
2004

Contested Nature: Promoting International Biodiversity with Social Justice in the Twenty-First Century

Dan Brockington
St. Hughes College, Oxford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jea>

Recommended Citation

Brockington, Dan. "Contested Nature: Promoting International Biodiversity with Social Justice in the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 8, no. 1 (2004): 84-85.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol8/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

Contested Nature: Promoting International Biodiversity with Social Justice in the Twenty-First Century

STEVEN BRECHIN, PETER WILSHUSEN,
CRYSTAL FORTWANGLER, AND PATRICK
WEST (EDITORS)
STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF NEW YORK,
ALBANY, 2003
321 PP. \$59.50 HARDCOVER, \$19.95
PAPERBACK

REVIEWED BY DAN BROCKINGTON

In 1991 West and Brechin published *Resident People and National Parks* in the hope it would “stimulate and mobilize a more deeply felt concern, a conversion of thinking from blind ecological imperative to more honest recognition of painful moral dilemma, and a sincere desire to rectify the injustice of the past.” *Contested Nature* is a fitting successor to this book, addressing these same issues in a more comprehensive and systematic fashion with four theoretical chapters and case studies from around the world. It touches upon diverse aspects of current conservation dilemmas including exclusion and eviction, the institutional difficulties of complex conservation organizations, private conservation areas, ecotourism, the reification of communities, community level conflicts, deforestation, bio-prospecting and more. As its title suggests, the works in the volume are geared towards identifying the shortcomings of international conservation, while seeking to influence policy and practice in ways that promote biodiversity with social justice. A chapter on complex organizations and governance regimes suggests specific strategies for achieving this vision.

Contested Nature is an authoritative statement of the current position of writings on social science and conservation and I strongly recommend it to researchers, practitioners and students. Written in an accessible and engaging style it is full of new ideas and accounts of the latest practices and problems that will form a valuable compendium for people wrestling with these problems. If *Resident People and National Parks* was a ‘bible’ for some activists (to quote a consultant working with the IUCN) then perhaps they now have an old and new testament.

But, with apologies to its authors, I wish to use the opportunity of this review to make some wider reflections on the field as a whole. *Contested Nature*, as the current state of the art, prompts a number of ideas as to where we can go from here. The first concerns engagement. I fear that the ideas presented in *Contested Nature* will not influence the policy and practice of international conservation as much as it ought to. In part this is because it does not engage with natural science literature. With less than 3% of its citations in serious scientific journals it characterizes the field by preaching an engagement with conservation scientists it does not itself practice.¹ This lack of integration works in other ways. The editors’ major contributions which came out in *Society and Natural Resources* in 2002 have no citations on the Web of Science, which means they have not yet been noted by natural scientists. That sort of material is too good not to come out in natural science journals.

The second concerns analysis. The book clearly argues that devolution is a necessary but insufficient step for locally rooted conservation. So now we need to ask for whom does devolution ‘work’ and what does it achieve? Indeed perhaps the real question here is how does democracy work/operate at different scales? Democratization is generally thought to be a good thing, but the practice of democracy is remarkably varied, it covers a plethora of forms of government. We require, in our writings about conservation and society, a greater awareness of the variety of forms democracy can take, and is expected to take, in the societies in which it is being encouraged.

The third concerns systematic understanding of aspects of conservation’s impact on society. As the conclusion of *Contested Nature* points out, “the

conservation literature is rapidly growing but lacks systematic analysis" (page 264). One of the main gaps here is the failure systematically to examine social and economic impacts of protected areas around the world. On what basis, for example, can we extrapolate findings about the impacts of individual reserves or parks to the rest of the nation? Few studies, if any, are based on randomly selected sites. Similarly we do not know how or why the studies in *Contested Nature* were selected, or what brought the collection together (this is a significant flaw). Perhaps all we can say for sure is that they are representative of the interests of a community of researchers at a particular time. We cannot say whether they are representative of a country or region's conservation policy. We could be more systematic. Databases outlining the number and location of protected areas provide a sampling frame and a means by which we could compare that which we have written about, to that which exists and find out where the islands of knowledge are, and where the oceans of ignorance are. This could become incorporated into the current world database so that it made more mention of the social consequences of conservation. We could also examine the broad relationships between protected areas and indices of poverty and well being at national and international levels.

Finally *Contested Nature* repeats a persistent error in social science writings about conservation which is also particularly prevalent in sustainable development writings generally: that unjust conservation does not work. This oft repeated mantra conflates social justice as end in itself and as a pragmatic means of achieving conservation goals. This can lead to fine sounding, but ultimately confused, statements such as Brechin's assertion in the introduction to *Contested Nature* that "conservation will not succeed in the long run if it is built on the backs of the poor. It must maintain the moral high ground or it will lose its soul." (pp. xi-xii). This is a worthy ideological position, but not a particularly sound empirical one. Oppression and injustice have been sustained repeatedly for centuries, and continue to be sustained. Asserting that inequitable states of affairs cannot last stops us from asking when they might be changed or how. What we need to ask now is

under what circumstances oppression is effectively maintained, and in what circumstances the rural poor can effectively oppose unjust conservation.

I hope that these ideas will promote conservation with social justice, as *Contested Nature* will itself do. Knowledge by itself will not be enough however. We must find the common ground, the innovative spirit, and the political will to help rural people become effective partners in conservation that provides them with equitable benefits while effectively protecting biodiversity.

Dan Brockington, School of Geography and Environmental Studies, St. Hughes College, Oxford

Notes

¹ I counted the following papers: *Conservation Biology* 7; *Science* 3; *Bioscience* 2; *Environmental Conservation* 2; *Oryx* 2; *Nature* 1; *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 1. Zerner's *People, plants and justice* has similar proportions from natural science journals.

Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: The Search for a Value of Place

THOMAS POWER

ISLAND PRESS, WASHINGTON, DC, 1996
295 pp. \$35.00 HARDCOVER

REVIEWED BY BARBARA J. DILLY

While this book is firmly based in the rhetoric of academic economics, Power's local economies and popular folklore makes it an excellent text for economic anthropology. Specifically he focuses on the ways in which folklore expresses local economic decision making wisdom with regards to environmental resources. These issues are brought to life through descriptive ethnography of the diversity of political and economic interests in American extractive industries.