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Ezra Rashkow
rashkove@mail.montclair.edu

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Idealizing Inhabited Wilderness: A Revision to the History of Indigenous Peoples and National Parks

Ezra D. Rashkow^{1,2*}

¹Montclair State University

²Columbia University

Abstract

Whereas most histories of national parks and indigenous peoples have largely focused on dispossession of resident populations in the making of uninhabited wilderness areas, this article surveys the problematic history of the idea of preserving human communities today referred to as ‘indigenous’ in parks. In the very first-ever call for a national park, as well as in frequent proposals for national parks throughout the 19th, 20th, and now the 21st century, protected areas have been envisioned as places of conservation, study, and display not only of endangered species but also of human groups perceived to be endangered. Drawing on cases from the early United States, colonial Africa, Indonesia, and India, as well as on histories of international conservation policies emerging around WWI, the article argues that this alternative conception of what national parks should look like has been pervasive, perennial, and deeply problematic. The problem is not only that indigenous groups have long been perceived as in danger of becoming extinct and therefore paternalistically projected as in need of protection. It is also that these peoples, who have long suffered dehumanizing animal analogies, are envisioned as endangered like wildlife, and in need of protection in parks.

Introduction

This article proposes a significant revision to the standard understanding of the history of the national park idea. Most histories of national parks and indigenous peoples have largely focused on dispossession of resident populations in the making of uninhabited wilderness areas. Almost entirely overlooked has been the perhaps equally problematic history of the idea of preserving human communities today referred to as “indigenous” in parks.¹ Yet in the very first-ever call for a national park, as well as in frequent proposals for national parks throughout the 19th, 20th, and now the 21st century, protected areas have been envisioned as places of conservation, study, and display not only of endangered species but also of human groups perceived to be vanishing or endangered. Since the 19th century, the vision that national parks should be inhabited with indigenous peoples has competed with the dominant conservation ideology that in order for an area to be wilderness, it must be uninhabited.

Considering the overwhelming numbers of people removed from national parks and other protected areas around the world, it is unsurprising that histories of national parks have typically emphasized that the creation of uninhabited wilderness usually involved the removal of indigenous peoples from areas that were once their homelands.² Although the precise magnitude of conservation-induced displacement is unknown, estimates of those affected globally range anywhere from 10 to 173 million.³ Thus, the issue of displacement and relocation from national parks is a “recurrent and central” theme that has moved to “centre-stage in debates on biodiversity conservation.”⁴

The global backlash against the ongoing epidemic of conservation-induced displacement based on the model of uninhabited, central government-administered wilderness parks,

culminated in the 1990s.⁵ Conservation legislation around the world has since emphasized a shift toward integrating local peoples' rights and interests into the maintenance of protected areas. Community-based conservation and numerous similar strategies have arisen with the goal of involving local communities in every stage of establishment and management of protected areas. In this milieu, a large camp of academics, activists, policy makers, and conservationists have sided with what they understand to be the interests of indigenous communities. This new conservation paradigm emphasizes the rights of resident communities to continue to exist in national parks and other protected areas.⁶ One problem with this new people-centered model in protected areas management, however, is that it does not critically engage with the history of the idea it unwittingly repeats. While the experience of removing people from parks has often been tragic, the history of the idea of allowing people to remain in parks, especially as central features of those parks, is equally fraught.

A major point of emphasis in environmental history since the field's inception has been the idea that wilderness is a historical and cultural construct, linking the modern love affair with wilderness to the founding of national parks.⁷ In this light, national parks can be understood as an idealized form of nature, or what Carrier labels virtualism, i.e. "the attempt to make the world around us look like and conform to an abstract model of it."⁸ Thus, for example, Spence shows in *Dispossessing the Wilderness* that in the big three national parks in the United States – Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Glacier National Parks – "uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved."⁹ Many argue that the US National Parks system became the predominant model for wilderness and wildlife preservation around the world.¹⁰ Daniel Brockington has labeled this top-down model of wilderness protection in Tanzania as "fortress conservation."¹¹ Especially in East Africa, early wildlife preserves are understood to have been (and to an extent remain) "rich men's playgrounds" that dispossessed poor local people.¹² In South Africa, Jane Carruthers and William Beinart, among others, have documented a similar politics of colonial conservation.¹³ Again, in South Asia, Mahesh Rangarajan has documented a history of "fencing the forest" from *adivasis* of central India. He and many other South Asian environmental historians have thus explored the "battles over nature" that have erupted in the subcontinent over this type of conservation-induced displacement.¹⁴

One might assume that the reason why the history of what I term "people parks" has never been properly documented, in contrast to the massive historiography on conservation-induced displacement just alluded to, is that such parks have never actually succeeded in being established. This is not correct, however. In this article, we will consider not only the earliest expressions of the inhabited national park concept in the 19th-century United States but also how by the early 20th century this had become a much advocated model for nature conservation in the international arena, with several prominent parks in Africa and Asia adopting this paradigm. In the United States, too, "Indian Wilderness" became an official government category in the mid-20th century. And around the world today, the United Nations is expanding its Man and Biosphere Program, with the goal of establishing a network of national park-like protected areas where ecological and cultural heritage can be conserved side by side.

