

## Reflections from a participant in the Symposium “Protected Areas: are they safeguarding biodiversity?” held at the Zoological Society of London on 8-9 November 2012

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The author, who works for an organization that is a founding Member of the ICCA Consortium, participated in the second day of this symposium. Staff of conservation NGOs, students and representatives of governmental, intergovernmental and research institutions attended the meeting. The symposium sought, amongst other goals, to “identify components of the current protected areas portfolio; how is it funded, managed and monitored, and to ask how protected areas have performed from a biodiversity conservation perspective” and “how we can most effectively manage the portfolio into the future, and identify the new tools and technologies, including governance and financing mechanisms”.

It appears that, overall, the symposium fulfilled its objectives: the presentations show that, under the right conditions and on the whole, protected areas are safeguarding biodiversity. Given the steady extension and multiplication of protected areas all over the globe over the course of the past century, this data is timely. However, given the move – acknowledged and applauded by many working in conservation – towards ever greater inclusion of social issues and perspectives in conservation, I felt there were gaps in the symposium's outcomes. This article deals with those gaps of greatest relevance to people working with or supporting Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCAs).

One symposium presentation, given by Madhu Rao of Wildlife Conservation Society Asia, touched on the topic of ICCAs. She presented a desk-based review of the literature on ICCAs that assesses their ability to safeguard biodiversity. It found that ICCAs were overall not as effective as state-governed protected areas for safeguarding biodiversity, but better than open-access regimes. Ms. Rao acknowledged the paucity of data available for drawing these conclusions, while also recognising that her review had not examined the non-biodiversity (i.e. socio-economic and cultural) benefits of ICCAs. The overall conclusion was that further research was required to draw better conclusions. Given the importance of ICCAs for conservation – the recent [CBD Recognition Study on ICCAs](#) states that “*ICCAs may number far more than the current officially designated protected areas (which number about 130,000, and are mostly governed by government agencies) and cover as much if not more than the area covered by them (nearly 13% of the earth's land surface)*” – it was surprising that only one out of 22 presentations addressed the role of ICCAs – which are increasingly recognised as de facto protected areas – in safeguarding biodiversity.

Given our ever-expanding knowledge on the inextricable relationships between social, cultural and biological diversity, it would have been constructive and progressive for the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a personal blog post that benefitted from critical contributions and edits from Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, Gary Martin and Susannah McCandless, and was improved following a robust exchange of opinions with Nigel Dudley.

symposium to move beyond assessments of protected area success that isolate biological issues from social issues, that address biodiversity as though it hangs in a vacuum. Not only does such an approach threaten biodiversity – as time and again conservation efforts that focus on biodiversity without considering its embeddedness in social, political, economic and cultural life are shown to be unsuccessful<sup>2</sup> – but also does not take into account the demonstrated interrelations between biological and cultural diversity, between natural life and social life.<sup>3</sup> Adopting a broader scope, the symposium might have explored in greater depth the important role of ICCAs in safeguarding biodiversity, drawing on the ever-expanding body of interdisciplinary and empirical research on conservation.

Those active in the global movement for the recognition of ICCAs have been prominent, for over a decade, in popular, conservation and academic literature, and at global meetings such as the World Parks Congress, World Conservation Congresses, and Convention on Biological Diversity Conferences of the Parties. Drawing on the expertise, knowledge and case study material of these practitioners and researchers would have injected a greater diversity of voices on community conservation at the symposium, giving more comprehensive evidence of the role and importance of ICCAs in both bridging the gap between conservation and people, and in safeguarding biodiversity. Given the proliferation of academic programmes, researchers, practitioners, funders, publications and practical projects that focus on the interconnections between biodiversity, social life and



A workshop organized by the ICCA Consortium at CBD COP 11, Hyderabad (India) in October 2012. (Courtesy: Aurélie Neumann)

conservation, it is essential that conservation now begin to embrace this inclusive perspective in *all* aspects of its work, even – or rather, *especially* – when it purports to focus specifically on biological issues.

However, despite an avowed lack of data on how protected areas function within landscapes, broader ecosystems and conservation networks, on the effectiveness of different governance systems in comparable ecological and social

situations, and on the effectiveness of ICCAs in safeguarding biodiversity in general, the overwhelming discourse presented at the Symposium was that more protected areas are required, they must be larger and they must improve their effectiveness. Therefore, much more money is required to establish, expand and manage them.<sup>4</sup> This discourse remained largely devoid of reference to the relationships between local people and protected areas.

The solutions to protected area financing mooted at the Symposium were (i) the green economy, i.e. financing through climate change mitigation strategies (REDD+) and payments for ecosystem services (PES), and (ii) mainstreaming protected areas into development programmes, i.e. establishing protected areas as biodiversity offsets in conjunction with mega development projects. An area in which we are *not* lacking data is the ‘double-whammy’ effect that both the green economy and biodiversity offsets can have on the well-

<sup>2</sup> See Alcorn and Royo (2007) for background information and analysis on the connections and disconnections between human rights and conservation initiatives, and the consequences of these.

<sup>3</sup> Maffi (2008) provides the background argument as well as numerous references to support the argument that biological, linguistic and cultural diversity are ‘inextricably’ linked.

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, although one of the Symposium’s explicit objectives was to identify ‘new tools and technologies for governance and financing’, no attempts were made to compare the economic, social, political and cultural costs of conventional protected areas versus other forms of governance, including ICCAs.

being of local populations.

In the first case, REDD+ and PES schemes not only suffer from tenacious equity problems (McAfee 2012, Mohanty *et al.* 2012, Corbera 2012, Milne & Adams 2012), but can also exacerbate the conflicts between local populations and protected areas, resulting in loss of access and rights to lands and resources (e.g., Beymer-Farris & Basset 2012) and threats to livelihoods and food sovereignty (e.g., Ibarra *et al.* 2011). In the case of biodiversity offsets, the impacts on local populations are even more obvious: having been pushed out of their traditional lands and livelihoods by mega development projects (e.g., hydroelectric dams, oil pipelines, hydrocarbon extraction or commercial monocultures), indigenous peoples and local communities find their access to lands and resources further curtailed as a result of the establishment of protected areas as 'offsets'. It is remarkable that such 'solutions' for the financing of protected areas are still part of the mainstream discourse when data on their damaging for indigenous peoples and local communities are so widely available. A recent special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, entitled ['Green grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?'](#) edited by Fairhead, Leach and Scoones (2012), provides an excellent entry-point to the literature regarding the social, political, economic and cultural impacts of such financing mechanisms.

Recently, Kent Redford, a household name for those of us working in the field of conservation, wrote about conservation's interactions with human rights in an online article entitled ['The Moral Arc of Conservation'](#). In it, he claims that, at the turn of the last century, "the arc of conservation was bending with the realization that our moral argument for the value of conserving biodiversity was seriously flawed if we ourselves were acting immorally towards people." He concludes the article with the statement: "conservation is aware of many of its previous failings and, although not achieving all it might, is on the right track". While many of us sincerely hope this is true, the thrust of the mainstream discourse in fora like the ZSL Symposium is not encouraging.

If conservation is to succeed and expand in an ever-more peopled world, it cannot but engage people in place to do so, and ICCAs provide an unparalleled, already-existing opportunity at the interface of biodiversity and human wellbeing to begin that work. Therefore, to ICCA supporters, it is obvious that a far better and more ethical solution to the 'biodiversity crisis' than biodiversity offsets and the green economy is to support, enhance, and publish frank evaluations of the work being done by indigenous peoples and local communities to protect and safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem functions in and around their ICCAs. A growing number of case studies reveal how these efforts not only safeguard biodiversity in a variety of environments but also enhance socio-ecological resilience and maintain human wellbeing.

However, the people with the power to make Big Decisions and spend Big Money on protected areas appear to have little or no awareness of the world of possibilities for safeguarding biodiversity, or rather *biocultural* diversity, present in ICCAs. Moreover, the discourse among conventional protected areas policy-makers and practitioners is that the lack of data on the effectiveness of ICCAs in safeguarding biodiversity indicates that money is best directed the usual way: towards strict protection in State-governed protected areas.

Fortunately, many communities, organisations and research institutions around the world are working to demonstrate that ICCAs are effective in safeguarding biodiversity and enhancing human wellbeing. We might not yet have all the answers, nor, certainly, do we have enough data. But then, neither, apparently, do those operating within the conventional protected areas paradigm, as mentioned above. However, we clearly are making significant advances in



An *agdal* in the Moroccan High Atlas. *Agdals* are ancient systems for the communal management and conservation of natural resources, and great examples of ICCAs. (Courtesy: Abderrahim Ouarghidi).

providing empirical evidence of the success of ICCAs. For example, at COP XI in Hyderabad, the CBD report on Recognising and Supporting ICCAs (Kothari *et al* 2012), available [here](#), was launched. This report, which covers a wide variety of ICCAs from all over the world and collates much evidence of their success, builds upon an array of examples and analyses that have been accumulating since the beginning of the new millennium (see also Borrini-Feyerabend *et al* 2010, and the website of the [ICCA Consortium](#), which is replete with specific and detailed examples). Others are also in the process of refining methods for assessing the effectiveness of ICCAs. For example, [Global Diversity Foundation](#) is currently working within the [COMBIOSEVE](#) project to develop co-enquiry (collaborative) and participatory approaches for evaluating the success of community-based biocultural diversity management.

Given the increasing visibility of ICCAs in the biodiversity policy-making arena, the supposed ‘paradigm shift’ towards a more socially-conscious conservation, and the growing body of evidence surrounding the importance of people for the health of biodiversity, why are there still conservation meetings in which biological issues are discussed in isolation from social ones? Is there a fundamental communication problem between those of us who are speaking about ICCAs and those of us who are involved in more conventional approaches? Is the perceived lack of empirical data from grounded ICCA case studies creating a vacuum in which preconceived notions prevail? Are ICCA advocates so keen to demonstrate success that they report only what is convenient to them, and only to the converted? Or perhaps are we simply, collectively, not creating enough opportunities for frank, open and productive debates to take place?

The current apparent paucity of communication between policy-makers, researchers and practitioners working on ICCAs and those working on conventional protected areas must be overcome. Attempts to tackle this decades-old problem have had only some degree of success. Although this lack of communication has multiple origins, we feel there is hope for a resolution. A first step towards opening more channels for communication might be to invite and encourage both groups to participate more in and speak at each other’s public events. It might also be timely to organise special events that gather leaders in the ICCA movement and the more conventional conservation movement to engage in honest yet solution-oriented dialogue about their concerns over the gaps in each other’s approaches, with the explicit aim of developing mutually useful tools for safeguarding not just biological diversity, but *biocultural diversity*. The ICCA Consortium and its members are planning a variety of such events to take place around the 6<sup>th</sup> World Parks Congress (Sydney, Australia,

2014). Contributions, comments and diverse perspectives on the topic would be most useful and welcome.

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