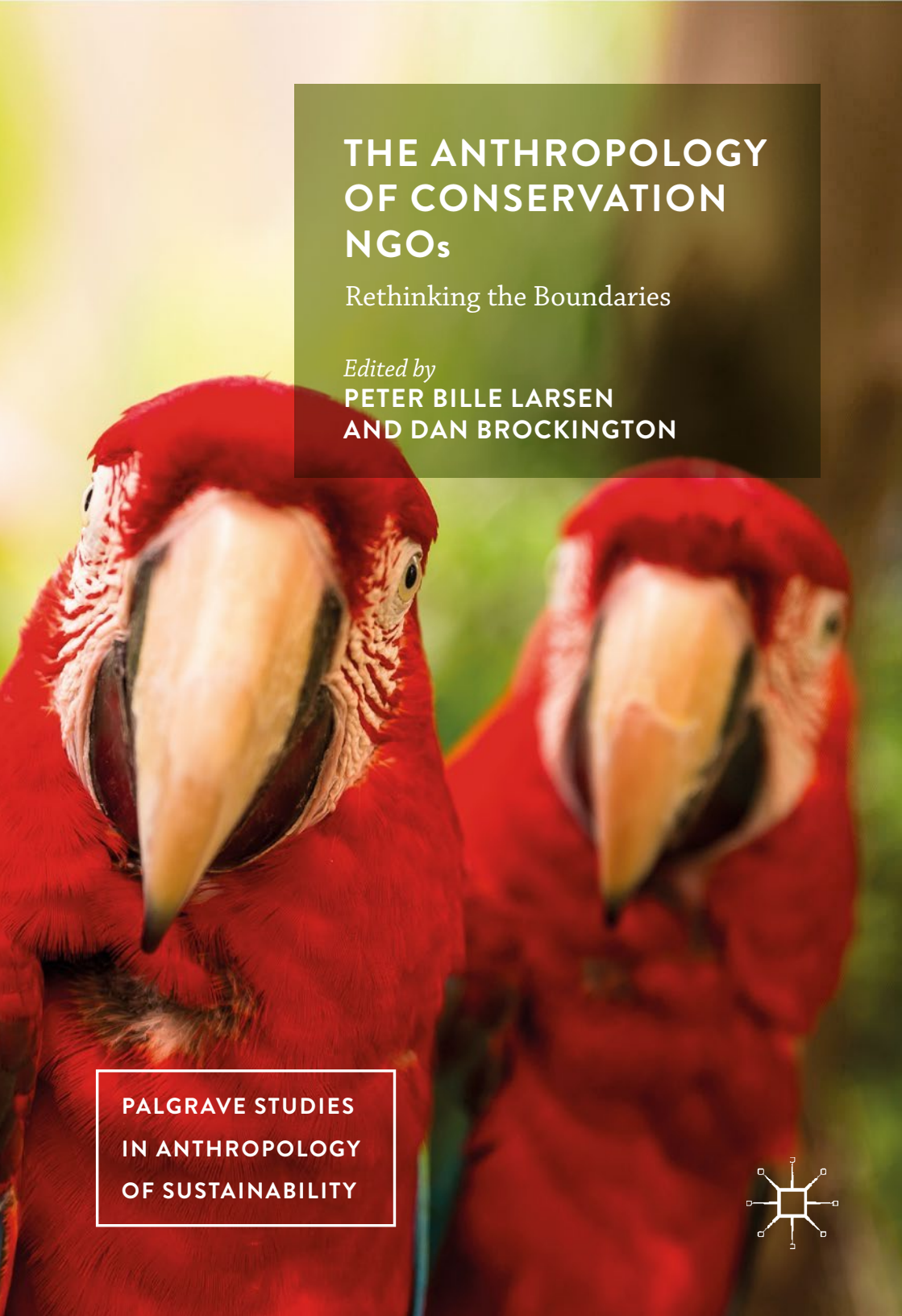
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CONSERVATION NGOs
Rethinking the Boundaries
Edited by
PETER BILLE LARSEN
AND DAN BROCKINGTON
PALGRAVE STUDIES
IN ANTHROPOLOGY
OF SUSTAINABILITY