The idea that national parks should be spaces for indigenous peoples has been pervasive and perennial since its inception in the early 19th century. While other scholars have addressed this history to a limited extent, they have done so in a fragmentary fashion. To date, no scholar has pieced together this history to reveal and survey the broad base of support that this conservation paradigm has had around the world. From antebellum calls in the United States to preserve "Indian wilderness" to contemporary international campaigns for biocultural diversity conservation steeped in the language of the environmental sciences, the underlying point that indigenous peoples should be a part of national parks has been constant through all of the variations on this theme. While sometimes this agenda has been based on sheerly romanticist or aesthetic

visions of ecologically noble savages, other times, it has been based on the supposedly rational scientific grounds of cultural conservation or even specimen preservation. Similarly, there have often been altruistic motives expressed in the examples we will consider; however, this protectionist discourse has clearly leant itself to taking a patronizing and paternalistic tone. As we will see, not only must we confront a wide variety of controversial motives here, but also the idea that a primitive, authentic, or traditional way of life should be preserved through parks conservation is deeply problematic.

What I have elsewhere called human endangerment and human extinction discourses seem to saturate much of the logic behind “people parks.”¹⁵ The problem here is not only that human societies are being projected as vanishing and in danger of becoming extinct, and therefore projected as in need of protection. More to the point, it is that indigenous peoples are envisioned as endangered like wildlife, that these two forms of endangerment are seen as related, and ergo that endangered species and societies need to be similarly sheltered in parks. This is deeply problematic for communities that have historically suffered the brunt of racist, dehumanizing animal analogies, to say the least.¹⁶

American Origins?

The man considered to have written the first-ever appeal for a national park was also the first to call for preserving indigenous peoples and wildlife side by side in such a setting. After traveling up the Missouri River in 1832, George Catlin, the man regarded as “the patriarch of preservation” in the United States, described his vision. Here, the buffalo and the Indian:

[M]ight in future be seen, (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a magnificent park, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse, with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes. What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A nation's Park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!

I would ask no other monument to my memory, nor any other enrolment of my name amongst the famous dead, than the reputation of having been the founder of such an institution.¹⁷

Buffalo and Indian are paired together as both in need of protection by the hand of government. Both need to be “preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness” for they are “fleeting,” endangered. In invoking the scene, not only does Catlin repeatedly refer to aesthetic considerations, repetitively using the words beauty and beautiful and specifically emphasizing visuals such as the “classic attire” that the “native Indian” would be seen to be wearing, but moreover, the whole park is reduced to a kind of romantic image. Here, the natives of the plains in all of their “wildness” along with their primitive material culture (sinewy bow, shield, lance) are to be preserved and put on display together with domesticated and wild animals as “thrilling specimen for America.” The park at once seems to act as a kind of museumized space filled with specimens, a place for entertainment and spectacle for “refined citizens” of the world, and even a kind of tombstone or “monument to my memory” where “in future ages” civilization can have a small glimpse of the primitive and wild past, frozen in time, a kind of anthropological anachronism akin to that described by Fabian.¹⁸ The passage thus combines so many of the elements that can be found time and again in calls to create “people parks” ever since.

Since wilderness, wildness, and fear for their loss were frequently associated with indigenous people in the western imagination, it is unsurprising that the first ever appeal for a national park

included a reference to preserving wild people, wildlife, and wilderness side by side. As Catlin elaborates:

Many are the rudenesses and wilds in Nature's works, which are destined to fall before the deadly axe and desolating hands of cultivating man... Such of Nature's works are always worthy of our preservation and protection.

Of such 'rudenesses and wilds,' Nature has no where presented more beautiful and lovely scenes, than those of the vast prairies of the West; and of *man* and *beast*, no nobler specimens than those who inhabit them – the *Indian* and the *buffalo* – joint and original tenants of the soil, and fugitives together from the approach of civilized man; they have fled to the great plains of the West, and there, under an equal doom, they have taken up their *last abode*, where their race will expire, and their bones will bleach together.¹⁹

This romantic vision for the preservation of “Indian wilderness” held popular currency in the United States up to the 1860s. Indicative of this *zeitgeist*, Ralph Emerson, Washington Irving, and James Audobon each explicitly evoked the idea of inhabited parks as a potential solution for preservation of “Indian wilderness.”²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, also, in 1858 upon his visit to the Maine woods expressed much the same idea as Catlin had over a generation earlier:

