobile and adaptable nomadic peoples of the world have been regarded with suspicion as well as admiration by their settled and more urbane cousins. Throughout most of the 20th century, they have faced enormous pressure to change their way of life and adapt to a more "modern" and settled existence. And as we enter the 21st century, mobile peoples are increasingly threatened by international biodiversity and conservation movements, which do not recognize their rights to use land traditionally inhabited by them.



ward, a throwback to some imagined early evolutionary stage of human development.

The international development efforts directed at nomadic peoples in the second

half of the 20th century were designed to make nomadic peoples "modern" largely by settling them and turning them into ranchers or farmers. Most of these efforts failed, resulting in social dislocation, destroyed economies and political disempowerment. Indeed the resulting disintegration of nomadic communities frequently created new problems for the nation-state.

The second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century can be characterized by a growing concern with the world's biodiversity. Most conservation efforts in the 20th century were based on romantic notions of pristine wilderness. Hence people found in areas earmarked for protection were regularly removed, the assumption being that people destroy nature.

Expulsion

Indigenous peoples, for decades, have suffered land expropriation and outright expulsion at the hands of national and international agencies bent on establishing reserves and

parklands to protect habitat and prevent species extinction. The failure of many of these conventional conservation approaches has seen a reexamination in some quarters of the forces which cause environmental damage. Questions have begun to be asked about some of the underlying assumptions concerning people's exclusion from protected areas.

The Earth Summit of 1992 gave a prominent place to indigenous and traditional peoples, and Article 22 of the Rio Declaration explicitly notes that "Indigenous peoples and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development." The Convention on Biological Diversity which was also finalized at the Earth Summit makes provisions relevant to indigenous peoples. More recently, in 1996 the World Wide Fund for Nature International adopted a Statement of Principles on Indigenous Peoples and Conservation, and in the same year the World Conservation Union (IUCN) adopted seven different resolutions on indigenous peoples.

Marginalization

This enlightened focus, however, largely falls on settled peoples whose settlement density and accessibility makes advocacy and activism, on their behalf and often with them, more feasible and media-friendly. Mobile people who inhabit extensive and seasonal tracts of semiarid land, savannah or tropical forests largely continue to be ignored or find their traditional hunting, grazing or farming lands still being confiscated, cordoned off and marked out as "nature reserves" without consultation. The very fact of their mobility acts against them on the national and international stage.

In a world where land law is written by those of fixed abode and is defined by private property, not common property, it is difficult to make a case of land loss when the aggrieved party is not permanently situated on the contested site. Thus mobile peoples, be they hunters and gatherers, pastoralists or farmers, have systematically been left out of the growing movement to recognize indigenous rights in conservation and biodiversity. Mobile peoples' widespread distribution over vast tracts of land, their extremely low land-people ratios and the distrust with which governments treat such groups have rendered them largely marginalized if not invisible, muted if not disfranchised and disempowered.

One step in the direction of specifically recognizing the rights and contributions of mobile peoples in conservation and biodiversity was set in

motion in Jordan in 2002. A group of concerned professionals met in the Wadi Dana Nature Reserve in April of that year to consider a comprehensive approach to mobile peoples and conservation. The term "mobile peoples" was clarified to mean a subset of indigenous and traditional peoples whose livelihoods depend on extensive common property use of natural resources over an area, who use mobility as a management strategy for dealing with sustainable use and conservation, and who possess a distinctive cultural identity and natural resource management system.

Dana Declaration

At the end of this meeting, the following declaration was agreed, now known as the Dana Declaration:

"Indigenous peoples, for decades, have suffered land expropriation and outright expulsion at the hands of national and international agencies bent on establishing reserves and parklands to protect habitat and prevent species extinction."

The world faces unprecedented threats to the conservation and sustainable use of its biodiversity. . . .

The linked pressures of human population dynamics, unsustainable consumption patterns, climate change and global and national economic forces threaten both the conservation of biological resources and the livelihoods of many indigenous and traditional peoples. . . .

Mobile peoples are discriminated against. Their rights, including rights of



Bedouin people at Wadi Rum struggle to maintain their traditions in the face of large-scale influxes of tourists.

access to natural resources, are often denied and conventional conservation practices insufficiently address their concerns. These factors, together with the pace of global change, undermine their lifestyles, reduce their ability to live in balance with nature and threaten their very existence as distinct peoples.

Nonetheless, through their traditional resource use practices and culture-based respect for nature, many mobile peoples are still making a significant contribution to the maintenance of the earth's ecosystems, species and genetic diversity—even though this often goes unrecognized. Thus the interests of mobile peoples and conservation converge, especially as they face a number of common challenges. There is therefore an urgent need to create a mutually reinforcing partnership between mobile peoples and those involved with conservation.

The participants at the Wadi Dana conference committed themselves to promoting conservation practices which consider the rights and capacities of mobile peoples based on a set of clearly defined principles.

The Dana Declaration serves to remind us that protecting the full cultural diversity of humanity, the settled and the mobile, is also part of the broader biodiversity that we all seek to preserve. In September, it was endorsed by representatives of mobile indigenous peoples at the World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa. □

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A Gana Bushman family in Kaudwane resettlement camp, having been evicted from Gape in Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve.