

**People, Plants, and Justice: The Politics of Nature Conservation.** Charles Zerner, ed. New York: Columbia University Press. 2000. Pp. 416. \$49.50 (cloth).

*People, Plants, and Justice: The Politics of Nature Conservation* makes three major contributions debates on the ethics of nature conservation. First, the theoretical and methodological approaches presented by the contributing authors to this volume advance political ecology scholarship. Second, the book suggests alternative models, principles, and perspectives that, if adopted, will enable conservation organizations to improve rather than abuse human rights. Third, it boldly exposes potential and actual human rights abuses caused by conservation projects by critiquing specific guiding models, principles, and perspectives. The data that are presented in this book support the proposition that the conservation of biodiversity does not necessarily coincide with the protection of human rights. In other words, the objectives of conservationists are not always the same as the objectives of indigenous and/or local people. It is possible to reach common ground, however, if conservationists can become less ethnocentric, learn from past mistakes, and—as is repeatedly emphasized throughout the book—relinquish control to local people.

The contributors to *People, Plants, and Justice* contextualize conservation programs in the political economic struggles that characterize the contemporary world. Their substantial evidence includes data on historical and contemporary social relations involving natural resource management in Africa, Latin America, Oceania, and Southeast Asia. Many of the authors juxtapose the perceptions and practices of local communities to those of conservation organizations, examining social relations between actors who are internal and external to environments that house valuable resources. Rather than romanticizing indigenous peoples or demonizing the multiple other groups of actors who are subjects of analysis, the book presents a non-essentialized, empirically-based analysis of the social relations of conservation. Nonetheless, either because of the realities of our contemporary world or the bias of the authors, the “scales of justice” (Zerner 2000:17) weigh heavily against conservation organizations.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One, “Across the Terrain,” consists of three chapters that define the subject matter, establish the book’s approach, set the prevailing tone for the writings, and review other chapters in the book (sometimes applaudingly and other times harshly). The organization of this book is quite unique among edited volumes since three chapters and three authors perform tasks that are typically accomplished in just one chapter. Far from being mere summaries of the chapters in Part Two, “On Location,” however, the three chapters in Part One combine critical commentary with rich data from the authors’ own research in insightful comparisons. In the official “Introduction” (subtitled “Toward a Broader Vision of Justice and Nature Conservation”), Charles Zerner, the editor, leads the reader through the volume’s major issues of hierarchical social formations, community dynamics, culturally constructed images of nature, the commodification and global circulation of nature, and democratic reform of resource management regimes. Zerner challenges his audience to conduct further critical research, design “better” social-ecological-political-economic institutions, and re-align the political economy with human rights. In Chapter 1, “Contested

Communities, Malignant Markets, and Gilded Governance: Justice, Resource Extractions, and Conservation in the Tropics," Michael Watts uses his review of the case studies in Part Two to scrutinize 'community' as a concept that is trendy and instrumental yet unsound and even dangerous in terms of increasing the risk of social injustices. In Chapter 2, "Beyond Distributive Justice: Resource Extraction and Environmental Justice in the Tropics," Richard Schroeder questions the standard theories of conservationists suggesting that they are culturally-bound, market-driven, and insufficient agendas and challenging the merits of "distributive justice," a common model for sustainable development that the World Wildlife Fund and other organizations follow in their conservation projects. Together Schroeder, Watts, and Zerner preface the prevailing temper of all the book's contributors by simultaneously deconstructing and expanding—through the insertion of democracy, cultural relativity, and local control—conceptions of conservation.

Part Two consists of 13 case studies that produce mixed emotions in the reader because they are at once revealing, shocking, discouraging, and inspiring. The authors confront us with the oppressive potential of imaginations including our own conceptualizations of local communities and those of institutions such as the state, development organizations, and conservation projects. For example, in Chapter 3, "Justice for Whom? Contemporary Images of Amazonia," Candace Slater describes typical American views (shared by many of the people who will read her article) of the Amazon and Amazonian residents. As she describes the historical development of our conceptualizations, Slater gives us contradictory demographic and ethnographic evidence to demonstrate that the reality of the Amazon does not coincide with the fantasy. The reader should beware: this article may cause painful self-reflections.

Another illustration of the danger of inaccurate imaginations is found in Chapter 9, "Global Markets, Local Injustice in Southeast Asian Seas: The Live Fish Trade and Local Fishers in the Togean Islands of Sulawesi," by Celia Lowe. Lowe criticizes the routine paradigm that is used in designing regulatory policies that identifies local people as the cause of unsustainable resource use. This is a restricted, hence inaccurate/incomplete, conceptualization of environmental degradation because it does not consider the influence of external political economic forces, or the innumerable local-global links in commodity chains.