The Kings of England formerly had their forests 'to hold the King's game,' for sport or food, sometimes destroying villages to create or extend them; and I think that they were impelled by a true instinct. Why should not we, who have renounced the King's authority, have our national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be 'civilized off the face of the earth,' – our forests, not to hold the king's game merely, but to hold and preserve the king himself also, the lord of creation, – not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation? Or shall we, like villains grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains?²¹

Thoreau's conclusion to his book *The Maine Woods* bears an uncanny resemblance to the concluding pages of Catlin's *Letters and Notes*. Both, in their final pages, end with calls for the creation of a “nation's park” or “national preserves” along essentially the same lines. Whereas Catlin hoped such an area would preserve “the buffalo and the Indian,” Thoreau believed such a space would keep “the bear and panther, and some of the hunter race,” i.e. Native Americans, from being “destroyed.” Upon his travels from Bangor to Mt Katahdin, Thoreau was depressed to pass through villages of “Indians” he saw as having a “shabby, forlorn, and cheerless look” and reflected on “the Indian's history, that is, the history of his extinction.”²² Given Thoreau's nostalgic view of authentic American Indian wildness, it is completely unsurprising that he would advocate for its preservation. After all, to Thoreau, “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” This meant that not only land but also people – Indians in their native wild, keepers of true wildness – needed to be preserved.²³

Such a vision was not actualized in the United States, at least not immediately or in full measure. Some 50 years after Thoreau's death, Theodore Roosevelt would justify westward expansion in the United States by arguing the land should not remain “a game preserve for squalid savages.”²⁴ Instead, Native Americans were pushed into an ever-shrinking reservation system, often on marginal lands surrounding national parks. The establishment of the National Parks Service in 1916 defined, created, and preserved a system of uninhabited wilderness parks that dispossessed Native Americans of their ancestral homelands. In Maine, where Thoreau had his epiphany about American wildness, Baxter Park was established 1931. Percival P. Baxter, who donated 6000 acres including most of Mt Katahdin for the creation of the park, stipulated

that the land “shall be forever left in the natural wild state, shall forever be kept as a sanctuary for wild beasts and birds” and clearly stated in the terms of his donation that no human habitation should be allowed in the park.²⁵

Internationalization

“People parks” might not have become the dominant model for parks conservation in the United States, but Spence is wrong when he writes: “Thoreau represented a way of thinking about wilderness that ended soon after he died in 1862. In many respects, antebellum conceptions of nature culminated in Thoreau’s philosophy, and his was the last plea for the preservation of some portion of an ‘Indian wilderness.’”²⁶ By the early 20th century, around the same time that the National Park Service was becoming a bedrock institution in the American west, parks conservation was also becoming an international crusade led by Europeans. The early 20th century Swiss conservationist Paul Sarasin was a firm believer in the establishment of national park-like “reserves for native tribes.”²⁷ Known as the founder not only of Switzerland’s national parks, he was also the man who in 1920 first submitted a program to the League of Nations for the global protection of nature (*Weltnaturschutz* as he called it). As part of his plan, he proposed the concept of anthropological nature conservation (*anthropologischer naturschutz*).²⁸ As Sarasin expressed:

I am not yet finished with the tasks that *Weltnaturschutz* has to take on. To the contrary, I have yet to address the most important of all, and the most worthy which lies before us, namely to save the last remains of the primitive tribal peoples, the so-called *Naturvoelker* (nature folk), from extinction, and to preserve them for posterity, uninfluenced to the largest degree possible.

That saving these tribal groups from extinction is just as important in the list of tasks of the global nature conservation commission as saving the other higher life forms, however, nobody can doubt... These branches of humankind urgently deserve protection.²⁹

Around the world, similar ideas were proposed and acted on in the early 20th century. In Dutch Indonesia, for example, the Lorentz Nature Monument (which would eventually become the Lorentz National Park) was established in 1923 and was “designed to protect indigenous tribes people from sudden contact with western civilisations.”³⁰ The plan for Lorentz was “initiated by P.G. van Tienhoven during a visit to the Dutch Indies as part of a world tour where he had visited conservation leaders in New York.” Those van Tienhoven was in consultation with included “leading thinkers in the social Darwinism/eugenics discourse,” and one reason put forward for the creation of Lorentz was that it was felt that “indigenous people needed ‘protecting’ from colonial business entrepreneurs.”³¹ Van Tienhoven’s vision for Lorentz also makes sense in light of the fact that after Paul Sarasin’s death, it was van Tienhoven who “assumed leadership of the crusade to institutionalize international nature protection,” and so the two clearly influenced each other’s work.³²

