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SALVAGING NATURE
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES,
PROTECTED AREAS AND
BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

by **Marcus Colchester**

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The Movement runs the **Forest Peoples Programme** to chart the forest peoples responses to the tropical forest crisis, based on securing the rights of those who live in and directly from the forests to control their lands and destinies. The Programme has three main goals: to help create an effective global network of forest peoples; to document real and practical examples of community-based, sustainable forest management; and to counter top-down planning and official solutions to the deforestation crisis, which deny local people a decisive voice about resources use in their areas.

WWF-World Wide Fund For Nature is one of the world's largest independent conservation organizations with a network of National Organizations and Associates around the world and over 5.2 million regular supporters. WWF aims to conserve nature and ecological processes by preserving genetic, species and ecosystem diversity; by ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable both now and in the longer term; and by promoting actions to reduce pollution and the wasteful exploitation and consumption of resources and energy. WWF continues to be known as the World Wildlife Fund in Canada and the United States of America.

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PREFACE

Under its programme on Environment, Sustainable Development and Social Change, the Institute is currently focusing on the social dimensions of policies and initiatives for environmental protection. The purpose of the research is to analyse the implications for livelihood and conditions of life, especially of the low-income groups, of a wide variety of projects to rehabilitate degraded resources and protect wild animals and plant species in national parks and reserves. The majority of the research costs under the project are covered by a grant from the Biodiversity Unit of WWF-International. This paper forms part of the work being undertaken under this research project.

Concepts of wilderness and biodiversity conservation have evolved within a traditional view which sets mankind apart from nature, and sees nature both as a threat to the social order and as a refuge from the stresses of civilized life. Within this world view, quite different from that of most indigenous peoples, wilderness preservation seeks to institutionalize this dichotomy, by establishing protected areas free from human occupation but available for recreation. However, most protected areas are inhabited, many by indigenous peoples. International law recognizes the collective rights of indigenous peoples to land, natural resources and self-government and establishes strict conditions under which they can be resettled in the national interest.

The author argues that conservation, which has emerged as a powerful global force dominated by Northern technical institutions, increasingly seeks to limit human activities in biodiversity-rich areas, especially in the South. Mainstream conservationists have sought to impose their culturally-bound vision of natural resource management on indigenous peoples without taking into account their rights under international law or their different priorities and perceptions. Forced relocation, impoverishment, cultural destruction and the undermining of traditional systems of natural resource management have been common results. Conflicts between indigenous peoples and conservation agencies have resulted, making protected areas unmanageable and inoperative. Mainstream conservationists are exercising a political choice to secure the power of the state over local resources at the expense of indigenous political institutions. However, states often lack both the capacity and the political interest to effectively control and manage protected areas. Repressive state agencies often abuse their power in the name of conservation and human rights violations are widespread.

The extent to which indigenous societies are 'conservationist' is contentious. Many indigenous peoples live in relatively undegraded environments, they have extensive knowledge of their environment, they have complex practices for regulating resource use and strong ties with their lands. Internally and externally generated changes, most obviously the intrusion of the market, threaten to undermine these relatively stable societies. Maintaining balance requires secure land rights and functioning of indigenous political institutions as much as the preservation of their knowledge. Recognising these problems, conservationists have experimented widely, by creating buffer zones, implementing profit-sharing and joint management schemes, and recognizing indigenous territorial rights. The main problems have related to the locus of power, between conservationists and the local people, as well as in choosing which local institutions are

representative. Coercive systems have rarely been effective, but the power of the state can and needs to be recruited to secure indigenous management.

Outside of protected areas, conservationist impositions have also generated problems, due to inadequate priority being given to indigenous land rights and control over decision-making. The paper argues that the Biodiversity Convention and the Global Environment Facility reinforce these top-down tendencies, strengthening the power of states and intergovernmental institutions at the expense of indigenous peoples. New areas of conflict are now emerging over the assertion of intellectual property rights over indigenous knowledge and biotechnologies, including indigenous peoples' own genes.

Though conservationists have become keenly aware of the need to accommodate indigenous interests, they increasingly act as consultants and agents for international development agencies and this is affecting their management style. The author argues that conservation agencies need to be made much more accountable to indigenous peoples if they are to become more socially sensitive and to cede power to local communities. This is most likely to be achieved by effective indigenous mobilization. The paper brings out encouraging examples which suggest that conservationists and indigenous peoples can reconcile their interests.

Marcus Colchester is a social anthropologist and is Director of the Forest Peoples Programme of the World Rainforest Movement. He previously worked with the human rights organization, Survival International, examining the impact of development processes on indigenous and forest-based peoples in Asia. The project on the social and environmental impacts of national parks and protected areas is coordinated at UNRISD by Krishna Ghimire.

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