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Conservation as Economic Imperialism

Sirisha C. Naidu

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Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) have historically been viewed as a desirable (and sometimes the only) way to engage in conservation of forests and biodiversity. In 2010, the World Database on Protected Areas recorded nationally designated PAs of 17 million km² (or 12.7%) of the world's terrestrial area, excluding Antarctica (including inland waters) around the world. A higher proportion of total area of the 'developing' world (13.3%), is classified as PAs than the 'developed' region (11.6%), with the Latin American region offering the highest level of 'protection' (20.4%) (Bertzky et al. 2012). Popular perception holds that PAs act as bulwark against over-extraction by capitalists as well as the local populace.

Since European colonialism, however, the colonised and residents of dominated states, on the one hand, have been fighting against capitalist over-extraction (although this is not to suggest that they have not been incorporated into a consumer society). On the other hand, they have been resisting the imposition of conservation. Forest conservation is viewed as yet another way to control nature and the labour of the dominated population. While conservation is desirable from an ecological perspective, the specific form and nature of conservation require attention because they can mask imperialist aspirations. Conservation under these circumstances would either provide a source of capital accumulation or safeguard imperialist interests, but lead to what David Harvey refers to as accumulation-by-dispossession (Harvey 2003). The incorporation of conservation into the imperialist project forms the basis of resistance against conservation by regulation as well as conservation through market forms. In the interests of brevity, the discussion will focus on the incorporation of forest conservation into imperialism.

Fortress conservation

Early colonialism was characterised by ecological imperialism (Crosby 1993) and highly intensive extraction of valuable minerals and biological matter (e.g. Clark and Foster 2009) to profit the colonisers. This effected

a change in land use across vast swathes of forestland to agricultural and mining purposes. With increasing scarcity of raw materials affecting capitalist production, colonial governments adopted 'scientific' management of forests that dictated land use and land management practices. In the US, while scientific management was adopted with a view to stemming unbridled laissez faire capitalism in the interests of enhanced efficiency (Guha and Gadgil, 1989), scientific management in the colonies maintained its efficiency objective but, without a thriving capitalist sector, directed its ire toward the 'natives'. Thus, indigenous (and in British India non-indigenous but local) populations, with their seemingly bewildering and overlapping usufruct rights and incomprehensible use of forest land, were viewed as anathema to advancing planned use and were often removed through the threat or actual use of violence. Thus, the dominant policy was to engage in fortress conservation and the forcible expropriation of the forest commons from its inhabitants.

For instance, the British in India enforced state monopoly by nationalising forests in the late 1800s. The main objective of the Indian Forest Act, 1865 and its subsequent amendment in 1878 was to establish PAs to secure a steady increase in timber production and silvicultural improvement. Forests were categorised according to their commercial value, and the degree to which local communities were excluded was determined accordingly. Images of severe scarcity, famine and environmental annihilation were invoked by colonial foresters to justify the severe social and political costs of expropriating the commons. Indian teak was used in building ships employed by the military in the Anglo-French wars in the early 19th century (ibid.). Also, timber extraction for railway sleepers, required to build an extensive rail network in India, exhausted large swathes of forests in the country. The rail network transported raw materials needed by capitalists and the British state especially during the two world wars. Forests were thus transformed into instruments of state power that allowed the imperialists to discipline the local populations, and at the same time incorporate nature into the capitalist project and aid in war efforts.

The actions of the imperial state were consistent with seeking to resolve the crisis of capitalism. The resolution was through a piece of legislation but enforcement was

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assumed through means of violence and conflict. However, 'conservation' was undertaken not as a result of a crisis of over-accumulation, but a crisis in the availability of raw materials to fulfil the needs of the imperial state (Magdoff 2003). Colonial policies formed the basis of post-Independence neo-Malthusian forest conservation policies in Asia and Africa (e.g. Fairhead and Leach 2005).

Markets and forests

While post-Independence states were free of direct control, imperialist interests continue to influence their economic and forest policies. This influence was accentuated with the debt crises of the 1980s and 1990s. Due to the subsequent structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF and World Bank, many economies (willingly or by force) liberalised their trade and investment regimes. Conservation policies were not immune to the tremendous impact of neo-liberalisation consequent to the intervention of the international economic regime. There has been a change in economic ideology, and discourses of the state and local communities. Despite the alleged progressive agenda of community participation and a 'bottom-up' approach, the associated focus on decentralisation has opened the field for market-based forest conservation (McCarthy 2005), and allowed international development and conservation agencies direct access to their intended audience. In many countries, PAs are heavily financially dependent on international organisations. In 2003, only 3 per cent of funds for PAs in Bolivia were supplied by the Bolivian state (La Prensa 2005 cited in Boillat, et al. 2008). Furthermore, in many countries PAs are administered directly by international conservation NGOs (Boillat et al. 2008). This has not diminished the role of the state, which, with its monopoly on legalised violence and significant control on instruments of ideology, facilitates accumulation by dispossession.