The fact that van Tienhoven was engaging with “leading thinkers in the social Darwinism/eugenics discourse” who were also interested in nature conservation presumably points to his involvement with figures at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.³³ This is particularly relevant because Carl Akeley, the taxidermist who established the famous African Hall there, is also credited with founding the first national park in Africa, *Parc National Albert* in the Belgian Congo (formed in 1925). The Akeleys envisioned it as an area of “exceptional variety of flora and fauna” and, if kept inviolate, believed it to be “an almost unique opportunity to save some of the primitive African pygmies, a race now threatened with extinction.”³⁴ As Carl Akeley’s wife Mary Jobe wrote:

A tribe of three hundred of these little people dwell in grass huts in the Kivu forest... Since the pygmy is one of the most interesting of all primitive peoples, it is earnestly hoped that he may never come under the civilizing influence of either the white man or a higher class of blacks. He affords a unique opportunity for scientific investigation. Just as the gorilla should be observed without domesticating him, so should the pygmy be studied without instilling in him a desire for white men's goods and chattels. He should be allowed to remain in his ancestral way of living. Fortunately, under the law of the Parc National Albert, he will be free from molestation and will have with all the other wild life of the park an absolute sanctuary.³⁵

Again, in this description and numerous others that the Akeleys left behind, indigenous people were paired with "all the other wild life" as romanticized "primitive" objects to be protected from "civilizing influence" and also as objects suitable for "scientific investigation."

As Roderick Neumann has shown, the evolution of Serengeti National Park in Tanganyika (contemporary Tanzania) followed closely in the approach started in the Congo. Various local realities and colonial ideologies prevented Serengeti National Park from becoming a human-free wilderness along the lines of the Yellowstone model in the United States or the Kruger model in South Africa. On the one hand, many colonial conservationists who were influential in the creation of the park subscribed to the "popular racial stereotype of 'primitive' Africans as part of the natural landscape." On the other hand, there was deep concern among some Tanganyikan officials that interfering with local customary right might prove disastrous, especially in 1951 in light of the Mau Mau Emergency occurring only a 3-hour drive to the north in Kenya, the same year that Serengeti's boundaries were set. As Neumann summarizes, these parks implemented

a mythical vision of Africa as an unspoiled wilderness, where nature existed undisturbed by destructive human intervention... 'Primitive' Africans were often simply regarded as fauna... The possibility of protecting them along with the wildlife could therefore be given serious consideration. It was the Europeans' prerogative, moreover, to determine the character of primitive culture... those Africans whose behavior did not fit with British preconceptions of 'primitive man' could not be allowed to remain in the national parks (the symbol of primeval Africa)...

Conservationists' original basis for accepting a human presence within the park, collateral with political expediency, was their belief that the Maasai would not detrimentally affect nature preservation efforts. Like the "Pygmies" of Parc National Albert, the Maasai were imagined to be living more or less harmoniously with nature because they were nomadic, did not hunt, and generally did not cultivate. When Africans did not live up to European stereotypes, attempts were made to make them conform.³⁶

Since Carl Akeley was so intimately involved in the establishment of both Africa's first national park and the prominent American Museum of Natural History, here I think, it is important to note the correspondence between the dual projects of anthropological-biological museums and parks preservation. As in the case of national parks, another prevalent manifestation of the desire to preserve and save for posterity the vanishing "other" throughout this whole period has been in the museumization of indigenous peoples. As Franz Boas put it in 1907, "Museums are the storehouses in which ... scientific materials from distant countries, vanishing species, paleontological remains, and the objects used by vanishing tribes are kept and preserved for all future time."³⁷ But more disturbing even than the linked preservationist projects of salvage anthropology and taxidermy, or even the museumization of indigenous peoples in dioramas alongside wildlife, was the historical phenomenon that has been identified as the "human zoo."³⁸ Between 1800 and 1950, some 35,000 people from around the world were "paraded before white Europeans and Americans" in these exhibitions, often literally put in cages or in the company of chimpanzees and orangutans in zoological gardens such as Ota

Benga at the Bronx Zoo.³⁹ In the apparition of human zoos, all of the imperialist and racist attitudes of the era were embodied; but for the purposes of this argument, what matters most is the fact that many of these exhibitions claimed to capture and preserve endangered specimens of humanity simultaneously for spectacle and for “anthropo–zoological science.” Thus, an 1840s exhibit in London of Khoisan peoples from Southern Africa referred to these people as “Bushmen” who were “sunk in the scale of humanity to the level almost of the beasts of the forest.” J.S. Tyler, the white exhibitor of these people claimed it was “inevitable that the Bushmen would soon be ‘exterminated.’ ‘Even now, London and Paris, in their museums, have stuffed skins of these people’, he declared.”⁴⁰

Coinciding with worldwide efforts in the early 20th century at the conservation of indigenous peoples’ landscapes, the category of “Indian wilderness” was also one being actively advanced in the United States at this time. Starting in the late 1930s under Robert Marshall, chief forester for the Office of Indian Affairs, the US government established an official system of “Indian wilderness.” Marshall’s original intention was that open space on Indian reservations could be designated for conservation under this label. As Rothenberg describes:

