



Conservation Evictions First Peoples Worldwide Background Paper March, 2007

What is First Peoples Worldwide's position on conservation evictions?

First Peoples Worldwide strongly opposes the relocation of Indigenous Peoples for conservation. Not only are these relocations abhorrent human rights violations; they have severe long-term impacts on the environment.

Forced relocation alienates Indigenous People from the goals of biodiversity conservation by:

- Creating a permanent population of refugees, severed from their traditional means of subsistence;
- Separating people from their own cultural commitments to sustainability;
- Preventing people from practicing traditional ecological knowledge, contributing to its loss; and
- Turning communities against protected area objectives and institutions.

First Peoples' goal is to protect Indigenous communities that are proven stewards of their environment and empower native peoples to manage their own assets and contribute to the achievement of global conservation goals at a lower financial and human cost than the current conservation paradigm.

What is a conservation eviction?

A conservation eviction is the forced relocation of families and communities in the name of biodiversity conservation. Evictions are usually carried out in the context of establishing an official protected area. In the most egregious cases communities are forced to leave without warning and without compensation, under penalty of torture or death. Conservation evictions usually involve Indigenous Peoples because their territories overlap with those areas rich in biodiversity where conservationists want to build parks.

There are other types of Indigenous relocation, sometimes referred to as soft evictions, which are equally deleterious to communities and their environments. In these cases, communities:

- Are offered inducements to leave;
- Have their territorial negotiations pre-empted; or
- Are allowed to continue to occupy the protected area, but live under the constant threat of removal, under strict conditions that do not allow for cultural survival. (Poole, 2003)

When Indigenous Peoples are forced out of their environment they lose their means of sustenance and become permanent refugees, suffering a myriad of health, economic and social impacts. Relocation leads to the disarticulation of a culture, and the traditional ecological knowledge it may hold. Scholars estimate millions of conservation refugees globally. An estimated 14 million conservation refugees have been created in Africa alone. (Geisler, 2002)

Aren't conservation evictions a problem of the past?

It's true that many infamous conservation evictions took place earlier in the twentieth century and particularly between 1985-1995, a period of rapid growth in funding for conservation. However, there are ongoing evictions and threats of evictions throughout the world. Over the past 25 years transnational conservation has set aside an area the size of the US, China and Canada combined for biodiversity conservation. Indigenous Peoples inhabit about 70% of that territory and most of it is still essential to their sustenance. Mounting pressure for the regulation of protected areas will inevitably lead to increased relocation.

This is a problem with which Indigenous Peoples are acutely familiar. At a recent International Forum on Indigenous Mapping, 200 delegates stated that the "activities of conservation organizations now represent the single biggest threat to the integrity of Indigenous lands."

What is the environmental impact of conservation evictions?

The forced relocation of Indigenous communities creates a population of permanent refugees that has a long-term negative impact on the ecology of a region. Displacement alienates the community from conservation objectives and leads to the endless conflict and expense of policing. (Turton) There are health impacts directly related to the conservation refugee communities linked to poor nutrition and the collapse of culturally regulated social norms. These include the increase and in some cases the introduction of HIV aids.

The most noted ecological impact of conservation refugees is unsustainable resource use around protected areas.

- Mounting evidence suggests that sedentary villages cause more soil erosion than shifting cultivation. Conservation refugees are forced to give up their nomadic lifestyle and settle into villages.
- Relocated villagers tend to settle in already overpopulated centers, leading to increased pressure on natural resources.
- Population pressure leads to increased harvesting of forest resources.

Don't large development projects cause most forced resettlements?

Yes, but any time that people are forced to leave their homes it is a crime, and relocations carried out for protected areas are done with the lowest standards, at times with no legal protections for the affected communities. There are presently no international conventions among states or conservation groups that adequately protect fundamental human rights in the face of evictions from protected areas. (Cernea, 2006) First Peoples advocates for accountability to human rights standards in all conservation funding.

What is the role of conservation organizations?

International conservation organizations contribute to the enforcement of park and protected area legislation that undermines the livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples. They also offer inducements, such as funding and technical expertise that provide a strong incentive for developing countries to ignore the rights of Indigenous communities and pursue evictions.



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Conservation International, for example, is currently offering to create a protected area and promote eco-tourism in Guyana, despite active protests of the six Wapishana communities within the park.

In many cases, when governments use conservation as a pretext to forcefully relocate, torture and otherwise intimidate minority ethnic groups, rather than protesting these actions or withdrawing their support, conservation groups simply turn their heads and state publicly that they cannot interfere in the internal affairs of another country.