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The Anthropology of Conservation NGOs

Rethinking the Boundaries

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Dedicated to the conservation practitioners,
our continuous conversations,
and their tireless efforts to make a difference.
—Peter Bille Larsen

For Tekla, Emily, and Rozie.
—Dan Brockington

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List of Figures

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Rethinking the Boundaries of Conservation NGOs

Peter Bille Larsen and Dan Brockington

Introduction

As debates rage on about changes required to build a different future for the planet, the role of conservation nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) as the global watchdogs of sustainability is increasingly prominent, but also questioned, in the public sphere. Vigorous debates about the role and effects of conservation NGOs call for independent analysis and debate about contemporary challenges and solutions. This book aims to showcase and challenge some of the latest engagements between critical social science and conservation NGOs. The authors have sought to do this partly because they believe it to be fundamentally important. Through such engagements it is possible to learn more about the consequences and politics of conservation policy, the way in which organisations function, and the interactions between various epistemologies and epistemic communities. This is a productive and

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insightful area for both researchers and practitioners. The chapters that follow showcase and debate some of the approaches that demonstrate these insights.

The authors also wanted to bring the chapters in this book together because the engagements can occasionally be frustrating. Too much of it is played out in contentious and adversarial ways that makes mutual learning and exchange difficult. The point is not that all the conflict is unwelcome, for some of these issues are best approached agonistically, where the difference is resolved through public debate, claiming space and airing of differences (Matulis and Moyer 2016). Consensus can be stifling and cloying. Still, however, it does not seem that the balance is right. Too many of the antagonisms on which Redford commented (2011 and reproduced in Chap. 9 of this book) remain. Therefore, there is also a commentary on, and an attempt to shift, the tone of these interactions. As will be clear from the commentaries (see particularly commentaries by Wilkie and Cleary), this book itself shows that there is still much work to be done.

Anthropological interest is not merely about whether NGOs make a difference but, paraphrasing Gregory Bateson, about understanding the difference that makes a difference (Bateson 1973). The real interest involves contributing to a more multifaceted understanding of NGOs, their forms of action and the contextual realities within which they operate. How is it possible to represent what conservation NGOs are and what they do if we acknowledge that they are dynamic and made up of webs of relations and networks rather than monolithic entities? Are anthropological and related critiques one step behind a dynamic reality, or one step ahead in terms of shedding light on NGO practice? Are conservation NGOs, in turn, ready for or resistant to 'informed criticism' (MacDonald 2003)? Are academics able to speak to the complex realities of conservation professionals and activists, and are the latter ready to explore and challenge basic assumptions and contentious politics? Where conservation NGOs look for success stories to describe achievements or give a positive spin, are social scientists, in turn, overemphasising the flipside of the coin? As Brosius noted:

> Anthropologists are seen to be fiddling while Rome burns. Furthermore, what anthropologists view as critiques derived from a particular set of theoretical premises, those in the conservation community view as criticisms, and this creates resentment. The fact that anthropologists, although prepared to critique, often fail to provide alternatives, only reinforces the perception that their criticisms are corrosive, irresponsible, and without validity. (2006: 684)

The discontent with critical literature and the difficulties of meaningful engagement persist a decade later. Neither the chapters, nor commentaries represented here shy away from strong positions, leading to some frustration in terms of nurturing fruitful exchanges. Can we, as Ashish Kothari (see Ashish Kothari (Chap. 12) of this book) and others, call for 'further shed[ding] stereotypes and be[ing] open to collaborations that can make conservation more effective and also more democratic and socially sensitive'? Notably, many of the commentaries reacting from the conservation NGO field, express more alignment with Redford's summary of social science contributions in Chap. 9 compared to other chapters. One reason, we suggest, concerns the challenge of representation, translation and contextualization in anthropology. Another, concerns the potential differences of perspective. What is certain is that there is a need for both more debate and multiple perspectives.