Marshall began compiling a list of Indian wilderness lands that he thought might be preserved. His official rationale was that since Indian cultures had evolved in wilderness, their cultural identities could best be preserved by saving some of that wilderness. But one could easily interpret his motive in more romantic terms: he was trying to protect these noble but innocent savages from the contaminating influence of modern civilization. By 1939, he had a list of sixteen areas totalling 4.8 million acres on thirteen reservations that he thought should be preserved. He then wrote a proposed executive order declaring each of the sixteen areas either ‘roadless’ or ‘wild,’ depending on its size. Collier [the Commissioner of Indian Affairs] signed the order on October 25, 1937; Interior Secretary Harold Ickes approved it two days later.⁴¹

Backlash

By 1961, the conservation category of “Indian wilderness” was scrapped in the United States, because the Bureau of Indian Affairs and many tribes themselves were opposed to the concept. The problem was that Marshall had created his Indian wilderness system without the tribes’ input or approval, and even though they could veto the designation of their lands as “Indian wilderness,” “understandably they did not want further federal interference.”⁴² Similarly, by the 1960s, the Akeleys’ dream of a park for the “Pygmies” was shattered when the Belgian Congo became the Democratic Republic of Congo and initiated a plan of forced relocations from its national parks. Said one Twa “Pygmy”: “Since we were expelled from our lands, death is following us. The village is becoming empty. We are heading toward extinction. Now the old people have died. Our culture is dying too.”⁴³ Curiously, today, texts discussing issues surrounding resident peoples in Virunga National Park almost universally avoid any discussion of its founding principles.⁴⁴ And in Lorentz, since Indonesian independence, there has been much back and forth with regard to the status of indigenous communities. In 1956, protected status for the park was first “abolished due to conflicts with Indigenous people over unresolved land ownership.” Then in 1978, Lorentz was “established as a Strict Nature Reserve by the Indonesian Government.”⁴⁵ Since that time, it has been reported that “Indigenous communities living around and within forested areas have been particularly marginalised from decision-making processes and restricted from accessing forest resources.”⁴⁶

In central India, too, the famed anthropologist Verrier Elwin proposed a plan in 1939, with remarkable similarities to those of Sarasin, van Tienhoven, Akeley, and Marshall discussed above. His intention was to counteract what he saw as “an over-hasty and unregulated process

of ‘uplift’ and civilization” for central India’s tribes by establishing “a sort of National Park, in which not only the Baiga, but the thousands of simple Gond in their neighbourhood might take refuge.”⁴⁷ This park was to be established in a “‘wild and largely inaccessible’ part of the country, under the direct control of a Tribes Commissioner. . . Inside this area, the administration was to allow the tribesmen to live their lives with the ‘utmost possible happiness and freedom.’”⁴⁸

Elwin’s proposition soon came under heavy fire, however. The Hindu nationalist sociologist G.S. Ghurye, in particular, launched a sustained attack on Elwin, calling him an “isolationist,” an “anthropological dictator.”⁴⁹ Ghurye fervently believed that the “so-called aborigines” of India were actually “backwards Hindus” who needed to be re-assimilated into the mainstream of the nation.⁵⁰ With specific reference to Elwin’s national park proposal, Ghurye criticized:

As we have seen, his scheme of a ‘National Park’ is intended to apply to that section of the so-called aborigines which has still kept itself vigorously tribal. In that ‘park’ there will be no schools, education being not considered good for the people of the ‘park.’ Outsiders will be licensed so that only amiable and amenable sorts of people get within the charmed circle. The people will practise shifting cultivation and will be governed by their own customs through their own elders. They will be encouraged to keep to their own ideas of aesthetics, etc. . . . Thus are they to be kept in ‘innocence and happiness for a while till civilization is more worthy to instruct them and until a scientific age has learnt how to bring development and without causing despair.’ For all practical purposes Dr. Elwin must be considered to be not only an isolationist but a no-changer as far as the uncontaminated aborigines are concerned, in spite of his disclaiming himself to be an isolationist.⁵¹

Following this rebuttal by Ghurye, Elwin eventually apologized for using the expression “National Park,” saying he “should have realized the unfortunate connotations.”⁵² Yet Elwin’s park was to have been established in the Mandla District, precisely where Kanha National Park, India’s most successful tiger sanctuary is now located. Mandla District is also the site of one of the more notorious colonial experiments in preserving and assimilating central India’s tribal populations: the Baiga Chak or Baiga Reservation, established in 1890.⁵³ Excluded and partially excluded areas for tribal communities were also official government of India policy by the time Elwin was writing. To some extent, his plan was already a reality; thus, Elwin felt it was primarily the issue of nomenclature that some objected to. As Elwin argued:

My views on the protection of the tribes caused a regular flutter, and for many years, indeed right up to the present time, I have been accused of wanting ‘to keep them as they are,’ to hold up their development, to preserve them as museum specimens for the benefit of anthropologists. This is, and always has been, nonsense.

