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VISION FOR A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

A Challenge to Conservationists

BY MAC CHAPIN

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A Challenge to Conservationists

As corporate and government money flow into the three big international organizations that dominate the world's conservation agenda, their programs have been marked by growing conflicts of interest—and by a disturbing neglect of the indigenous peoples whose land they are in business to protect.

BY MAC CHAPIN

A WAKE-UP CALL

In June 2003, representatives of major foundations concerned with the planet's threatened biodiversity* gathered in South Dakota for a meeting of the Consultative Group on Biodiversity. On the second evening, after dinner, several of the attendees met to discuss a problem about which they had become increasingly disturbed. In recent years, their foundations had given millions of dollars of support to nonprofit conservation organizations, and had even helped some of those groups get launched. Now, however, there were indications that three of the largest of these organizations—World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Conservation International (CI), and The Nature Conservancy (TNC)—were increasingly excluding, from full involvement in their programs, the indigenous and traditional peoples living in territories the conservationists were try-

ing to protect.† In some cases, there were complaints that the conservationists were being abusive.

The meeting led to a series of soul-searching discussions, led by Jeff Campbell of the Ford Foundation, who initiated two studies—one to assess what was really happening between the indigenous communities and conservationists, and the other to look into the financial situation of each of these three big groups.

The work plan (or “terms of reference”) given to the investigators contained two key observations about the three conservation giants: they had become extremely large and wealthy in a short period of time; and they were promoting global approaches to conservation “that have evoked a number of questions—and complaints—from local communities, national NGOs and human rights activists.”

Because the two studies provided only a quick first foray into terrain that is undeniably complex, geographically extensive, and diverse (WWF, for example, works in more than 90 countries around the world),

Editor's Note

We anticipate that this article will launch an open and public discussion about a complex and contentious issue that has been debated behind closed doors in recent months. While the fresh air may at times be chilly, we believe that active, engaged discussion is essential to resolving these issues and to strengthening the conservation and indigenous community movements.

The author of the article is an active “player” in that debate, and we look forward to publishing other views in the January/February issue. We therefore invite all interested readers, including staff of the “Big Three” conservation organizations discussed herein, to submit responses for publication. We welcome the views of indigenous people, NGOs that are working with indigenous groups, foundations or agencies that fund such work, and others concerned with these issues.

* Among those foundations represented were Ford, MacArthur, Moriah, Wallace Global, C.S. Mott, and Oak.

† “Indigenous and traditional peoples” is a more inclusive category than simply “indigenous peoples.” “Traditional peoples” includes non-indigenous groups that are long-standing residents of wilderness areas, such as the rubber tappers of Brazil and long-term Ladino and Creole residents of the Caribbean coastal region of Central America.

Documentation of this article is presented here in two forms: footnotes (flagged by asterisks and daggers) elaborating on key points; and source references (flagged by superscripts) listed in sequence at the end of the article.

they were understood to be just rough sketches that could help orient discussions among the concerned foundations. The findings were not intended—initially, at least—for publication.

There were many people working either in the field (as I was) or in the foundations sponsoring field projects in biodiversity and cultural diversity, who wanted to see these findings aired. As an anthropologist who had been working with indigenous peoples for more than 35 years (most recently as director of the Center for Native Lands), I was acutely familiar—and increasingly uneasy—with the conditions that had precipitated the two Ford investigations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Complaints had been building for more than a decade, and they paralleled the extraordinary growth of the major conservation organizations. WWF, for example, was founded in 1961 with a small office in Switzerland. Its program was limited to coordination and fundraising activities for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which implemented programs in the field. WWF grew slowly over the ensuing years, spawning country and regional offices in various countries of the industrial north. Third World countries weren't included until later. During the first two decades, despite its expansion, the WWF family remained small. In the late 1970s, for example, the U.S. branch of WWF fit on one floor of a relatively small building on Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., staffed by 25 people. In the early 1980s, it began to grow rapidly—and today fills up four floors of a luxurious building nearby. Worldwide, the U.S. and international branches of WWF now employ close to 4,000 people.

The Nature Conservancy started up in the mid-1940s, when a small group of scientists joined forces to save natural areas in the United States. In 1965 TNC used a grant from the Ford Foundation to pay the salary of its first full-time president. In the 1970s, it grew to cover all 50 states and expanded into Latin America. Fueled by fresh injections of bilateral and multilateral money, as well as corporate support, it began a vertiginous growth spurt in the 1990s—and spread into new regions of the globe; yet the bulk of TNC's work is carried out domestically. It is now the largest conservation organization in the world, with assets in excess of \$3 billion.

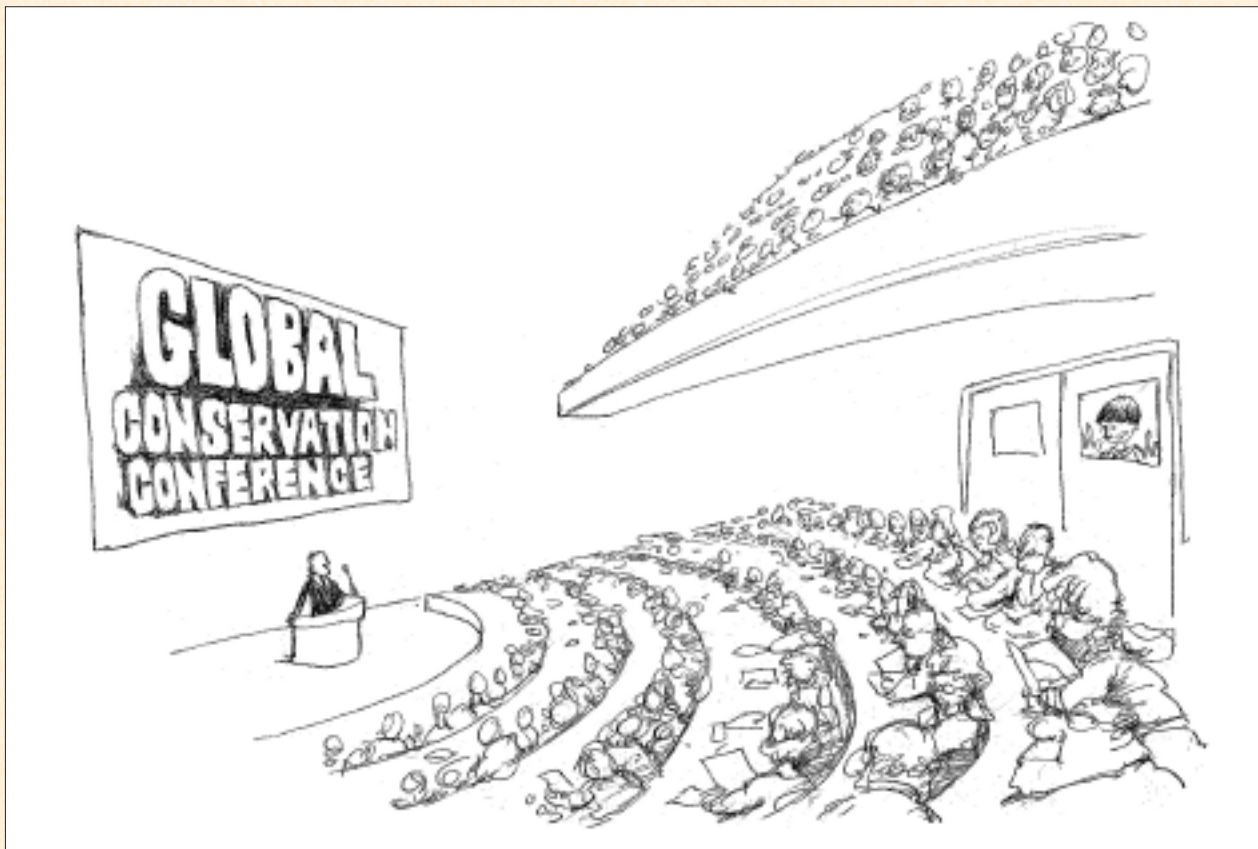
Conservation International began in dramatic fashion in 1986. During the previous several years, TNC's international program had grown rapidly, and tension with its other programs had mounted. When TNC's central management tried to rein it in, virtually the entire international staff bolted and transformed itself into CI. From the start, the new organization was well equipped with staff, contacts, and money it had assembled before-