Nonetheless, first things first—this book is about conservation NGOs, but what do we mean by that? What constitutes a conservation NGO? The answer may appear straightforward, yet the ever-changing faces of conservation NGOs, histories of transformation from protest to advocacy, business or public service delivery point to significant differences, not merely subtle variations. The chapters herein challenge common assumptions about who and what conservation NGOs are and what they do. The sheer diversity of conservation NGOs both in terms of internal differences, underlying structures and evolving practices make them dynamic social entities. Compared to government hierarchies, NGOs' structures are more flexible, responsive to project funding and shifting dynamics. From Latin America to Asia, the NGO scene includes both affiliates of international organisations and homegrown institutions varying considerably in terms of political weight, constituencies and action forms (Miller 2007).

Many environmental organizations have shifted from initial positions of advocacy and confrontation to cooperation and interaction (Kraft 2001). One study of environmental justice organizations suggests a shift toward formalization, partnerships and networking (Perez et al. 2015). In Asia, for example, it has been suggested that policy influence on domestic environmental NGOs is limited compared to wider global processes (Frank et al. 2007); although, some national organizations, as in Indonesia, have been pivotal in influencing governmental environmental policies (Ruysschaert 2013). One of the challenges of this debate is to point to trends and patterns while capturing the diversity involved.

Conservation NGOs as Boundary Organizations

The idea of conservation NGOs as 'boundary organizations' offers one gaze to recast the debate. The concept has been used to describe organisations working at the boundaries between science and politics (Guston 2001; Carr and Wilkinson 2005). We suggest here a more expansive approach conceptualising boundary organisations as covering a broader set of boundary interactions, identities and relationships (O'Mahony and Bechky 2008). Organizations do not operate as self-contained entities in isolation, but evolve through boundary interaction with a variety of networks, multiple sectors and institutional contexts well beyond the science–policy interface. This entails roles of reshaping and defining the contours of conservation concerns, identities and constituencies as well as ways of framing and positioning themselves ideologically in relation to other actors. Thus, while conservation etymologically is about preserving and maintaining something, practice entails constant responses to and engagement with changing social, political and economic boundaries. Larsen (Chap. 2 of this book) notes how this creates friction between commonly held ideas of pure conservation action versus publicly contested forms of (inter)action.

Conservation NGOs inevitably entail interactions with a wide range of actors. Where business and government may appear as odd bedfellows with conservation on paper, today they are regular partners in more explicit terms. The question is not whether this takes place or not, but rather understanding the implications of these entanglements, transboundary transactions and the choices behind them. Ranging from explicit strategic engagement to tacit involvement, boundary interaction from conflict and contestation to cooperation is shaping the nature and outcomes of conservation action.

It is increasingly difficult to maintain divides between domestic and/or international, civil society (i.e., the state) or conservation and development. Faced with daunting climate change and biodiversity loss challenges, boundaries are continuously challenged to explore new frontiers of action. The ensuing questions of benefits and costs of this new set of interactions are frequent in the public sphere between organisations working with, and those challenging, the mainstream (McDonald 2016). What from one perspective may represent win–win gains, of shifting practice through alliance building and conversation, is from another perspective seen as giving in to the status quo.

Redefined roles, in relationship to social movements and grassroots organizations, business partnerships and state politics, are part and parcel of an NGO's life. Specific sectoral negotiations, or campaigns, often reveal changing alliances, diverse positionalities and intrasectoral divergences among global NGOs (Pallas 2013). Where conservation NGOs may engage in boundary maintenance to communicate and single out their core values and distinctive roles in society, they may equally challenge boundaries and venture into new forms of action. Engagements in social justice issues, for example, are not uniform, and complexities are rarely evident in the policy statements and self-representations of conservation action even within one NGO. Indigenous representatives may appear as board members in one context, be offered central roles in the development of policy standards, yet remain outside decision-making contexts in others.