It was not a question of preserving Baiga culture – for the Baigas have very little culture: it was a question of keeping them alive, saving them from oppression and exploitation, giving them a simple form of development. In actual fact, the Government of India has now appointed a Tribes Commissioner and established Tribal Welfare Departments in several States, as well as Scheduled and Tribal Areas, which in practice are not unlike what I suggested so long ago.⁵⁴

In many regards, this debate, in which Elwin eventually conceded loss, reflects the broader arch of the debate over what shape national parks around the world should take. Elwin’s concern for saving the Baiga from tribal extinction and Ghurye’s reaction that this would prevent assimilation and national progress both also resonate with wider debates that have taken place time and again around the world with reference to the fate of indigenous peoples and their lands. Although these days, those debates are usually framed in terms of self-determination for indigenous peoples, under what conditions should such choices be made?

Toward Biocultural Diversity Conservation

In 2014, there is widespread scientific consensus (and attendant horror) that we are living in the sixth period of mass extinction in the history of the earth. Whereas all previous periods of mass extinctions were attributable to natural disasters such as climate change, volcanoes, or meteors, this sixth extinction wave is unique in that we humans are causing it, i.e. it is anthropogenic.⁵⁵ Whereas most of the focus on the extinction crisis has traditionally been on charismatic wildlife species, a key question now being asked by a multitude of voices around the world is: in the sixth extinction, are more than just non-human species being lost? Since the late 1980s, several widely reputed studies have established that links exist between biological, linguistic, and cultural diversity.⁵⁶ More recently, there has been growing concern that links also exist between biological, linguistic, and cultural endangerment and extinction.⁵⁷ These concerns have given rise to policy plans to conserve biological and cultural diversity together.⁵⁸

The United Nations network of Biosphere Reserves run under the auspices of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve Program is a particularly prominent example of the push to advance the biocultural diversity conservation agenda in the international arena. UNESCO defines Biosphere Reserves as “special environments for both people and nature ... living examples of how human beings and nature can co-exist while respecting each others’ needs,” spaces that foster “the harmonious integration of people and nature for sustainable development.” Goals of the reserves include “Integrating cultural and biological diversity, especially the role of traditional knowledge in ecosystem management” and “aiming at preventing the present global trend of erosion of diversity, both biological and cultural.” In 2013, the World Network of Biosphere Reserves “is composed of 610 biosphere reserves in 117 countries, including 12 transboundary sites.”⁵⁹

Advocates of biocultural diversity conservation, i.e. the simultaneous conservation of biological and cultural diversity, tend to believe in the novelty of this approach.⁶⁰ In contrast, my own work contends that though the portmanteau neologism “biocultural diversity” may be of recent origin, awareness of these inextricable linkages is by no means new.⁶¹ Particularly noteworthy in the case of the UNESCO’s Man and Biosphere Program is that its intellectual genealogy can in some ways clearly be traced back to the work of Paul Sarasin, who was influential in founding the League of Nations’ International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation (CICI), the direct precursor of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁶² Time and again since the 19th century, we see individual and institutional linkages in agendas related to various forms of cultural and biological conservation. Perhaps, the most obvious manifestation of the lineage between pressure groups founded to protect peoples and wildlife can be seen in Thomas F. Buxton, first president of the Aborigines’ Protection Society established in 1839, and his grandson Edward N. Buxton, who led the creation of the Society for Preservation of Wild Fauna of Empire in 1903. In their multiple campaigns over several generations, the Buxtons, an elite family of English Quakers, show manifestations of the same romanticist and liberal desires to protect the vulnerable and those that cannot defend themselves at the essence of the top-down conservationist mentality.

Linkages in space as well as time connect every level of global parks management. Around the world, in recent decades, national and local governments have been adopting the new people-centered conservation paradigm. Recent legislation in India, for example, has granted so-called scheduled tribes and other forest dwellers the right to remain in India’s national parks. In 2003, a new Tiger Task Force was formed with its goal being to strengthen measures for tiger conservation. The task force broke with traditional models of parks conservation to propose “a new wildlife management paradigm that shares concerns of conservation with the public at large.”⁶³ As a direct result of these recommendations, in 2006, a new “Scheduled Tribes and Other

Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill” passed in India’s Parliament, the Lok Sabha. The bill promised forest dwellers, among other things, the right to remain in any forest, including wildlife sanctuaries, if they can show they had historically occupied that land.