Debt-for-nature swaps

The debt crises led to significant intervention by the Paris Club, a group of 19 creditor countries formed to resolve and manage international debt. The Paris Club includes debt swaps, including debt-for-nature swaps (DNSs), in its arsenal of debt management

instruments. DNSs usually involve an international agency that buys the debt of a 'developing' country in the secondary market. It then sells the discounted debt back to the debtor country for local currency. This money is used by a local government agency or environmental group for use in an environmental programme agreed on by the agency buying the debt and the debtor country. In addition, swap agreements may also include the bank holding the debt. While the Paris Club has been forced to engage in debt forgiveness in some cases, its interventions have proved to be a boon for surplus capital (Harvey 2003). In 1987, the first DNS was agreed on between Conservation International, a US conservation group, and Bolivia. In exchange for the debt, Bolivia agreed to expand the 334,000 acre Beni Biosphere Reserve by 3.7 million acres. By 1993, conservation groups had raised \$128 million at a cost of \$47 million for 31 environmental projects primarily in Latin America and Africa (World Bank 1993 cited in Didia 2001).

DNS has been made possible by multiple actors – environmental NGOs, development agencies, and governments of the creditor and debtor countries. It has also allowed for a reorganisation of internal social relations to accommodate the needs of international capital looking for a spatio-temporal fix (Harvey 2003). For instance, the Canada/Costa Rica DNS investment was signed in 1995 and the conservation was to be overseen by the Costa Rican National Institute for Biodiversity (INBio), a Costa Rican NGO, and the Canadian Worldwide Wildlife Fund (WWF-C). It led to the creation of the Arenal project over an area of 250,561 hectares, of which 116,690 hectares were declared as PA; local inhabitants from 108 communities were expelled (Isla 2001). Conservation of trees on this land is sold as pollution credits to countries including Canada. Local inhabitants, previously engaged in subsistence production, are employed by INBio under the direction of the World Bank and are 'service providers'. The employed inhabitants produce inventories of local species which are used in bioprospecting for new pharmaceutical and agricultural products (ibid.). The Arenal project also promotes micro-enterprises aimed at women's participation in small-scale marketing of biodiversity financed by international funds at an interest rate of 20–30 per cent (ibid.).

As part of the Paris Club, the US has also played a significant role. The US Congress authorised three channels through which DNS was put into practice: (a) in 1989, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID; a federal government agency that disburses and administers foreign aid, and which reportedly has close ties to the CIA) was permitted to purchase commercial debt of foreign countries as part of a DNS agreement; (b) DNS transactions were included as part of the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative (EAI), which promoted free-market reform (Bush 1990), which restructured or sold Latin American debt equivalent to nearly \$1 billion (of the total \$1.8 billion) and generated \$178 million in local currency for expenditure on environmental and developmental projects (Sheikh 2006); (c) an expansion of the EAI model resulted in the Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFCA) to include tropical forests around the world, not just Latin America. Since 1998, this has led to the restructuring of loan worth \$82.6 million and is expected to raise \$136 million in local currency for tropical forest conservation in the next 12–26 years (*ibid.*). Eligibility for DNS transactions under EAI and TFCA include multiple criteria including co-operation with the US on drug control. Eligible countries are also required to undertake a structural adjustment loan or its equivalent from the IBRD (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) or IDA (International Development Association), or an agreement with the IMF and to implement economic reforms to ensure an open investment regime (*ibid.*).

As a debt-reduction instrument, DNS has not lived up to its promise (Didia 2001; Sheikh 2006). Nevertheless, advocates argue that it stimulates economic growth, international trade, and foreign investment in erstwhile low-income countries. On the issue of conservation, advocates argue that it generates significant conservation funds, though there has not been much evidence to show that this actually reduces over-extraction or increases forest conservation (Sheikh 2006). DNS agreements have resulted in conflict in some cases, especially due to the role of international agencies. In the Beni Biosphere Reserve, for instance, one result of the DNS was the formation of the Central de Pueblos Indígenas del Bolivia. This organisation accused the DNS of contravening the claims

of the indigenous people who had lived on the land for centuries. The DNS deal collapsed in 1990 after negotiations between the indigenous Chicame people and the Bolivian government (Hobbs 2012). It was later revealed that government agencies involved in the negotiation received significant funding from concessionaire logging companies that would have potentially been affected by the Reserve (*ibid.*). It nevertheless does not detract from the fact that indigenous communities would also have been subject to the exclusionary policy.