Interrogating the *non*governmental of conservation, in this respect, concerns one important boundary. For one, certain forms of 'NGO' action today are often far more governmental than the name and history suggests. Red tape, permits and control, but also collaborative funding arrangements, capacity-building and long-term partnerships with state agencies are part and parcel of conservation work. Blurred boundaries are the rule rather than the exception in the (non)governmental sphere. Relationships with the state remain fraught with complexity between complicity, outright contestation of some ministries and decisions, while delivering services to and building capacity of others. Indeed, state machineries are equally complex and contradictory, rendering sensitivity to networks and 'transboundary' activity a critical feature of ethnographic attention to state-related NGO action.

Several papers cross-examine the implications of NGOs moving closer to, while speaking to and struggling against power. Conservation NGOs also display power and influence, and therefore merit analytical attention. The range includes conservation NGOs speaking with power and authority in local settings to internal power struggles or power implications of transboundary alliances with business and the state.[1]

In 2016, for example, Survival International launched an official complaint against the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), under the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, for having contributed to violence against the Baka in Cameroon through support of protected area creation and ecoguards targeting Baka in Southeastern Cameroon. The allegations suggested the centrality of NGO support in maintaining—and failing to

secure the respect of human rights—in a highly unjust system, nurturing displacement and even violence (Survival International 2016). This situation was not as unusual as it might appear.

Over the last couple of decades, human rights and local NGOs have denounced the impacts of conservation NGOs (Colchester 2003; Pyhälä et al. 2016). The relationship between conservation and human rights remains fraught and uncertain (Winer et al. 2007). Some NGOs' call for and support to militarized enforcement to fight the wildlife crisis is increasingly present in parts of the world (Duffy 2014), resulting in 'green militarization', which is understood as the use of military and paramilitary technologies in the pursuit of conservation (Lunstrum 2014). Still, the analytical point is not one of displaying NGO power alone, but of recognising the diversity of the power relationships at stake.

Power deficiencies, weakness and short-lived windows of opportunity of NGOs are far more frequent than actual influence. Furthermore, shifting alliances over time are not captured by the somewhat simplistic opposition between international NGO power trumping local action. Many NGOs today engage in alliances and collaborative efforts with indigenous people, local communities and their organizations. This book therefore insists on understanding NGOs as diverse and constituted both by varied webs of relations, responses to the contexts within which they operate, and portfolios of activities.

Boundaries of Action

Whereas NGOs generally were recognized as 'non-institutional' agents of both democratisation and development in the 1980s (Lewis 2016), the post-Rio (1992) prominence of conservation NGOs involved a window of privileged agency of sustainability and incremental institutionalisation both nationally and internationally. Conservation NGOs have contributed both to addressing and defining the sustainability frontiers and the normative frameworks of our times. Where it is common to distinguish between mainstream and radical organizations, NGOs are rarely confined to one approach, nor one form of engagement. Campaigns, business partnerships and legal action exist side by side without being flagged as such, and often evolve over time. Protest movements may become mainstream partnership organisations engaging with state power, just as popular support may drive mainstream organisations into campaign mode. The NGOs' actions and effects are not easily captured in standard typologies.

Amid the diversity of responses visible in the plethora of conservation NGOs' actions, some interesting contrasts are evident not the least being international meetings. Consider the differences of discourse between the 5th International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity, 'Walking the Meaningful Great Transformations' (Budapest, September 2016), and the World Conservation Congress, 'Planet at the Crossroads', in Honolulu attended by some 10,000 participants in the same year (see also MacDonald, Chap. 4 of this book). The Budapest conference spoke of 'Degrowth in Practice' under the motto 'slow down and think'.[2] Panel topics included: Connecting the Dots of Degrowth, the Growth Economy and Challenges for a Social Ecological Transformation and From Capitalist Accumulation to a Solidarity Economy.

The Hawai'i 'Commitments' in turn spoke of diverse voices finding common ground 'in a spirit of partnership and collaboration', a 'culture of conservation' and building constituencies aiming for '[e]conomic and legal systems … that reward communities and companies for actions and investments that protect and restore nature'. This conference called for more public and private investments in conservation and a 'collaborative approach, including government, civil society and the private sector' as 'essential for success'.[3]

A certain form of sanitized politics prevails and currents of partnership, dialogue and reform language clearly prevail over radical change among international conservation NGOs. *Dialogue* is prioritized as a value and engagement strategy. Ranging from staged 'high-level' encounters to institutional dialogue and roundtable mechanisms, how do impacts differ compared to more radical questioning and positions characterized by protests or confrontational media campaigns?