hand. In 1989, it brought in yet another group of defectors—this time from WWF—and began expanding with the help of an aggressive fundraising machine that has become the envy of all of its competitors. However, a substantial portion of its funding comes from just four organizations: the Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the World Bank, and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). TNC and WWF, in contrast, have far more diverse funding bases.

Discussion of “natural” alliances between conservationists and indigenous peoples and the need to work closely with local communities, common just a few years ago, has largely disappeared. It has been displaced, in the biggest conservationist NGOs, by talk of changed priorities, with a new focus on large-scale conservation strategies and the importance of science, rather than social realities, in determining their agendas. At the same time, there has been an undercurrent of talk about how “difficult” indigenous peoples can be, how hard they are to work with, and, in places such as Ecuador, Bolivia, and the Chiapas region of Mexico, how some have moved in the direction of civil disruption and even violence. Then there have been cautions from various quarters of the conservation movement that indigenous peoples are not—contrary to what many of them have been advertising—suitable allies because they, like most other people, are not even good conservationists, sometimes choosing their economic wellbeing over preservation of natural resources. Examples of the Kayapó in Brazil logging their forests and Mayans slashing and burning the forests of the Petén of Guatemala are often trotted out as examples of the destructive tendencies of indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples, on whose land the three conservation groups have launched a plethora of programs, have for their part become increasingly hostile. One of their primary disagreements is over the establishment of protected natural areas, which, according to the human inhabitants of those areas, often infringe on their rights. Sometimes the indigenous people are evicted, and the conservationists frequently seem to be behind the evictions. On other occasions, traditional uses of the land have been declared “illegal,” resulting in prosecution of the inhabitants by government authorities. Coupled to all of this has been the partnering of conservationist organizations with multinational corporations—particularly in the businesses of gas and oil, pharmaceuticals, and mining—that are directly involved in pillaging and destroying forest areas owned by indigenous peoples.

How did relations deteriorate so rapidly and so drastically? In the 1970s and through much of the 1980s, conservationists and indigenous peoples had little to do with each other. In Latin America, for example, the large conservation NGOs tended to work through



urban-based local groups and there was little awareness of who the indigenous peoples in the various countries were. By the mid-1980s, however, the wall was breached within WWF by a program called Wildlands and Human Needs, a community-based conservation effort, with financing from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). This was seen as something of a distraction by many within WWF, who were mainly biologists lacking experience working with communities. They viewed the new program as an unwanted diversion from strict conservation, which they saw as their mission. It was seen as an imposition by USAID, which was pushing for a more grassroots approach.

In 1989, the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) made an appeal directly to “the community of concerned environmentalists” at the international level, proposing that they form an alliance “in defense of our Amazonian homeland.”¹ COICA’s call for collaborative action came at a time when the Amazonian ecosystem was being threatened as never before by heavily funded and ill-conceived development and colonization projects, cattle ranching, and unregulated logging and mining operations. The appeal noted that the conservationists “have left us, the Indigenous Peoples, out of your vision of the Amazonian Biosphere.” That omission, they claimed, was the primary reason the

conservationists’ programs were ineffectual.

COICA’s appeal presented *Two Agendas*—one for conservationists, the other for the multilateral banks. It included this declaration:

We, the Indigenous Peoples, have been an integral part of the Amazon Biosphere for millennia. We have used and cared for the resources of that biosphere with a great deal of respect, because it is our home, and because we know that our survival and that of our future generations depends on it. Our accumulated knowledge about the ecology of our home, our models for living with the peculiarities of the Amazon Biosphere, our reverence and respect for the tropical forest and its other inhabitants, both plant and animal, are the keys to guaranteeing the future of the Amazon Basin, not only for our peoples, but also for all humanity.²

COICA’s arguments combined human rights considerations with practical suggestions for action in the areas of sustainable development, territorial defense, conservation, and research, all reflecting indigenous priorities. It proposed that the conservation and development organizations “work directly with our organizations on all your programs and campaigns which affect our homelands.” At the time, this suggestion came as a revelation to many conservationists—an alternative approach that just might work!

Some of them wondered why such an obvious connection had not occurred to them earlier.

Two Agendas had great impact around the world and generated much discussion about partnerships, alliances, co-management of protected areas, participatory management, and a variety of other working relationships. In May 1990, COICA hosted The First Amazon Summit Meeting Between Indigenous Peoples and Environmentalists, in the Peruvian city of Iquitos. Delegates arrived from indigenous communities in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil, as well as from the Bank Information Center, the Fundación Peruana para la Conservación de la Naturaleza, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, National Wildlife Federation, Probe International, Rainforest Action Network, The Rainforest Alliance, the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, the World Resources Institute, CI, and WWF. At the end of this meeting, everyone signed the *Declaration of Iquitos*, which, among other things, concluded that “it is necessary to continue working in the future as an alliance of indigenous peoples and environmentalists for an Amazonia for humanity.”³

In 1992, the role of indigenous peoples in protected areas was a major topic at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature-sponsored IVth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas, held in Caracas, Venezuela. During this period, the IUCN and WWF began producing a stream of declarations, statements of principles, and policy documents discussing the value of traditional knowledge, the need to respect indigenous traditions, and the importance of forging partnerships.⁴

The IUCN-WWF “Principles and Guidelines on Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and Protected Areas,” was formally presented in October 1996.⁵ It begins with the observation that indigenous peoples have a long history with the natural world and “a deep understanding of it.” It continues: “Often they have made significant contributions to the maintenance of many of the earth’s most fragile ecosystems,” and therefore there is no inherent conflict between the objectives of conservationists and indigenous peoples. “Moreover, [indigenous peoples] should be recognized as rightful, equal partners in the development and implementation of conservation strategies that affect their lands, territories, waters, coastal seas, and other resources, and in particular in the establishment and management of protected areas.” If somewhat patronizing in tone, at least the document spelled out the need for co-management and respect for both indigenous peoples and their knowledge of the environment.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the conservation groups began designing programs to work with communities. Donors, too—both private foundations and multi- and bilateral donor agencies—strongly sup-

ported this approach to what was then in vogue: the concept of sustainable development. It soon became a bandwagon onto which many organizations jumped.⁶ The initiatives that appeared were variously called “community-based natural resource management,” “community-based conservation,” “sustainable development and use,” “grassroots conservation,” “devolution of resource rights to local communities,” and—perhaps most commonly—“integrated conservation and development programs” (ICDPs). It is important to note that all of these terms were generated by the conservation organizations, not by the indigenous peoples; and the programs were designed and run by the conservationists, not the indigenous peoples. Funders provided money to the conservation organizations to develop programs for indigenous communities, and small units were formed in-house to carry out this mandate.