PES, REDD+ and carbon sequestration

Following the failure of the Kyoto Protocol, consecutive rounds of the Conference of Parties (COP) negotiations under the UN Framework Climate Change Convention have failed to arrive at any agreement on the limits on carbon emissions for individual countries. However, there is considerable excitement at the prospect of creating carbon offsets that can be traded in the market. One mechanism through which carbon offsets could be produced is carbon sequestration, presently referred to as REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation). It combines offsets with payment for environmental services (PES), which compensates those individuals who contribute labour to the provision of environmental services (WWF 2006). It is expected that providing a market for carbon offsets will compensate forest communities for conserving forests and thus provide an incentive to maintain or restore them (UN-REDD Programme 2010).

The conservation organisation WWF has recently undertaken to experiment with REDD+ projects by creating protected areas (PAs) in 15.5 million hectares of land spread across three key tropical forest regions. These include the Mai-Ndombe region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Kutai Barat District of East Kalimantan Province in Indonesia, and the Madre de Dios region of Peru; these constitute three of the five largest rainforest countries in the world. WWF's report claims the use of participatory planning, recognition of customary rights, and community participation in decision making (WWF 2013). Including funds from recipient countries and the US (in the case of Indonesia), financing is expected through the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, a World Bank programme created specially

to facilitate REDD+-type projects; and Forest Investment Program of the Climate Investment Funds, of which the World Bank is a Trustee and has fiduciary responsibilities. Funds from the Forest Investment Program are disbursed through multilateral development banks such as the African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank, and International Finance Corporation. The WWF report does not mention the amount of carbon credits or certified emissions reductions, possibly because currently there is no fully developed and stable carbon market.

Despite the enthusiasm for REDD+, not everyone is convinced of its desirability. Peru, one of the countries in which WWF has undertaken the project, had received \$350 million between 2008 and 2011 to implement REDD+ projects (Llanos and Feather 2011). A group of indigenous organisations affected by these projects released an analysis of REDD+ mechanism. One of the leaders of these organisations stated:

We live here in the Peruvian Amazon where there is a new boom, a new fever just like for rubber and oil but this time for carbon and REDD. The companies, NGOs and brokers are breeding, desperate for that magic thing, the signature of the village chief on the piece of paper about carbon credits, something that the community doesn't understand well but in doing so the middle-man hopes to earn huge profits on the back of our forests and our ways of life but providing few benefits for communities. We denounce this 'carbon piracy' that is one side of the reality of REDD in the Peruvian Amazon. The other side is the big programs of the environmental NGOs, the World Bank, the IDB and the government who promise to act with transparency and respect our collective rights but will this include the respect of our ancestral territories and self determination? The safeguards and guidelines of the big projects always say that they will respect our rights but the reality is always different. (Alberto Pizango Chota, President of the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon (AIDSEP) in Llanos and Feather 2011)

The report notes that more than 10 million hectares have been handed out to various

timber, tourism, REDD+ and conservation projects to the detriment of indigenous communities. Notwithstanding criticism of the implementation of REDD+ projects and carbon offsets, the report also discusses the pressure put on indigenous communities to waive their rights to land on highly unfavourable terms; contracts are complex and rendered in English to an illiterate, Spanish-speaking audience. Thus, the situation is set up to facilitate land grabs. The report further claims that REDD+ proponents have been manipulating the representation of costs and benefits, and that there is usually either no community consultation or that they are held only after the projects have been put in place (*ibid.*). Many REDD+ and REDD+-type projects have experienced land grabs, violent expropriation, human rights violations and militarisation; for instance, Papua New Guinea's indigenous leader was reportedly forced to abdicate carbon rights of his tribe's forest at gunpoint (Bond 2012).

Payment for environmental services, which forms the basis of REDD+ projects, requires monetising the value of nature and commodifying it for market exchange. The benefits of these projects to global capital are manifold. The imposition and rationalisation of property rights, whether vested in the individual or community, provides a lien on the extraction of further surplus value. It could be used as collateral to incur debt (Mandel et al. 2009; Sullivan 2013) and it could lead to real-estate appreciation. Similar conservation projects around the world could potentially absorb surplus capital and hence represent capitalised surplus value, which would be incorporated into the reproduction of global capitalism (see Harvey 2003; Kemp, 1967). According to a WWF report, while REDD+ projects only amassed \$7.2 billion in actual or pledged funds by 2010, forest conservation could potentially tap into a \$100 trillion bond market (Cranford et al. 2011). The actual impacts on sustaining nature and poverty alleviation, the stated objectives of REDD+, may be beside the point.

This explains the enthusiasm for REDD+ even though climate negotiations have been a failure (*ibid.*). The World Bank has consequently taken the lead in its implementation well before a global agreement about its use and framework has been reached. In addition, unlike previous fortress conservation projects, it is expected that there will be less

opposition to conservation efforts even if it is not always clear what the benefits are for the local populace. In cases when local communities are resistant to such projects, the state steps in and uses a combination of physical or psychological violence, regulation, or dangles the possibility of higher market income.