The NGOs and their operations are not simply signs of our times, but involve the pursuit of distinct ideas (Blanchard et al., Chap. 6 of this book) and distinct forms of agency and engagement (Ruyschaert and Salles, Chap. 5 of this book), chasing emerging opportunities through private financing, social media attention and political change. They are not only users but equally creators and sellers of conservation tools and approaches. In the often fiercely competitive marketplace of conservation finance, singularity and added-value are part and parcel of winning competitive bids and a seat at the table. Such conservation entrepreneurialism and creative thinking obviously entail risks and opportunities. A number of the authors (Ruyschaert and Salles, and Nuisiri, Chaps. 5 and 8 of this book) explore and challenge as to whether conservation NGOs achieve

conservation and wider development goals with their current portfolios. Critical assessments of effectiveness and equity impacts, however, should not overshadow that progress may be achieved through various forms of engagement (e.g., see Cleary, Chap. 11 of this book), nor the potential lost opportunities where more radical positions may deliver significant long-term results.

The Contents of This Book

The idea behind this book came out of a workshop, entitled 'Anthropology of Conservation NGOs', held in Chicago in December 2013. The themes and perspectives struck a chord with a growing call for further engagement and bridge-building between critical research and conservation NGOs. Additional contributions were brought together and commentaries from practitioners and observers of the NGO field were solicited to trigger and stimulate further debate.

One of the central themes of the chapters here is the changing relationship of conservation organisations with the market-based conservation and neoliberal capitalism more generally. Libby Blanchard, Chris Sandbrook, Janet Fisher and Bhaskar Vira look at the variety of attitudes toward market-based instruments using the Q methodology among conservationists at the International Congress for Conservation Biology (in New Zealand in 2011) and among conservation organisations clustered in Cambridge, UK (in 2013). They find a divergent set of attitudes toward the use of market-based instruments in conservation. At both sites there was a clear group of market enthusiasts, who embraced the opportunities that markets provide. As one of the respondents put it:

> [W]e used to be combative and confrontational, presenting to the rest of the world capitalism as the cause of the decline in biodiversity. Now we are moving into a much more mature frame of mind that says collaboration. Let's try to solve these problems together. Let's take what money, wealth, and capitalism can do at face value and help it do the right thing to make the world a better place.

The strength of the common viewpoints in New Zealand and Cambridge over a two-year period suggested a single epistemic community forming around embracing and supporting market-based initiatives in conservation. There were some indications that the move to embrace markets is

being led from the top by leaders in the respective organisations that took part. Nevertheless, there also were a series of viewpoints that expressed more scepticism of, if not opposition to, market enthusiasm. These were, however, more fragmented, and expressed in a different way across the two study sites the researchers dealt with.

Similarly, George Holmes, in Chile, details the surprisingly opportunistic and contingent engagement of conservation organisations in setting up new protected areas on private land. These are happenstance alliances not driven by large-scale, long-term planning, but simply because new opportunities to set aside large areas of land emerged. The growth of protected areas here came about, ironically, because of legislation designed to make it easier for companies to take over land for development. They (the protected areas) are flourishing in part because capital investments are not. These are marginal lands that can be set aside for conservation because commercial interest in them has waned. This strikes a chord with a broader argument about the significance of context to fully grasp the action realm of conservation NGOs.

Ken MacDonald's chapter tackles one of the most vibrant aspects of the marriage between mainstream capitalism and mainstream conservation head on, examining the performance and institutionalisation of the private sector with conservation organisations at the World Conservation Congress (WCC) in 2008. Through exploring the political message, spectacle, orchestration and organisation of the conference he found that:

> The 2008 WCC provided a notable window into the consolidation of such relationships, perspectives, and processes and their role in shaping the new organisational order of IUCN; one which situates markets, business, and private sector actors firmly at the core of the Secretariat, if not the membership, of IUCN.