For example, the New York based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) touts its conservation work in Burma, work that is criticized by human rights advocates. By the year 2000, Burma had designated over 15,000 sq. km. of protected areas in 31 national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. When evidence surfaced that the military government (SLORC) was torturing, killing, and evicting ethnic minorities in the alleged interest of conservation, the World Wildlife Federation and others closed down their programs there. However, the WCS continues to manage conservation programs in Burma, completely aware of continuing crimes against humanity.

Many conservation leaders throughout the world continue to promote the exclusionary ("Fortress") model of wilderness without humanity; a concept that facilitates the removal of natives from protected areas, just as the Miwok and Awahneeshi were removed from Yosemite National Park. Fortress conservationists present the protected area as a 'return to the wild,' where flora and fauna can only flourish in the absence of humans. This approach to conservation ignores the ongoing stewardship of Indigenous lands and undermines Indigenous Peoples' legitimate claims to their territory.

In the publicity materials of the large conservation organizations, the most serious threat to wildlife commonly cited is poaching or incursion by local peoples. But people 'poach' only when they are fenced out of their traditional lands. Even the strictest conservation organizations are beginning to realize that a protected area will not be protected if the people who have thrived in it for thousands of years are excluded. When local people suffer relocations, they are not likely to support the boundaries of a park.

Are protected areas the best way to protect biodiversity?

The creation of protected areas has not proven to be a successful model for biodiversity protection. With the exception of a few charismatic mega-fauna, biodiversity loss continues in the same dramatic downward spiral.

One model of biodiversity conservation that has barely been tried is that of conservation areas instigated and managed by Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples protected areas combine the creative use of assets with traditional ecological knowledge. In the few that exist studies indicate that biodiversity is increasing. It seems evident that Indigenous stewardship may be the key to protecting biodiversity.

Is the conservation eviction problem under control?

No, in fact, the problem appears to worsen as funding for protected areas increases. First Peoples has identified a number of pending hard evictions, and innumerable soft evictions being

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carried out at this very moment. [First Peoples Worldwide Research on Global Conservation Evictions](#) lists most of them. Here are just a few current examples.

- In Gabon the Wildlife Conservation Society claims on their website that they were “instrumental in convincing President Bongo to establish a national park system in 2002 that set aside just over 10% of the national patrimony for conservation with 13 national parks.” To support the initiative USAID gave the Gabon National Parks office \$56 million. But USAID does not adequately link compliance with human rights standards to their conservation funding. Thus the fate of thousands human occupants of those parks is uncertain.
- The government of India estimates that 2-3 million Indigenous People will be displaced over the next decade to comply with a World Wildlife Fund demand to protect tiger habitat. Non-government sources put the estimate closer to 5 million (Kothari, 2004).
- In Thailand, the Army, in the name of conservation, regularly forces the Karen people off their land. They are not able to report their situation for fear of death.
- In Ethiopia, about 20,000 Mursi people are threatened with eviction from the Omo National Park that recently came under the management of the Netherlands-based Africa Parks Foundation.

Can conservation evictions be stopped?

First Peoples Worldwide is committed to preventing relocations of Indigenous People in the name of conservation. A few of our strategies:

- Legal challenges: First Peoples was one of the primary supporters of the lawsuit by the San people of Botswana to return to their homeland in the Central Kalahari Game reserve. They won the right to return in December 2006.
- Human Rights regulation of conservation efforts: There are no international covenants and few national or even industry-wide policies to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the establishment of protected areas. First Peoples is working with colleagues in various policy-making arenas, including the United Nations, Capitol Hill, and the World Bank, to demand accountability.
- Promoting Indigenous Stewardship: We believe that the surest way to stop conservation evictions is to support Indigenous led conservation. Indigenous Stewardship is more efficient than the current protected areas model. That is why First Peoples established the Indigenous Stewardship Initiative, which carries out research, advocacy, and funding for Indigenous stewardship.

How can we measure success?

Evictions for any reason are unacceptable, but conservation evictions are particularly heinous because they displace the very people who possess the traditional knowledge to effectively protect biodiversity. Forcibly relocating long-term stewards from environments that sustain them

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in order to 'protect' nature is not only a foolish strategy, it is a cruel irony of the current conservation paradigm.

If human survival is separated from the survival of the natural environment, there is no guarantee it will be protected. Indigenous Peoples protect the environment because it is linked to their survival. It is our sincere belief that conservation initiatives will only succeed when humanity is included in all future plans for living with nature.

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