EMERGING DIFFICULTIES

The outcome of these attempts to work with indigenous communities was, with a few exceptions, a string of failures. On the ground, ICDPs were generally paternalistic, lacking in expertise, and one-sided—driven largely by the agendas of the conservationists, with little indigenous input. As a consequence, few partnerships were formed in the wake of COICA’s proposal, and few of those that were formed functioned very well. According to Thomas McShane of WWF International, “Encouraged by the frantic quest for examples of sustainable development, ICDPs exploded in popularity, rapidly advancing from an untested idea attracting seed money to ‘best practice’ for biodiversity conservation.” The fact that conservation organizations were perhaps not suited to work in the social and economic realms was missed in all the excitement. Successes have been few and far between, and today an expanding barrage of mostly critical literature has fueled concern among organizations implementing and financing ICDPs.⁷

Others, however, have claimed that community-based conservation schemes are inherently contrary to the goals of biodiversity conservation, which should be based on rigorous biological science. For this reason, it is said, they are doomed to failure, regardless of who runs them or how they are run. TNC’s Katrina Brandon and her colleagues Kent H. Redford and Steven E. Sanderson wrote, “The trend to promote sustainable use of resources as a means to protect these resources, while politically expedient and intellectually appealing, is not well grounded in biological and ecological knowledge. Not all things can be preserved through use. Not all places should be open to use. Without an understanding of broader ecosystem dynamics at specific sites, strategies promoting sustainable use will lead to substantial losses of biodiversity.”⁸

In their discussion of TNC’s Parks in Peril (PiP)

program, financed by USAID during the 1990s, Brandon, Redford, and Sanderson repeatedly call community-based conservation approaches “catchy phrases” and “slogans” based on “stereotypes.” These slogans and catchy phrases, they say, mislead by promising that “conflicts over resources can be resolved with relative ease” (Ibid.) and divert us from the true task of protecting biodiversity, which has to be an enterprise based on sound science. Redford, in particular, has sought over the years to debunk the stereotype of the “noble ecological savage,”⁹ which he claims has been cynically used by “...indigenous peoples and their advocates...because they recognize the power of this concept in rallying support for their struggle for land rights, particularly from important international conservation organizations.”¹⁰

Be this as it may, the core fact remains that indigenous peoples were never given the chance to design and run their own projects, and with conservationists at the helm the failures mounted. Many projects were ill conceived by the conservationists. Projects dealing with agroforestry and organic gardening fell apart because no one had figured out how to market what was grown. Local ecological conditions were often wrong for the crops introduced. Local people were not interested in setting up parks and doing management plans, which was what the conservationists proposed. Environmental education projects in indigenous areas were modeled on urban programs. In short, the conservationists had little experience working with community groups.

Funders grew impatient, and relations between conservationists and indigenous peoples became increasingly tense—and, in some respects, intransigent. In its official policies, WWF-U.S. has continued to voice respect for indigenous peoples, yet in many of its pronouncements it displays a studied lack of interest toward partnerships with indigenous or local communities of any stripe.* In broad strategy statements about its ecoregional approach, WWF simply avoids talk of involvement with indigenous peoples at all.† In late 2002, the director of the WWF Latin America program told me flatly, in reference to the Amazon Basin, “We don’t work with indigenous people. We don’t have the capacity to work with indigenous people.” Around this time, a CI biologist who works with the Kayapó in the Lower Xingu region of Brazil told me: “Quite frankly, I don’t care what the Indians want. We have to work to conserve the biodiversity.”

This last comment may sound crass, but I believe that it accurately represents the prevalent way of thinking within the large conservation organizations. Although they won’t say it openly, the attitude of many conservationists is that they have the money and they are going to call the shots. They have cordoned off certain areas for conservation, and in their own minds they have a clear

idea of what should be done. “They see themselves as scientists doing God’s work,” says one critic, pointing out the conservationists’ sense of “a divine mission to save the Earth.” Armed with science, they define the terms of engagement. Then they invite the indigenous residents to participate in the agenda that they have laid out. If the indigenous peoples don’t like the agenda, they will simply be ignored. “I think there’s been a shift,” says a key official at one of the major foundations that have supported the conservationist NGOs—“a shift away from building local capacity [by helping to launch local NGOs that can then work with the indigenous communities in their own countries]. These groups now see themselves as semi-permanent international organizations, that are *not* working themselves out of a job.”

The fact is that indigenous peoples and conservationists have very different agendas. Indigenous agendas almost invariably begin with the need to protect and legalize their lands for their own use. They emphasize the importance of finding ways to make a living on the land without destroying those resources. And they give high priority to documenting their people’s history, traditions, and cultural identity.

Conservationist agendas, by contrast, often begin with the need to establish protected areas that are off-limits to people, and to develop management plans. If they include indigenous peoples in their plans, they tend to see those people more as a possible means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. They are seldom willing to support legal battles over land tenure and the strengthening of indigenous organizations; they consider these actions “too political” and outside their conservationist mandate. They have been reluctant to support indigenous peoples in their struggles against oil, mining, and logging companies that are destroying vast swaths of rainforest throughout the world. Again, the excuse is that such interventions would be “too political,” and the conservationists often defer to

* In 2000, WWF International, in collaboration with a group called Terralingua, produced a report entitled *Indigenous and Traditional Peoples of the World and Ecoregion Conservation: An Integrated Approach to Conserving the World’s Biological and Cultural Diversity* (endnote 32). This was an attempt to bring together the earlier policy statements and the ecoregional approach; yet it appears to have had little effect on WWF’s program, and in any case the major author, Gonzalo Oviedo, departed from WWF International shortly after.

† A WWF document titled “A Guide to Socioeconomic Assessments for Ecoregion Conservation,” published in 2000, talks about potential collaborators and partners (“‘partnership’ implies a closer working relationship”). It notes that “reversing biodiversity loss at the scales required by ecoregion conservation may require close collaboration or partnerships with and among industry, the private sector, resource owners and harvesters, government development agencies, foreign affairs departments, policy fora, and others” (WWF-U.S. Ecoregional Conservation Strategies Unit 2000: 5-6). Indigenous peoples are not included as potential collaborators or partners. Also notable is the absence of mention of local NGOs.

national governments to handle those matters.

Beyond this pervasive reluctance, there is the difficulty of reconciling cultural differences between industrialized and indigenous ways of viewing the world, deliberating, negotiating, and making decisions. Andrew Chapeskie notes the difficulties faced by those seeking co-management schemes in the Canadian context:

*How should co-management arrangements be established for lands and waters where one set of relationships to land—the aboriginal—have been built around the normative values of equity, cooperation and reciprocity that is expressed in terms of local authority and common property access arrangements while the other set of relationships to land—those regulated by the state—have been built around the normative values of competition, exclusive rights to property/resources, and centralized management authority? These are challenging questions as much for aboriginal communities as they are for their non-aboriginal counterparts in Northwestern Ontario.*¹¹

Establishing a relationship of trust across cultures, when people come to the table carrying different agendas and worldviews, requires patience and respect—qualities that are hard to muster even in normal circumstances. The challenge grows exponentially more difficult when money intervenes and the relationship becomes glaringly asymmetrical, with virtually all of the money and power held by one side.