Engagements with capitalism also frame the work of Denis Ruysschaert and Dennis Salles on the NGOs engaged in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a private multi-stakeholder initiative to produce 'sustainable' oil palm. Nonetheless, their case serves to illustrate a further point—that is, the work of conservation NGOs is best understood by exploring the work of collectives of organisations and by exploring the fault lines and continuities across them. This chapter examines the paradox of NGO engagement with palm oil and tropical deforestation with a focus on Southeast Asia. There, both deforestation for palm oil and engagement

in the RSPO are increasing. What drives NGO involvement and these apparent failures in the Roundtable's ultimate goal? Based on more than five years of engagement with the RSPO, the authors divide NGOs into those who collaborate, those who oppose, and those who are opportunists and chose either collaborative or oppositional stances depending on the needs in specific areas. The last group, the sceptics, are concerned more with community land rights than collaboration. A key limitation was that NGOs in these diverse strategic camps were separated in practise. They could not collaborate across the strategies.

Dan Brockington, Katherine Scholfield and Richard Ladle take a sectorial approach, considering the work of NGOs as united by their geography—in this case, their work in sub-Saharan Africa. Using previously published work, which describes the distribution of activities, they show that several thought experiments and various insights into their work and performance become possible with this perspective. Indeed, Scholfield's observation, from her study of one conservation NGO network in Rwanda, was that 'NGO activities made little sense when viewed as the work of single organisations'. This approach also can indicate new possibilities of collaboration and make it possible to ask which synergies might be possible if forces were combined. Their challenging observation is that entirely new scales of collaboration could result in transformative support for protected areas. Current estimates suggest that it would cost a little over USD60 million (in 2006) to fully protect more than 90% of the more strictly protected areas (IUCN categories I–IV). This is without further state subsidy. Expenditures in 2006 by conservation NGOs was probably more than three times that figure.

Emmanuel Nuesiri's concern is with the work of the NGO sector on the local and national scale. Building on work by Ribot and others, he observes that conservation NGOs have been used effectively to circumvent local process and politics with respect to the implementation of the UN Programme for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) in the Cross River State in Nigeria. Their presence made it possible for forestry groups that were implementing REDD+ to work without going through elected local government representatives. At the same time these NGOs were not well equipped to challenge some aspects of the REDD+.

Bridging the gaps between critical social scientists working on conservation, and many in the conservation community remains difficult. This is clear in the work of Blanchard and colleagues, who found that there

seemed to be little connectivity between critical social science scholars' views about market-based instruments and the market sceptics in conservation communities. Peter Bille Larsen in his Chap. 2 emphasizes how much both public and scientific discourse are framed easily in simplistic narratives, ill-adapted to capture the complexity and changing practices of conservation NGOs. Even though conservation NGOs in part thrive on narratives of fighting for the public environmental good, counternarratives about NGOs growing big, 'ugly' and business-minded are common in both social science and public discourse. Through a case study of the shifting roles and practices of NGOs in the Peruvian Amazon, Larsen calls for a critical middle ground of analysis that will be able to capture problematic spaces as well as alternative institutional forms and practice worthy of anthropological exploration. Such middle grounds, however, are perhaps better thought of as turbulent seas.

Kent Redford's Chap. 9 (and David Wilkie's commentary) offer salutary and critical observations as to the way that this engagement is undertaken. Redford's essay, which has been reproduced in this book, provides a short list of the ways in which social science has improved conservation practice, and a lengthier discussion of the problems with social science engagement. Social science analysis does not appreciate sufficiently the diversity of conservation practice, thinking, strategy or instruments. Redford remains hopeful that engagement between diverse sides can be constructive, and he calls for continued engagement with *informed* (our emphasis) social science.