Conservation as imperialism

Control of raw materials has been cited as one of the motivating factors propelling the control of distant territories (Luxemburg, 1913/2003; Magdoff 2003). In contemporary times, however, imperialism has been manifested not through direct control of territories but through indirect control, influence of economic policies, and international relations. Capitalist businesses inherently attempt to manage risks through the control of raw materials among other factors, to influence not only the profit rate but also manage capital investment and competitive pressures (Magdoff 2003). This increases monopoly power that serves as a barrier to entry, and controls costs. Given capitalism's penchant for continuous expansion and growth, O'Connor (1998) argues in a Luxemburgian vein that capitalist expansion necessarily requires the degradation of the very conditions necessary for its survival, and that conservation would be viewed merely as costs for capitalism. While important in highlighting the limits to unfettered capitalist growth, O'Connor's analysis falls short in understanding the dynamic nature of capitalism.

Capitalism benefits not only from the current extraction of raw materials from nature, but also requires its maintenance for future extraction. Further, under incomplete substitutability between human-made goods and services and those provided by nature, capitalist production depends on what the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) refers to as the provisioning services of nature. O'Connor's (1998) analysis ignores the profit-making possibilities of environmental degradation (see Burkett 2005). Rather than be constrained by environmental degradation, the economic system has developed a number of solutions to the environmental problem such as free-market environmentalism evident in the rise of 'green' products in the market; cut-and-run environmental frontier approach, which is made possible due to high spatial displacement of capital and an approach often associated with

international mining companies; regulation of consumption of nature and environment; and co-opting community management in market endeavours; or some combination of the above. These responses are rooted within the fundamentals of imperialism, though the form of these responses is influenced by historical, geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors; thus necessitating the combination of solutions to tackle the problem, and at the same time sharpening contradictions (Biel 2012). These contradictions lie beyond the scope of this essay.

Harvey (2003) argues that if global capital is in surplus and seeks to be valorised, owing to uneven development, it can undertake geographical expansion, spatial reorganisation, and temporal displacement. This, he argues, explains the absorption of surplus capital into physical infrastructure that has use value and may also lead to appreciation of land value. The same argument could also be employed to explain the increasing attraction of forest conservation projects to finance capital (see Sullivan 2013). The most valuable forests have significant present and future use value. These long-term conservation projects also constitute temporal displacement as the value is realised for profit in the future through the employment of financial instruments. Further, these forests tend to be located in areas of low economic development and are often inhabited by indigenous people or the most marginalised section of society. Due to the current and future productive and consumptive possibilities, these forest conservation projects, whether voluntary or established by force, thus also become sites of asymmetric power and wealth, and unequal exchange.

While the imperial strategy has involved the use of some force in setting up and implementing forest conservation projects, this is not always necessary. The state may participate in the setting-up of institutions and the crafting of domestic and international regulation and treaties, as in the case of climate change agreements (or non-agreements). It may use the threat of economic fallouts and sanctions, as in the case of DNS. This draws our attention to institutions that govern the global circuit of capital, and the unequal exchange that displaces the burden of environmental contamination as well as environmental conservation to the Third World (Clark and Bellamy-Foster 2009; Sutcliffe

1999). For instance, poorer countries are the recipients of both e-waste and funds to reduce carbon and conserve forests (Bond 2012). This is not a contradiction for, as Sutcliffe (1999) argues, despite the existence of ecological limits, the 'privileged can afford to overpollute because the underprivileged are underpolluting'. Conserving forests in poorer countries using 'innovative' mechanisms such as PES and REDD+ displaces the burden of consumption reduction on those who are already underconsuming, so that industrial and post-industrial countries need only marginally deviate from their high consumption path.

The intervention of imperialist states and international development and conservation agencies in forest conservation is reminiscent of a desire for reintroducing what Max Booth, an editor of the *Wall Street Journal* and an advocate of US imperialism against terrorism, described as 'enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets' (Max Booth quoted in Harvey 2003). If and when a global agreement on the combination of state intervention and market instruments to tackle the problem of environmental conservation is reached, control of nature is likely to lead to monopolies. It would then be appropriate to invoke Lenin:

Production becomes social, but appropriation remains private. The social means of production remain the private property of a few. The general framework of formally recognised free competition remains, and the yoke of a few monopolists on the rest of the population becomes a hundred times heavier, more burdensome and intolerable. (Lenin 1916/1963: 205)

Resistance against certain forms of nature conservation as well as opposition against environmental degradation thus assume relevance; they become sites of anti-imperialist struggle.

Sirisha Naidu

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