THE MONEY

Since 1990, there has been a sharp decline in the amount of money available for conservation programs overall. According to a recent assessment of the finances of the conservation sector, “between the mid-nineties

and the turn of the century, the amount of funds available for conservation [has] declined almost by 50 percent.” At the same time, “the funding made available to the large NGOs [WWF, TNC, and CI] has *increased* [italics added] in both relative and absolute terms.”¹²

Against the overall decline in conservation funding, the growth of the big NGOs has been accomplished in large part through an expansion of their fundraising reach into new areas, with a wide array of tactics. One recent estimate notes that the combined revenues of WWF, TNC, and CI in 2002 for work in the developing countries amounted to more than half of the approximately \$1.5 billion available for conservation in 2002; and the Big Three’s investments in conservation in the developing world grew from roughly \$240 million in 1998 to close to \$490 million in 2002.*¹³

The Big Three’s fundraising covers virtually all of the bases: private foundations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, corporations, the U.S. government, and individuals (WWF even has a program called “Pennies for the Planet” that taps into children’s piggy banks). The boom can be traced to a strategic shift. Whereas two decades ago the bulk of the Big Three’s funding came from private foundations and individuals, it now flows more abundantly from bilateral and multilateral agencies and private corporations. The foundations and individual donors have by no means been abandoned, and still make up a large percentage of the total budgets. But the offerings of the new bilateral, multilateral, and corporate “partners,” or “collaborators,” as they are called by the conservation groups, have been added to the traditional sources—and those new offerings have been lavish.

This attraction of strong financial support in a weak economic environment has been accomplished in several ways. First, starting in the mid- to late 1990s, WWF, CI, and TNC all reformulated their mission statements to focus on what they term “large-scale conservation” approaches. The terms used differ—“hotspots”† for CI, “ecoregions” and “Global 200”‡ for WWF, “ecosystems” for TNC,§ and “living landscapes” for Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)—but they are similar in that they are high off the ground and, as all of the NGOs note, they are “ambitious” and even “visionary.”** These are global approaches that are viewed as necessary to take on the huge global threats to ecosystems and species now being faced. As Myers and his colleagues wrote, “The traditional scattergun approach of much conservation activity, seeking to be many things to any threatened species, needs to be complemented by a ‘silver bullet’ strategy in the form of hotspots with their emphasis on cost-effective measures.”¹⁴

The gist of the argument for this large-scale approach—one that is unquestionably appealing to those of us who try to see the world in more wholistic

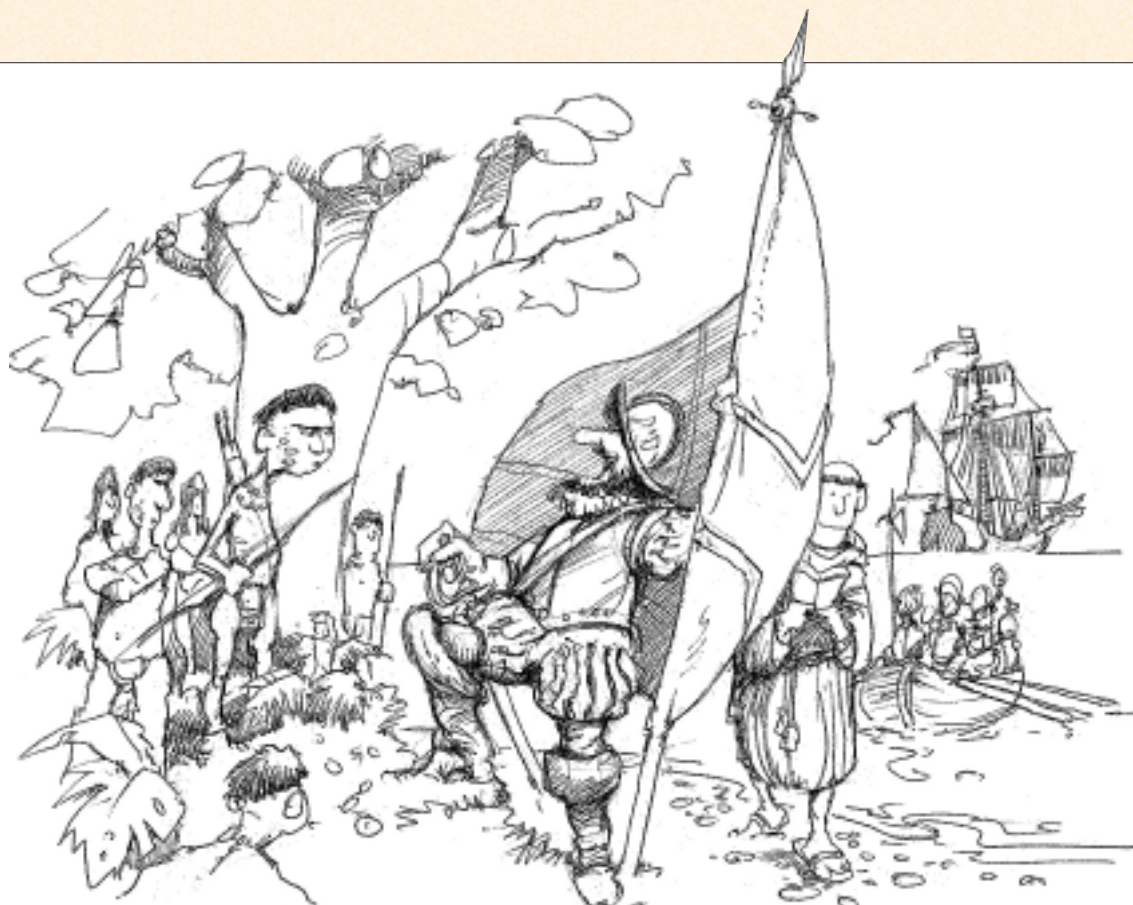
* “Analysis of the finances of just three large conservation organizations—the U.S. branch of the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, and The Nature Conservancy—reveals that their combined revenues and expenditures (i.e., their investment in conservation) in the year 2002 were \$1.28 billion and \$804 million, respectively. This snapshot of NGO finances in the year 2002 is not an aberration but rather part of a continuing trend, evident since the mid-1990s, of increasing revenue, expenses and asset accumulation. The combined revenues of these three NGOs increased from \$635 million in 1998 to \$899 million in 1999 to \$965 million in 2000” (endnote 12).

† “Hotspots” are “areas featuring exceptional concentrations of endemic species and experiencing exceptional loss of habitat” (endnote 14).

‡ An ecoregion is a “large unit of land or water containing a geographically distinct assemblage of species, natural communities, and environmental conditions;” the Global 200 “is based on an analysis of all terrestrial regions and ocean basins of the earth, so the extent of the approach of the terrestrial region is equal to approximately 150 million km².”

§ TNC has largely taken the ecoregion approach pioneered by WWF.

** Example: “Ecoregions are the appropriate geographical unit for setting conservation goals; they represent an ambitious and visionary scale necessary for biodiversity conservation” (see endnote 16).