The final section of the book is a collection of independent commentaries by thinkers and practitioners who are active in the conservation NGO field on writings we gathered and have just summarised. Solicited in the spirit of nurturing further debate, the diversity of responses is encouraging as well as indicative of vigorous debates ahead. On the one hand, there is general agreement about the significance of social sciences within and about the role of conservation NGOs. Ed Tongson, for example, underscores how stakeholder analysis, participatory research and approaches to equitable sharing of costs and benefits informed the toolkit employed in marine conservation. Diane Russel, in turn, offers a succinct perspective on the importance of institutional factors in shaping NGO action. Kartik Shanker, Siddhartha Krishnan and Marianne Manuel, in a point of view from India, challenge dichotomies between local and international NGOs, noting similitudes but also variation and complexity.

On the other hand, several commentaries express uneasiness with the theoretical premises and analytical value of critical approaches. David Cleary challenges analysis as being rigidly grounded in a political economy framework and ideology that disregards actual achievements. David Wilkie equally suggests that language and an overemphasis on neoliberalism from afar hinders effective dialogue with conservation practitioners. Steve Brechin, in contrast, calls for renewed debate about NGO ethics, reminding readers of attempts to silence a critical essay more than a decade ago (Chapin 2004).

Debates around language, theory and perspective may at first glance appear unusually heated and emotional, yet are also signs of the profound engagement found in both the social sciences and conservation NGOs. These are not matters taken lightly either at a personal or an organizational level. The discussions offer a refreshing basis for exchange and alternatives to the polished nature of dialogues predominating contemporary conservation forums.

Concluding Remarks

The shifting boundaries of conservation NGO identities and actions offer an important terrain of study as well as fields of engagement and exchange. Yet, at the end of the day, do critical approaches and further anthropological analyses matter? What difference, if any, do they make? Both the findings and discussions offered here testify to the fertile grounds.

Kothari, in his commentary, calls for 'rethinking epistemologies based on much closer, collaborative work with indigenous peoples and other traditional local communities'. This challenge arguably goes for both the social sciences, such as anthropology, and conservation NGOs. Although specific anthropological studies or conservation projects may come under attack for imposing their knowledge forms, this should not draw attention away from the fact that overall global trends of sidelined science, immobilized NGOs and climate change responses are being hollowed out. In this sense, social sciences share a fundamental epistemological challenge in terms of the various ways of knowing and, ultimately, stewarding the world. Central to this endeavour are the multiple ways in which human environment relationships, practices and values are conceptualized—a central theme in both environmental anthropologies and political ecology at large.

Given that NGOs are a critical piece in the larger puzzle of biodiversity conservation, the ability to interrogate and speak to the concepts, approaches and partnerships undertaken, and how they relate to social and ecological processes, remains important. Such attention needs to be directed not only at NGOs themselves, but also through boundary engagement to shed light on wider trends of sustainability politics, economic organization and social practise. This entails shifting from individual projects and activities toward contextually informed organizational histories and sectoral perspectives. In particular, tracing the craft and long-standing moral guardians of sustainability needs to be seen in the context of nation-state policy and global inequalities. The NGOs seek to occupy a powerful institutional space, yet cultural brokers and boundary actors are equally vulnerable to governmental control and the perils of unstable finance.

Understanding the effects and the effectiveness of conservation interventions continues to trail most other policy fields (Ferraro and Pattanayak 2006). Responding to such dynamics, not the least being the mediating role of conservation NGOs in global and local responses to conservation challenges, is key to current and future sustainability interventions. Consistent calls for strengthening the evaluation of conservation measures raises the need for applied social science, as well as critical approaches that reach beyond immediate output and outcome indicators. A given initiative may be judged relevant or effectively implemented, but still not necessarily capture shifting institutional arrangements, political trends and future viability. Given the magnitude and multiple scales of socioenvironmental challenges, the ways in which problems are framed and solutions play out in practice in diverse social, political and cultural contexts should be at the heart of research.

Sherry Ortner recently asked: 'How can we be both realistic about the ugly realities of the world today and hopeful about the possibilities of changing them?' She was describing how 'dark anthropology' since the 1980s has tended to focus on 'the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality, and oppression)' (Ortner 2016). The question is of more obvious relevance than ever if individuals take the sustainability challenges of our times seriously. Whereas the necessity of 'dark' analysis remains, there is certainly room for additional empirical and theoretical ventures into the world of conservation NGOs.