Another topic that is addressed in the book is social inequities resulting from commodity chains that de-value the labor and knowledge of people at the source of a natural product while exponentially increasing the value of the product itself. In Chapter 12, "Profits, Prunus, and the Prostate: International Trade in Tropical Bark," Anthony Cunningham and Michelle Cunningham incriminate pharmaceutical industries and international consumers in the thievery of indigenous knowledge, showing that they/we have contributed to the massive over-harvesting of *Prunus africana* and the widespread destruction of forest habitat.

Ignorance or mis-perceptions of local management regimes is another major issue related to paradigms for development and conservation that is discussed in this book. The authors of Chapter 7 (Genevieve Michon, Hubert de Foresta, Kusworo, and Patrice Lewang) and Chapter 8 (Stephanie Gorson Fried) demonstrate the sustainability of local damar production in Krui, Sumatra and indigenous rattan production in East Kalimantan, Borneo, respectively. The environmental

policies of Indonesia deny the validity of indigenous agroforestry, in the process de-legitimizing the basis of local property rights. The official ignorance of the state enables the appropriation of vast amounts of acreage and the establishment of less-rational forms of commodity production that are not based on local environmental knowledge.

While the objective of conservation organizations is to solve ecological problems, they often cause social problems. In Chapter 13, "A Tale of Two Villages: Culture, Conservation, and Ecocolonialism in Samoa," Paul Cox compares the operational procedures of a democratic, community-controlled successful environmental project in one Samoan village to a top-heavy, externally-designed unsuccessful environmental project in another Samoan village. Cox goes so far as to label ethnocentric conservation projects that are insensitive to indigenous perspectives "ecocolonialism." To avoid contributing to global imperialism, Cox (2000:343) suggests three aspects that ought to be incorporated into environmental projects in indigenous communities: "*Consent* of the indigenous people, *respect* for their culture, and *submission* to indigenous political control." Jill Belsky documents the ways that conservation programs in central Belize exacerbated social and ecological dysfunction. In Chapter 11, "The Meaning of the Manatee: An Examination of Community-Based Ecotourism Discourse and Practice in Gales Point, Belize," Belsky deconstructs the "community-based conservation" model and ecotourism as a solution to ecological degradation.

Although the three chapters in Part One are all reviews of the 13 chapters in Part Two, there is little if any redundancy. Zerner, Watts, and Schroeder notice different themes, contextualize the case studies in variant yet overlapping bodies of scholarship, and take off from them in personalistic directions. Moreover, organizing the volume so that there are three introductory chapters in the beginning eliminates the need to have a concluding chapter following the case studies. Thus, there is no summary chapter at the end of Part Two. Instead, the book ends with a case study that Zerner (2000:9) describes as an "analytical tour de force." Indeed, the audience enjoys a fiery finalé as Bronwyn Parry guides us through a history of plant collecting providing a chronology of the changing bases for valuation beginning with the early era of exploration, when the value of botanicals was based on novelty and exotic-ness, through the current bio-techno era in which botanical value is determined by efficiency in communicating knowledge.

This book speaks to environmental and social advocates, policy makers, and scholars. It is a call to action. Conservationists should not read this book as an attack on their views and goals. Instead, they should use this book as a manual for becoming more culturally aware of the particular geographical areas, social groups, and natural resources with whom they work. Through this optic, conservationists can consider the growing literature on the social relations of conservation as attempts to improve, not dismantle, their projects. This is an opportunity to combine the need for environmental protection with social justice. Academics also can use this volume to improve upon their work in a number of ways. For instance, the writings in this volume enhance reflexivity, problematize common concepts, pose important questions, and provide answers to some crucial questions as well. Most importantly, the book's articles supply scholars with models

for conducting more ethical research and tools for improving social conditions cross-culturally.

Since the publication of *People, Plants, and Justice: The Politics of Nature Conservation*, it will never again be possible for the assortment of people who manage plants—ranging from herbarium collectors to biotechnicians—to claim that their endeavors are benign. As suggested by the subtitle of this book, their activities are embedded in global politics. Participants in nature conservation—from consumers of “rainforest” candybars to ecotourists—can no longer assume that their learned perceptions of ‘other’ ecosystems or their contributions to “save” the environment are cross-culturally true or socially just.

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