

**FIRST PEOPLES
WORLDWIDE**

857 Leeland Road
Fredericksburg, VA 22405
(540) 899-6545
fax (540) 899-6501
www.firstpeoplesworldwide.org



In Review ...

Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples

By Mark Dowie
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The current U.S. Poet Laureate, W.S. Merwin, has written of how absurd the search for obscure bits of historical truth may seem with “a storm of lies ... sweeping the planet.”

Nomads, hunter-gatherers, forest peoples, hill tribes and subsistence fishers are not past history yet. But with science, urbanized economic development fundamentalism, and conservation interests producing a perfect storm of lies to justify the seizure of their territories, how long before even the more enlightened opinion leaders find it absurd to argue for them? In the age of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, they still go unmentioned at major conservationist conferences.

So give Mark Dowie every credit. He has compiled a seeming ten thousand fragments of truth in his masterpiece of reportage from 2009, *Conservation Refugees*. The book is an indictment of saving the environment at the expense of Indigenous Peoples. It proves to a fare thee well, in the words of First Peoples Worldwide President and Founder Rebecca Adamson, that organized conservation represents a culturally conditioned refusal to recognize land rights for all. And more ominously, it provides evidence that the commodification of territorial resources is outpacing the comeback of “commons” models, with inscrutable consequences for a climate-changed, global-warmed biosphere.

At the very least, *Conservation Refugees* should raise doubts about the rhetorical questioning posed above: Indigenous cultures are anything but absurd, and opinion leaders are anything but enlightened. For in case study after case study, Dowie’s touches of detail reveal the colossal lies and ironies engineered by decades of disregard for first peoples – the keepers of the earth, the protectors of biodiversity before the term existed. Putatively humanist foundations, engaged in saving the planet, turn out to be unapologetic agents of cultural genocide. Governments talking the line of economic prosperity for all their people turn out to be the paid henchmen of corporations. Corporations with their profit motive and their various shades of green wash turn out to be infiltrators and enviro-pirates. Their justifications and denials are many, and they are often successful.

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Dowie's book leaves no doubt to the contrary: Indigenous Peoples on every continent are being driven off their lands in the name of conservation. In their place and to their cost, national parks and protected areas have been created. Collaborating in the evictions are Euro-American foundations, national governments, transnational corporations, nonprofit organizations, local businesses, environmentalists – and of course the cultural assumptions most of them share.

Foremost among these, long held and dying hard if at all, is an attitude toward nature. “Westerners still revere nature as a place, rather than a cultural concept,” Dowie writes. It is no place for human societies; it is a hostile place, to be subdued. “... An antagonism between human society and nature continues to grow as humans urbanize their cultures and separate themselves from both the places and the concepts they regard as ‘nature.’” The contrast with Indigenous cultures, embedded in nature as nature in them – as demonstrated by the “commons” approach to territorial resources that predominates among them – is stark indeed.

On the outcome of that stark contrast for Indigenous Peoples, Dowie quotes historian William Adams: “Once the idea of a pristine nature separate from people is accepted, it is a small step to the idea that it needs to be protected from ordinary human activity, especially from direct use of land, water, plants or animals. This idea goes deep within the dominant modern model of conservation. It has made the extinction of occupancy rights and eviction or resettlement a common experience across the world, in both industrialized and developing countries.”

The clear idea that Indigenous Peoples and their cultures depend on their territorial resources does not seem to interfere with conservationist ideals.

And it only motivates the businesses, corporations and settlers that want to drive them off their land and seize their resources. A frequent variation on the theme of nature purified by human exclusion is that making direct economic use of nature may be fine, as long as governments, corporations, local businesses, and salaried foundation staff are stripping the assets of Indigenous Peoples. Because Indigenous Peoples themselves must not make decisions about their own use of their own territories, Western science must be brought to bear against their traditions of sustainable use.

But perhaps the brightest note in Dowie's shocking account of environmental Imperialism is that Indigenous traditions of protective care for productive territory are making headway against their cancellation by science. “There are a growing number of well-documented incidents where [Traditional Ecological Knowledge] and Western science have come into conflict, and TEK has proven to be superior.” Dowie cites hunting and whaling cases in Canada; rotational cultivation in Australia, Central Africa, Sarawak, Malaysia, Thailand, Mexico and Belize; cattle grazing in East Africa; and by contrast, military-, civic-, or science-piloted biodiversity disaster areas in Brazil, Burma, India, California and elsewhere.

With such ameliorating evidence in mind, and apologists pocketing foundation or corporate dollars in advance of any public controversy, it is tempting to accept the estimations of polite society that, after all, the past is the past and things are changing. Isn't the U.S. Agency for International Development, a main

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offender of Indigenous communities through its corporate-profit-oriented approach to ending poverty, recasting its assistance to promote local food production?

One of two minor weaknesses in Dowie's great book is that on occasion, he seems to determine that conservation idealists will outgrow their incomprehension of human beings who are not only Indigenous to a place in nature, but a part of it – indeed, as others have stated, a “keystone species.” Writing in 2009, at the end of painstaking research and many remarkable paragraphs indicting organizational conservation, he discerns signs of change for the better, of better days ahead for Indigenous Peoples. He closes on a philosophical note of hope and progress. But at the end of 2010, we know that in the name of conservation, Canada has become the master resource thief among nations, by virtue of its Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement. We know that nations continue subverting the rule of their own law to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples for conservationist, political, ideological and economic purposes. We know that the international philanthropic network is rewarding its own for suppressing research that exposes the carnage of conservationist ideals. And we know that as local Community Conservancies, controlled by on-the-ground groups of Indigenous Peoples, grow in number and effectiveness, foundations in need of a good face for their own operations are acquiring them through money and influence.

Dowie, one of the most hard-nosed reporters of our time, would surely have been more stern if not for another shortcoming that makes itself felt from time to time: workshops, conferences, interviews, profiles, speeches and resolutions still do not amount to a community voice. Though by no means absent, it is a voice often muted in his pages.

But the weaknesses noted are little enough to lay against a book with a chance to change history for anyone who reads it. *Conservation Refugees* should be required reading in every course of environmental studies; no one should graduate a U.S. tribal college without reading it twice; every public library should feature a copy; every university should have pride of place for it on a syllabus or two; the Council on Foundations should devote a plenary workshop to it at the next annual conference, with Dowie as an honored guest lecturer; it should be duly noted on President Barack Obama's desk; an Oprah special should be in the works, as well as a documentary film – one that will stand with this book against the storm of lies.