Written with the premise of addressing the “*historical injustice* to these forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem,” the Bill also asserted that the “scheduled tribes” have traditional rights, defined as including “responsibilities and authority for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance... thereby strengthening the conservation regime of the forests while ensuring livelihood and food security.” Yet for all the blanket statements, such as “conservation is embedded in the ethos of tribal life,” contained in India’s Forest Rights Bill, and elsewhere in the new school of international conservation legislation, the question of “tribal” and other forest-dwelling peoples’ historical relationship with the ecosystem and its wildlife remains very much under discussion.⁶⁴

Analogously, in the United States in 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, or ANILCA, “designated more than 100 million acres, or 28 percent of the state, as new national parks” and other conservation lands and simultaneously “provided for the continuation of ‘customary and traditional’ subsistence use in the new national park areas.” As Catton argues, “Superficially, at least, this innovative concept for Alaska’s new national parks harkened back to one of the earliest antecedents of the national park idea.... [T]he romantic appeal of Catlin’s vision did not lie far beneath the surface of the legal language set forth in ANILCA’s subsistence provisions.”⁶⁵ It almost certainly has its origins in what Shepard Krech calls the myth of the “ecological Indian” as well.⁶⁶

Can it be mere coincidence that each of these conservation-minded thinkers – Catlin, Thoreau, Sarasin, van Tienhoven, Akeley, Elwin, Marshall, etc. – believed themselves to have independently developed the idea of biocultural conservation in parks, championing their plans as lone voices in the face of a worldwide movement toward human-free wilderness? The fact that so many individuals stumbled upon such similar visions of “people parks” should not come as a surprise considering the wide circulation of ideas linking endangered species and societies since the age of empire.

Variants of biocultural diversity conservation discourse have been prevalent since at least the 19th century, with recurrent tropes of vanishing and endangerment, and ideas of allowing or encouraging indigenous peoples to reside in “parks.” Today, it is at least as popular as it was some 150 years ago to declare that indigenous peoples, their cultures, religions, languages, etc. are “endangered” and are becoming “extinct.” Thus, ideas of *in situ* cultural conservation in national parks and other protected areas remain prevalent.⁶⁷ Usually, today, such sentiments are expressed with significantly more political correctness than in the colonial era, but not always. In fact, often times, it is quite amazing to see how half a century or more of intellectual and political struggle for intercultural sensitivity has been entirely missed by powerful groups engaged in working with indigenous peoples.⁶⁸ None of this is to say that indigenous communities should not live in their traditional homelands if they so choose. Rather, it is to say that only by confronting and acknowledging the bleak history of human endangerment discourse and “people parks” can the biocultural diversity conservation agenda begin to function postcolonially.

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Short Biography

Ezra Rashkow is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Montclair State University and a Research Associate with the South Asia Institute at Columbia University. His research focuses primarily on issues relating to the history of conservation and development-induced displacement affecting Bhil and Gond *adivasi* communities in western and central India, and he has published widely on issues relating to South Asian and world environmental history. His writings have appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Environment and History*, *Conservation and Society*, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *South Asian History and Culture*, and *Modern Asian Studies*, among others.

Notes

* Correspondence: Montclair State University, 323 Dickson Hall, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA. Email: Edr2115@columbia.edu.

¹ Kuper, "Return of the Native."

² Brockington, "Eviction for Conservation."

³ Agrawal, "Conservation and Displacement."

⁴ Rangarajan, "Displacement and Relocation."

⁵ Already in the 1970s when the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve program was founded, "Raymond Dasmann argued for conservation institutions to establish a different relationship with the 'biosphere people' with whom protected areas overlap" (Alcorn, "Indigenous Peoples and Conservation"). He also argued that moves to protect these communities "should be determined by the 'peripheral peoples' themselves. They alone have the right to determine their own future" (Dasmann, *The Conservation Alternative*). However, this mode of thinking about conservation was not prominent until the 1990s when the indigenous peoples movement merged with the politics of environmentalism (Conklin, "Environmentalism," 162–3).

⁶ Colchester, "Conservation Policy," 17–22.

⁷ Nash, *Wilderness*.

⁸ Brockington, "Consequences of Protected Areas," 609–616.

⁹ Spence, *Dispossessing*.

¹⁰ An interesting counterargument that protected areas were first established in India under the British Raj, and not in the United States, has recently been put forward by Barton, *Empire Forestry*.

¹¹ Brockington, *Fortress Conservation*.

¹² Steinhart, *Black Poachers*.

¹³ Beinart, "Colonial Conservation."

¹⁴ Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*; Saberwal, *Battles over Nature*.

¹⁵ Rashkow, *Nature of Endangerment*.

¹⁶ Dippie, *Vanishing American*, and Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, have both problematized discourses of "vanishing" long used to describe indigenous peoples, but neither explicitly links this to the language of environmental "endangerment."