"Relax, we're from Conservation, Inc."

ways than have prevailed in the past—is that it's not just isolated ecosystems dotted about the landscape that are in danger; the entire world system of interconnected ecosystems is imperiled. In presentations to funding agencies, this pitch can be put on vivid and convincing display with GIS and satellite imagery—technology that was unavailable only a few years ago. And, as the argument goes, large-scale strategies can accomplish more for less money. Of course, large amounts of cash are needed to run them on the scale being proposed. In reference to CI's hotspot strategy, Myers and his colleagues suggest that \$500 million per year would be an appropriate amount for preserving 25 prime hotspots.¹⁵ The Big Three make it clear that among the thousands of organizations working to conserve the world's biodiversity, only *they* have the capacity to manage such large-scale schemes.

It's here that we come to two divergent interpretations of how the conservationist NGOs developed their large-scale approaches to conservation. Advocates within the NGOs maintain that these approaches are the end result of scientific processes based on biological—as opposed to social or political—criteria.* Critics both outside and within the NGOs note that concepts such as "ecoregions," "hotspots," and "conservation land-

scapes" are little more than slick marketing tools—slogans and catch phrases, if we may borrow from Brandon, Redford, and Sanderson—and that the "science" part, given that it exists, is largely for decoration. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that these approaches are a mixture of the two; but the marketing angle is undeniably strong. A recent WWF document, for example, instructs: "Ecoregion conservation programmes should develop a bold, engaging, and ambitious vision for an ecoregion in order to set directions and arouse support. This vision should contain an inspirational message to motivate and engage stakeholders and partners."¹⁶ Whatever we may think of the science, there is no doubt that the new focus on global conservation is profitable.

One of the largest and most talked-about grants in recent years has been the \$261.2 million donation from the Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation to CI for

* CI: "The hotspots' boundaries have been determined by 'biological commonalities'" (endnote 14). WWF: "Ecoregions are defined in biological terms and, as such, are logical units for conserving biodiversity" (endnote 16). Social aspects do not figure in the calculus of WWF's ecoregions, except at the level of "threats," and they are introduced after the priority setting, based on biological criteria, has been completed.

conservation activities, with a focus on science, in “hotspots and tropical wilderness areas” around the world. Bringing together CI’s Center for Biodiversity Conservation (\$121.2 million), Scientific Field Stations (\$40 million), and the Global Conservation fund (\$100 million), the project is defined in terms of large “conservation corridors,” which the Moore Foundation defines as “networks of protected areas (national parks, reserves, etc.) and other areas under biodiversity friendly land uses that are big enough to sustain ecological and evolutionary processes.” The Moore perspective continues, “Addressing biodiversity conservation at this larger geographic scale—establishing connectivity between individual parks and protected areas—increases conservation impact and enhances the prospects for individual species to be conserved over the long term.”¹⁷

If the first means of increasing the flow of cash was to wow foundations with large-scale goals, a second tactic was to go after the bilateral and multilateral agencies. The Big Three eased slowly into these arrangements, often amid internal discussion and debate. WWF’s relationship with USAID, which began in the early 1980s, is illustrative. In the late 1970s, as USAID was becoming increasingly interested in the environment, the conservationist NGOs realized that this could be a lucrative new source of support for their work. At first, WWF took relatively small amounts, never more than 50 percent of any project budget, and supplemented the new money with privately raised funds. It did not want to be caught up in USAID’s political agendas or in the instability that comes with them. Yet gradually, according to a senior WWF official who was in the middle of these transactions at that time, the 50 percent rule began to erode. As budgets from other, privately funded, projects dried up, WWF started shifting funds from the USAID-supported projects to keep those projects alive. Larger amounts of USAID money flowed in to fill the hole left by the shifted funds, and before long there was a string of projects in which 80 to 90 percent of the budget was funded by USAID. “Then somewhere along the line we stopped asking questions,” the official said. “We just eased into it. It’s not clear where or when, but at some point we crossed the line and having entire projects and programs funded with government money was OK.” Not to be outdone, the other large NGOs eagerly followed suit.

* In the early 1990s, WWF-U.S. began to tap into World Bank money and there were loud cries of protest from the international branch in Switzerland. This and other differences eventually culminated in a series of costly lawsuits and an eventual split between the International and U.S. offices. The panda symbol was re-claimed by the International branch and later licensed back to the U.S. branch.

† Approximately 22 percent of WWF’s global income comes from governments and assistance agencies (endnote 16).

Despite initial misgivings, this strategy has paid off with the formation of a variety of joint ventures, co-operative agreements, and partnerships.* Examples include the World Bank-WWF Global Forest Alliance, which was created in 1998 and currently works in 30 countries, and the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund (CEPF), a \$150 million initiative formed by CI, the World Bank, the Global Environmental Facility, the MacArthur Foundation, and the government of Japan.

From 1990 through 2001, USAID provided a total of roughly \$270 million to NGOs, universities, and private institutions for conservation activities.¹⁸ The lion’s share of this amount destined for NGOs was harvested by WWF, which received approximately 45 percent of the available money.† A small yet significant portion of the total budget for conservation goes to just five other NGOs—CI, TNC, WCS, the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), and Enterprise Works—through the Agency’s Global Conservation Program. The theory behind this arrangement is that these groups will re-grant a portion of the money they receive to local NGOs for their work. This may ease the paperwork load for USAID; but it also gives the six NGOs considerable power over the agendas of local groups to which it re-grants.

For example, there was USAID’s support of PROARCA, a joint five-year project in Central America started in the mid-1990s. It had a budget of \$5 to \$6 million per year, with roughly \$1 million per year going to TNC, WWF, and the Rainforest Alliance. The project’s aim was “to improve environmental management in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (CBM)” —which, in turn, was a project being run by the World Bank, with GEF money. The first phase entailed planning for the second “implementation” phase, which was approved in 2002 with a slightly higher yearly budget. While the bulk of the NGO component deals with large-scale activities at the policy level, it also contains a small grants fund that theoretically benefits local NGOs involved in biodiversity conservation.

A third strategy, which at first seemed fairly innocent, was to reach out more to the corporate sector. TNC and WWF have long been involved with private corporations, but by the mid-1990s the pace began increasing. At present, TNC has some 1,900 corporate sponsors, which in 2002 donated a total of \$225 million to the organization.¹⁹ CI’s website lists over 250 corporations, which donated approximately \$9 million to its operations in 2003. WWF’s share is smaller, but it actively courts such support. In WWF’s scheme, the highest category of corporate sponsor is “conservation partner,” which consists of “multinational companies that contribute major funding to WWF’s global conservation work.” “Independent research shows,” we

are told, “that consumers have a high regard for a company that invests in its social and environmental responsibilities.” WWF selects “the very best in corporate social responsibility and environmental best practice,” but it also sees the need to “engage with companies that have a poor or mixed record on the environment where there is a real potential for positive change.”²⁰ Among the corporations channeling money to the three conservation NGOs are Chevron Texaco, ExxonMobil, Shell International, Weyerhaeuser, Monsanto, Dow Chemical, and Duke Energy.

THE CONSEQUENCES

All told, the new mixture of fundraising strategies, coupled with the intensity of the hunt for money, has made the largest conservation NGOs both rich and powerful. In the 1980s, many of us thought that this was an important goal. Conservation requires money, and it seemed clear to environmentalists that the leading environmental organizations needed far better funding to carry out the huge mission of saving the planet from ecological calamity. There may still be truth in this belief—the conservation groups have developed admirably ambitious plans—but their growth has also brought unforeseen complexities and contradictions.