Anthropology from this perspective need not be about jumping on the bandwagon of imagining futures and a positive solution spin, but first and foremost of decrypting practice in real social terms. Applied conservation

anthropologies have a long history of engagement through, for example, ethnobotany and problem and stakeholder analysis; however, equally so through employing critical social science and political ecology to contextualize the reach of conservation NGOs from a dynamic, relational and processual perspective. Dramatic environmental transformations prompt not only attention to changing state policies and multilateralism, but equally so to the efforts and context of conservation NGOs' actions.

Notes

1. Note that Sandbrook's blog on this topic is available at: https://thinkinglikeahuman.com/2016/09/22/weak-yet-strong-the-uneven-power-relations-of-conservation/
2. http://budapest.degrowth.org/. Accessed 18 December 2016.
3. https://portals.iucn.org/congress/sites/congress/files/EN%20Navigating%20Island%20Earth%20-%20Hawaii%20Commitments_FINAL.PDF. Accessed 18 December 2016.

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CHAPTER 2

The Good, the Ugly and the 'Dirty Harry's of Conservation: Rethinking the Anthropology of Conservation NGOs

Peter Bille Larsen

Introduction[1]

'Are you in?' I was asked this in the email header from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF),[2] a big conservation organisation, with which I have collaborated over the years. 'Do you care about a clean, healthy future for people and the planet?', the mass mailing continued. The following section, 'Our Pledge', noted: '[W]e believe our future should be powered by nature' and emphasised the need for 'investments in clean and renewable energy'. It went on: 'We choose to invest in solutions, not in problems'. The email's message ended with: 'Click "yes" to sign our plea: seize your power'. Such power could either be seized through Facebook, Twitter or Google+, revealing the social media version of 'signing up' to 'good' solutions spearheaded by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

Conservation NGOs, dedicated to biodiversity at large, today form a natural part of the institutional landscape and public space. The NGOs'

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influence and presence grew exponentially in the years following the 1992 Earth Summit, leading to the expansion of field offices of Northern NGOs as well as the mushrooming of Southern conservation NGOs (Levine 2002). They have been particularly influential in shaping public opinion and policy in the North (Corson 2010) as well as in influencing policy terrains in the global South that harbour the highest concentrations of biodiversity.

Anthropologists have become increasingly active both in terms of working within and studying the work of conservation NGOs. First, conservation NGO projects are increasingly present in 'ethnographic' field settings because of the explosion of conservation initiatives across the globe. This has led to many projects hiring practising anthropologists. Second, conservation presence has led to tensions and dynamics with indigenous people and local communities, triggering various forms of anthropological critique. Third, a growing body of analysis has increasingly taken up conservation NGOs as an object of study in their own right. Anthropologists have portrayed local perspectives in which global narratives prevail. They have undertaken global event ethnographies (Brosius and Campbell 2010; Corson and MacDonald 2012), site-specific analysis (West 2006) as well as comparative work (Brockington and Scholfield 2010). The discipline is also at the forefront of 'elucidating institutional developments and the forms of environmental surveillance and intervention it promotes' (Brosius 1999: 50).

Nevertheless, rather than resulting in a concerted anthropological conservation agenda, such engagement is pointing to a number of contradictions. Not only has the biodiversity crisis deepened during the same period that NGO activity has mushroomed, but also the very solutions conservation organisations propose are questioned and, according to some, are even aggravating the problem (Igoe and Brockington 2007). Critical voices point to mainstream organisations, particularly big international nongovernmental organisations (BINGOs) that are dedicated to anodyne advocacy rather than activism. They observe technically framed solutions and compromise replacing politics, corporate partnerships substituting critique, narrow environmental policy and single issues predominating over broad-scale sustainability politics (Barker 2010; Chapin 2004; Holmes 2011; Levine 2002; MacDonald 2010). Furthermore, there have been attacks in the global South against international conservation NGOs, which are perceived as foreign enterprises that undermine rather than support national civil society organisations, whether through