¹⁷ Catlin, *Letters*, 261–262. *Italics* in the original. Fragments of this passage are oft quoted in environmental histories of national parks. Often, these sources will cursorily point out that, almost as a novelty, that 'surprisingly' there are parallels between Catlin's vision and the direction that park policy in their specific case study has pursued. Interestingly, although many have hailed Catlin as giving birth to the national park idea, none have yet linked Catlin to this wider nexus of 'people parks' as a pervasive approach to parks conservation. See, for example, Spence, *Dispossessing*, 10; Nash, *Wilderness*, 728; Adams, *Against Extinction*, 77; Runte, *National Parks*, 22.

¹⁸ Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

¹⁹ Catlin, *Letters*, 260.

²⁰ Spence, *Dispossessing*, 32–35, for example cites how Irving proposed that the Rocky Mountains "must ever remain an irreclaimable wilderness... affording a last refuge to the Indian."

²¹ Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 160.

²² Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 5.

- ²³ Martinez, "Protected Areas," 247–50.
- ²⁴ Hinton, "The Dark Side," 10.
- ²⁵ Botkin, *No Man's Garden*, 145.
- ²⁶ Spence, *Dispossessing*, 22.
- ²⁷ Wöbse, "The World."
- ²⁸ Wöbse, "Paul Sarasins," 207–14.
- ²⁹ Sarasin, *Über die Aufgaben des Weltnaturschutzes*, 1913. My translation.
- ³⁰ Jepson, "Histories of Protected Areas."
- ³¹ Pers. Comm. Paul Jepson (11/9/13).
- ³² Nash, *Wilderness*, 358–9.
- ³³ As Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 56 puts it, "the three public activities of the Museum, all dedicated to preserving a threatened manhood... [were] exhibition, eugenics, and conservation."
- ³⁴ Akeley, "Summary," 5.
- ³⁵ Akeley, *Carl Akeley's Africa*, 220.
- ³⁶ Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness*, 122–39.
- ³⁷ Boas, "Some principles," 920–33.
- ³⁸ Blanchard, *Human Zoos*.
- ³⁹ Browning, "Human Zoo."
- ⁴⁰ Durbach, "London," 84.
- ⁴¹ Glover, "Romance," 32.
- ⁴² Roth, "National Forests," 122.
- ⁴³ Colchester, "Conservation Policy," 17. See also Barume, *Heading Towards Extinction?*
- ⁴⁴ Languy, *Virunga*, for example does not even discuss Akeley's vision for the "Pygmies" of the park.
- ⁴⁵ Gabriel, *Cooperative Conservation*, 63.
- ⁴⁶ Moeliono, "Cattle, Cockatoos."
- ⁴⁷ Elwin, *Baiga*, 515.
- ⁴⁸ Elwin, *Tribal World*, 291–2.
- ⁴⁹ Sinha, "Colonial Anthropology," 71; Upadhyaya, "Hindu Nationalist Sociology," 28–57.
- ⁵⁰ Singh, "G.S. Ghurye," 39.
- ⁵¹ Ghurye, *Scheduled Tribes*, 164.
- ⁵² Elwin, "Growth," 476. Also Elwin, "Beating."
- ⁵³ Prasad, "Baiga."
- ⁵⁴ Elwin, *Tribal World*, 291–2.
- ⁵⁵ Leakey, *Sixth Extinction*.
- ⁵⁶ Gadgil, "Diversity"; Dasmann, "The Importance"; Nietschmann, "The Interdependence"; Mühlhäusler, "The Interdependence"; Harmon, "Are Linguistic," 26–27; Moore, "The Distribution"; Maffi, "Linguistic."
- ⁵⁷ Suckling, "A House on Fire"; Lizarralde, "Biodiversity"; Ostler, "Disappearing Languages"; Sutherland, "Parallel Extinction Risks."
- ⁵⁸ Oviedo, *Indigenous*; Maffi, *Biocultural Diversity Conservation*.
- ⁵⁹ EPCO, "EPCO Projects"; UNESCO, "World Network."
- ⁶⁰ Maffi, "Biocultural Diversity," 268.
- ⁶¹ Rashkow, "Endangerment Discourse."
- ⁶² Wöbse, "The World"; Gissibl et al., *Civilizing Nature*.
- ⁶³ Tiger Task Force, *Joining the Dots*, 3.
- ⁶⁴ The Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, no. 158 of 2005, 1–8.
- ⁶⁵ All quotations in this paragraph are from Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness*, 1–10.
- ⁶⁶ Krech, Shepard. *Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. London: Norton, 2001.
- ⁶⁷ Maffi, *Biocultural Diversity Conservation*.
- ⁶⁸ See for example any number of works on the Human Genome Diversity Project. E.g. Barker, "Human Genome Diversity," 574–575 and Marks, "Human Genome Diversity," 1–4.

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