One problem is that the larger the three NGOs have grown, the more dependent on large amounts of cash they have become. This has created a climate of intense—and not always beneficial—competition among them. The result has been a strong reluctance to partner with each other, or with anyone else. In dealings with smaller organizations, either they tend to use their sheer heft to press their agendas unilaterally or they exclude the smaller groups altogether. A common tactic is to create new organizations out of whole cloth in foreign countries, implanting local bodies as extensions of themselves. In dealings with each other, the large conservationist NGOs enter into contractual arrangements when they must—USAID’s Central America program, for example, has a custom of setting up consortia of several organizations—yet in most cases they assiduously keep their distance and show great reluctance to share information. Thus, the USAID-funded PROARCA program in Central America is a kind of shotgun marriage in which TNC and WWF (with the Rainforest Alliance affixed as a small appendage) were pressed into a collaborative relationship. From the start, WWF and TNC kept their distance from each other, maintaining two almost entirely separate programs, with minimal overlap. WWF concentrated on the coastal area, while TNC handled the protected areas of the interior.

Such insular behavior, often manifested in a roping-off of real estate, has been common for years, yet it has been exacerbated as the conservation NGOs have grown

in size and strength. It is generally recognized, for example, that CI has staked off Suriname and Guyana as its “territory”; TNC controls the BOSAWAS region of Nicaragua, and WCS guards the gate to the Bolivian Chaco. Territoriality even manifests itself within organizations. Initially, WWF U.S. had control over Tanzania but later moved aside and transferred responsibility to WWF International. During the mid-1980s, WWF divided the world into two parts, giving Latin America to the U.S. branch and the rest of the world to the international office (this division was short-lived). There are also occurrences of the most powerful NGOs trying to pressure foundations to deny entrance to rivals in claimed territory.

In the Petén region of Guatemala during the 1990s, all of the large NGOs had programs, yet they worked separately and there was intense competition for funds, which were considerable. Between 1990 and 2001, an estimated \$56.6 million flowed in for conservation and sustainable development from USAID (\$31.2 million), the Guatemalan government (\$15.3 million, largely from international agencies), and international NGOs (\$10.1 million).

It should be acknowledged that territoriality of this sort does serve the function of diminishing conflict. Were a number of competing NGOs to be given access to a single area, bidding wars for the favors of local groups and the bounty of donors could rapidly get out of hand, creating chaos. This occasionally happens, and the outcome is invariably disastrous for all unlucky enough to be involved.

On the other hand, cooperation is rare even when the groups share common goals. According to McShane, “Biodiversity conservation’s devil is the competition for donor funding. We all know that successful biodiversity conservation requires money. Unfortunately, in the pursuit of funds, conservation organizations find themselves making claims based on little more than theory. This marketing of conservation approaches has resulted in a dogmatic debate, outwardly over how best to conserve the world’s biodiversity, which is a necessary question, but behind the scenes over how to get the funds before someone else does, which is not.”²¹

Another consequence of the recent bulking up of conservationist NGOs stems from the sources of their funding, and the conditions attached to it. The movement from dependence on private money to an income stream from bilateral and multilateral donors and corporations has meant that new interests—and restrictions—come into play. USAID, the World Bank, and the Global Environment Facility, for example, are diplomatic agencies that work closely with national governments. The conservationist NGOs are no longer able to openly oppose government corruption or inaction, which is often the primary cause of environmental

degradation in countries of the Third World; government backing of extractive industries in fragile forest areas is one of the most common outcomes.²²

Yet another consequence of increased funding from bilateral and multilateral donors is that the NGOs have become “gatekeepers” of external resources. The strategy of passing money through NGOs gives the donors considerable influence over the programs of the large NGOs, and this in turn gives the large NGOs influence over local NGOs, who must rely on re-granting through the large international NGOs. This results in two layers of controls: first those from the bilateral and multilateral donors, and second those from the international NGOs that do the re-granting. When funds finally trickle down to the local NGOs, they are often so tangled in strings that the locals have little room to carry out their own programs. In any case, these funds tend to be minimal; most stay with the large NGOs, never making it past the gate.*

The situation is far worse for indigenous peoples, who are frequently in an adversarial relationship with their national governments over their lands and natural resources. National governments—and the U.S. government—have supported oil companies, miners, loggers, and pharmaceutical companies on indigenous lands, and in many of those countries (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Guyana, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea, among others) private concessions sanctioned by governments have provoked considerable violence. Each of the large conservation NGOs has close financial and political ties to the governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and multinational corporations operating throughout the Third World, and is reluctant to oppose them. This has given rise to the ironic observation that the large international NGOs are allying themselves with forces that are destroying the world’s remaining ecosystems, while ignoring or even opposing those forces that are attempting to save them from destruction. Isn’t it a bit odd that in 2003 Oxfam America supported an indigenous group in the Amazon Basin in its battle against the depredations of Chevron Texaco, while the large conservationist NGOs were providing this same company with a green fig leaf in exchange for financial aid? In last year’s highly publicized series of articles about The Nature Conservancy, for example, *Washington Post* reporters Joe Stephens and David Ottaway note:

* Perhaps the most blatant example of this is with CI’s Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund (CEPF), which was set up to reach local NGOs. According to program guidelines, “only” 50 percent of CEPF’s money is supposed to be granted directly to CI. Yet during the first two years of its Latin American program, CEPF granted \$6,915,865 out of a total of \$8,919,221—78 percent—to CI. Other groups, several of them CI clones, received a total of \$2,003,356, or 22 percent of the available money. (CEPF Annual Reports)

*The Conservancy’s mission makes it reluctant to take positions on some leading environmental issues, including global warming and drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Corporations represented on the Conservancy’s board and advisory council have lobbied nationally on the corporate side of the issues. A Conservancy official said the group avoids criticizing the environmental records of its corporate board members.*²³

Reluctance to oppose harmful practices in foreign countries is even greater where the NGOs are largely out of sight of First World eyes and under the protection of governments that are unconcerned with protection of the environment. And here we have a contradiction. Since the mid- and late 1980s, indigenous peoples have received a good deal of support for a variety of causes, primarily from private foundations and a variety of European agencies. The Inter-American Foundation, a U.S. government agency, gave hundreds of grants to indigenous organizations during this period and gave a significant boost to the indigenous movement in Latin America. Conservation organizations and foundations with conservationist agendas supported indigenous peoples all through the 1990s for work on conservation and sustainable economic development. One result was that indigenous organizations became more empowered. But when they began using their newfound strength to defend their lands and resources, they ran head-on into private companies, governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and conservationists all standing shoulder to shoulder. Not only did the conservationist NGOs turn away from indigenous peoples; so did many of the private foundations, to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

As the major conservationist NGOs have distanced themselves from indigenous and traditional peoples in recent years, the causes of this separation can be tracked to two particularly sticky problems. First, there is the problem of indigenous resistance, which sometimes takes a violent turn, to the activities of many of the NGOs’ funding partners. For the NGOs, siding with indigenous peoples in their struggles or uprisings against those partners might seem financially unwise.

Second, there is the presumption that biological science should be the sole guiding principle for biodiversity conservation in protected natural areas. This notion has produced a running debate between those who do not see human inhabitants as a part of the ecological equation,²⁴ and those who argue for partnerships and the inclusion of indigenous and traditional peoples in protected area plans, both on human rights grounds and for pragmatic ecological reasons.²⁵

The Big Three NGOs are currently dominated, at least in their upper circles, by the second view. According to their critics, they have increasingly come to “view



rural people as the enemies of nature, rather than as political actors who can form an environmental constituency.... By identifying indigenous and traditional peoples as obstacles to effective conservation, or by concluding that indigenous and other inhabited reserves are incompatible with 'real' conservation, the people-free park school impugns the critical conservation value of inhabited forest areas and ignores the role of forest peoples as constituencies for forest conservation."²⁶

A suspicion often voiced by the conservationists is that once indigenous peoples are given tenure to their lands, there is no assurance that they will work to conserve their biodiversity. "What if, after we have helped them out, they suddenly decide to log their forests?" is a standard question.

Just as the once widely recognized possibilities for native stewardship have been largely dismissed, the terms "indigenous" and "traditional" have largely dropped out of the discourse of the large conservationist NGOs—replaced mainly by "marginalized" or "poor."²⁷ (The more neutral terms "rural" and "local" have also spread more widely in the literature and are commonly used by both sides.) This linguistic shift robs the dignity of indigenous peoples. Who is interested in saving the culture of marginalized people? What is the value of the traditional ecological knowledge of the poor? People who are viewed as having no distinctive culture, assets, or historic claims to the land

they occupy end up being, in a very real sense, a people with no value.

In the last year or so, the large conservation NGOs have come to claim that what they do is conservation, not "poverty alleviation," which they seem to equate with any sort of work with indigenous or traditional peoples. Ever since their work with grassroots conservation and integrated conservation and development projects fell on the rocks, they have avoided involvements along these lines, including talk of co-management of protected areas and sustainable development or alternative livelihoods with indigenous peoples. In part, the NGOs have felt pressured by the bi- and multilateral donors to include poverty alleviation in their conservation programs, and some have tried to accommodate the donors with re-tooled language in their mission statements; yet the tendency among the large NGOs has been to set up a false dichotomy between poverty alleviation and conservation and say that they are not in the business of "social welfare."²⁸

To be sure, the views of the large NGOs are not monolithic. While some of those at the top may dismiss work at the community level as scattershot and inconsequential, or even contrary to the goal of large-scale biodiversity conservation, the picture at the field level is often quite different. WWF, for example, has a vigorous community forestry program that works on forest management, certification, and marketing in

Mexico, the Guatemalan Petén, the Honduran Mosquitia, the Atlantic Coast region of Nicaragua, and Madre de Dios in Peru. TNC field offices work with communities in Mexico, Guatemala, and indigenous regions of Brazil. CI is less engaged at this level, although it does have a small project with organic coffee farmers in Chiapas, Mexico. WCS's South American program is perhaps the best of the lot, with a strong focus on community-level conservation, co-management of protected areas with indigenous peoples, and sustainable community development. Its work with the Izoceño Guaraní in the Gran Chaco region of Bolivia is an exemplary example of mutual respect and smooth co-management of a protected area.

Unlike the brain trusts in the main offices, representatives in the field are not dealing with abstractions. Some have realized that they can accomplish little of value if they don't work in partnership with local people. Some have commented that they see their community work as their focus of attention and pay little heed to the global pronouncements coming from on high. Unfortunately, these field efforts are given little support in the home office, and as the drift from high-level support for indigenous peoples continues, future financial backing may prove hard to find.

More particularly, we are seeing an evident split between the U.S. branch of WWF and the international branch in Switzerland. While talk of partnerships with indigenous and traditional peoples has dropped out of WWF U.S.'s policy statements regarding ecoregional conservation, it has not dropped out in the European office.²⁹ An assessment of the field programs of the U.S. and International branches of WWF might yield an interesting comparison.

What can be said about the "increasing number of serious complaints" from the field reported in the Ford Foundation's internal investigation? Complaints against the activities of the Big Three conservation NGOs have now been heard from Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, Papua New Guinea, and the Congo Basin, among others. In one case, CI has been accused of bullying and riding roughshod over local NGOs and indigenous organizations in the Vilcabamba region of Peru. In another, its work in the Laguna del Tigre area of the Guatemalan Petén ended in a bitter fight over resources with the local NGO it had created—and with angry villagers setting the CI research station on fire. Yet, relatively little is yet known about whether such abuses are pervasive or aberrations. No thorough, independent evaluation of these

situations has as yet been carried out, and it is often difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. But in any case, perhaps the most central investigation should focus not so much on particular failures in the field as on the large NGOs' recent inclination to withdraw from working with indigenous and traditional peoples at all.

WHERE IS ALL THIS HEADED?

Shortly after the Ford Foundation's "Study on Critical New Conservation Issues in the Global South" got under way, two board members—Yolanda Kakabadse, president of the IUCN, and Kathryn Fuller, president of WWF—reviewed the study's work plan. They concluded that the studies of the two consultants, which no one at Ford had yet seen, should not become public—and, in fact, should not even be officially turned in to the Ford Foundation. They recommended that the studies be embargoed, and this indeed happened, at least for a time. Ford officials received a verbal briefing, and finally saw the full studies, but the studies were never made public. News of this chain of events rapidly leaked out and was widely disseminated among foundations and NGOs—causing a furor about which the larger public heard very little.

On April 20, 2004, WWF convened a meeting of representatives from the big international NGOs—WWF, TNC, CI, IUCN, and WCS—for a full-day session with the foundation representatives who had brought the issue to the fore in South Dakota, 10 months earlier. The Big Three presidents—Kathryn Fuller of WWF, Peter Seligman of CI, and Steven McCormick of TNC—all came, together with some of their technical people. No indigenous representatives were present.*

Beyond a bland summary document, nothing has been shared publicly from this gathering, but it is possible to piece together impressions from several accounts. Initially, the NGO people were somewhat defensive, but were unapologetic. The foundation representatives spent the morning voicing their concerns, and the NGOs responded that their primary mission was conservation, not "poverty alleviation"—which in many minds is equated with working with local communities. They denied insensitivity to traditional or indigenous peoples and cited their programs in "capacity building." But for the most part, the NGOs gave little ground.

One foundation representative brought up the fact that multinational companies were extracting natural resources and destroying ecosystems in fragile forest areas, and that indigenous peoples were fighting these companies while the conservationists who were working there stood by in silence. This representative noted that the NGOs usually sided with the companies, especially when the companies were corporate sponsors to the NGOs. The NGOs responded that they didn't

* Several people explained that this was simply meant to be an "internal" meeting between donors and NGOs, a first cut to chart future directions. Beyond this, several people noted that they had no idea of which "representative" indigenous people who could.

want to intervene—that they wanted to remain apolitical. In any case, they said, these were matters for national governments to handle.

In the afternoon session of the meeting, the NGOs again defended their work and one of the officials even turned a bit testy, as if to say “Who do you think you are, to question us? Perhaps you should examine yourselves.” As one participant put it, some NGO representatives “pushed back,” accusing the foundation people of having their ears bent by “activist NGOs” and not getting their facts straight. On the whole, they were aggressive within the bounds of politeness—they didn’t want to bite down too hard on one of the hands that feeds them, suggested one participant, although the foundation hand has shrunk in size as new and larger hands have appeared.

In the end, it was decided that some studies of the situation in the field had to be done. The details of which sites would be chosen, who would do them, how they would be carried out, and under whose supervision, were to be worked out later. Another meeting would follow, perhaps with a larger group including some indigenous and traditional representatives. A couple of participants on the foundation side came out of the meeting saying that the NGOs “simply don’t get it. They don’t understand.” Several said that the NGOs see the whole matter as an image problem, not anything involving substance.

In June 2004, a year after the issue was first raised in an after-dinner gathering, the Consultative Group on Biodiversity convened again—this time in Minnesota, on the shore of Lake Superior. More discussions ensued, among the same representatives who had raised the issue in 2003 and several new interested people, but the conference agenda involved other topics and discussion of the conservation NGO problem was fragmented and inconclusive. As one participant put it, they went around and around and around, without resolving anything.

Overriding the conversation has been a sense that this is a delicate issue in very uncertain and difficult times. Some of the actions taken by indigenous groups to resist the depredations of extractive industries, for example, have been likened to the actions of terrorists. The delicacy of the issue has resulted in a reluctance to move forward with anything. Moreover, the foundations themselves have recently had their operations put under a spotlight. Some foundations are being criticized for lavish spending on their upper management staff and trustees, for support of partisan political agendas (and even allegedly terrorist organizations), and for cronyism and conflicts of interest.³⁰ The Ford Foundation, specifically, is being investigated by a congressional committee for some of its funding with groups in the Near East, and is maintaining a low profile. And the

large conservation NGOs have been the subjects of scrutiny on other fronts, quite aside from their abandonment of indigenous partnerships. In 2002, TNC was attacked and seriously wounded in a series of articles in the *Washington Post* that exposed questionable practices in the organization’s management. The group is currently being probed by Congress and audited by the IRS. This has caused TNC’s colleagues to hunker down and avoid controversy (and the media). At this point, nobody wants any new embarrassments dredged up for public inspection. How, then, can the issue be raised and honestly addressed without turning the process into a spectacle?

CONCLUSION

The challenges of biodiversity conservation are among the world’s most difficult, especially in the southern latitudes. Alien languages and cultures, impenetrable political systems, and high-stakes greed and corruption converge with the rising pressures of population growth and development to create situations that often seem insurmountable. Project work in the field is arduous—marked by progress one day and setbacks the next. Misunderstandings and conflicts of interest—and long periods of stagnation—seem to be the rule. Often, it is difficult to know whether one is making real progress or not.

Take the case of Chiapas, Mexico. Here, CI has a strong presence and has been accused in the local press of trying to enlist the Mexican military to expel peasant families from the Lacandon Forest, of bioprospecting for international corporations, and of flying planes over the Mayan Forest region with USAID support and giving the information thus obtained to the U.S. and Mexican governments. Pieces of this picture—such as the fact that CI has corporate ties—are well substantiated. Others—such as CI buying up land for bioprospecting—appear to be greatly exaggerated. Still others—such as the overflights, which are indeed taking place—would be acceptable in most areas of the world other than Chiapas, where an active guerrilla movement is ensconced and the Mexican military has a strong presence. David Bray, one of the people originally enlisted by the Ford Foundation to investigate the alleged abuses, notes that this region “is probably the most politicized and difficult working environment for conservation and development in Mexico.”³¹ Precisely what is going on in Chiapas is difficult to sort out, and CI’s role in the drama, whether positive, negative, or otherwise, is far from clear.

None of this is easy, but one thing that seems clear to many of us who have worked in the field is that if we are to make any headway, cooperation among groups and sectors is crucial. There are still some among us who strongly believe that conservation cannot be effective unless the residents of the area to be

conserved are thoroughly involved. This is not solely a matter of social justice, which must in any case be a strong component of all conservation work. It is also a matter of pragmatism. Indigenous peoples live in most of the ecosystems that conservationists are so anxious to preserve. Often they are responsible for the relatively intact state of those ecosystems, and they are without doubt preferable to the most common alternatives—logging, oil drilling, cattle ranching, and large-scale industrial agriculture—that are destroying ever larger tracts of forest throughout the tropical latitudes. Forming partnerships and collaborative alliances between indigenous and traditional peoples and conservationists is no easy task, but it would seem to be one of the most effective ways to save the increasingly threadbare ecosystems that still exist.

Yet, cooperation by the large conservationist NGOs, both among themselves and with other, smaller groups, including indigenous and traditional peoples, has lost ground over the past decade, only to be replaced by often intense competition, largely over money. NGOs entrusted with the enormous responsibility of defending the planet's natural ecosystems against the encroachment of the modern world in its most destructive manifestations have increasingly partnered with—and become dependent on—many of the corporations and governments that are most aggressively making this encroachment.

Within weeks after the Minnesota meeting at which the foundation people went “around and around,” the Ford Foundation received two proposals that would ostensibly move the debate forward. One came from the IUCN, the other from WWF. The IUCN project would facilitate a series of meetings culminating in an “open dialogue session” at the World Conservation Congress to be held this November in Bangkok. The WWF project would evaluate existing WWF community-based natural resource projects via interviews over a three-month period, then produce new manuals and training programs. Ford had been negotiating with WWF on its proposal for some months, and the final version was presented in August 2004. The IUCN proposal, likewise, was submitted in August. Both were approved that same month.

For those who have been concerned about the drift of the conservation NGOs, this rapid response was simultaneously encouraging and dismaying. On one hand, Ford was showing positive interest in continuing its examination of the relations between indigenous and traditional peoples and the large NGOs, and in reconciling conservation with human communities. But the haste of the Ford response was disconcerting, as was the direction it took. Both of the grants went to large conservation NGOs, which meant they'd be administered by some of the very people whose practices were

being questioned. No similar grant to indigenous organizations, or organizations that work closely with indigenous peoples, was in the works. It was argued, quite rightly, that no indigenous group had come forward with a proposal; but then, no indigenous people had been invited to any of the discussions.

There were also concerns about the fact that both of the contracted NGOs are run by Ford Foundation board members—Yolanda Kakabadse, IUCN's president, and Kathryn Fuller, WWF's president (Fuller is the board chairperson). It was common knowledge (confirmed for me by people who were closely involved) that these were the two people who had kept the initial Ford studies from public view. The IUCN proposal notes that Kakabadse will be “personally presiding over the dialogue sessions.” The WWF project is limited to studies of WWF's programs and will be carried out by WWF personnel, for use by WWF.

I fully agree that more study of conservation programs in the field is needed. It has been the case for some time that the large conservationists are not accountable to anyone, and that far too little is known about what is really happening in the field. In particular, we don't know whether the large-scale, science-based programs that appeal so much to funders are really achieving conservation goals. We also have little sense of what works and what doesn't work in what circumstances. And we don't know what to make of the charges and countercharges—the claims of success and rumors of abuse—that emanate from the backlands on a regular basis. One reason for the lack of clear information is the role of the Big Three's marketing and fundraising arms in “packaging” field reports and data, a tactic that encourages the exaggeration of successes and downplaying or nonrecognition of questionable results. The suggestion that the IUCN and WWF—or any of the other large conservation NGOs, for that matter—should now lead a search for reliable new information strikes some as a fox-guarding-the-henhouse solution.

What's needed now is a series of independent, non-partisan, thorough, and fairly objective evaluations that answer key questions the NGOs can't credibly answer. These evaluations should be undertaken by nonhierarchical teams representing the various sectors—indigenous peoples, local communities, national NGOs, government agencies, and donors, including bilateral and multilateral donors (whose influence is enormous) and private corporations (which have been largely silent)—and should be prosecuted in the spirit of seeking information and insights, not justifying existing programs. Together, these stakeholders need to pursue the kind of open, public discussion that can lead towards the creation of conservation programs that are responsive to the needs of *both* biological and human diversity worldwide.

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