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The Hidden Cost of Paradise

Indigenous people are being displaced to create wilderness areas, to the detriment of all

By Mark Dowie

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In the name of conservation, millions of indigenous people – including over 100,000 Masai in East Africa – have been expelled from their homelands.

the HIDDEN COST of PARADISE

Indigenous people are being displaced to create wilderness areas, to the detriment of all

by MARK DOWIE

Against the wall of a large meeting room in Bangkok, Thailand, stands Martin Saning'o. The Masai leader from Tanzania listens intently to a panel discussing the human factor in conservation, and patiently awaits an invitation to comment. He stands out as the only black man in a room packed with committed environmentalists, most of whom are from the United States and Europe. When his turn comes, Saning'o speaks softly in slightly accented but perfect English.

"Our ways of farming pollinated diverse seed species and maintained corridors between ecosystems," he explains to an audience he knows to be schooled in Western ecological sciences. But over the last 30 years that way of life has dramatically changed. During that time, more than 100,000 Masai pastoralists have been displaced from their traditional homelands in southern Kenya and the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania, all in the interest of conservation. "We were the original conservationists," he tells the room full of shocked white faces. "Now you have made us enemies of conservation."

This was not the message that most of the 6,000 wildlife biologists and conservation activists from over 100 countries had come to Bangkok to hear. They were assembled at the Third Congress of the World Conservation Union (also know as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources [IUCN]) to explore new ways to stem the troubling loss of biological diversity on an ecologically challenged planet.

Based in Gland, Switzerland, IUCN is an assembly of 82 states, 111 government agencies, more than 800 nongovernmental organizations, and over 10,000 scientists, lawyers, educators, and corporate executives from 181 countries. The IUCN's mission is "to influence, encourage, and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to assure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable." To those who believe that ecological health trumps all other measurements of human security, IUCN stands amongst the most important international organizations in the world.

What drew Martin Saning'o and about 400 other indigenous people to the November 2004 gathering

PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM GRAHAM/GETTY IMAGES

was the congress's theme – "People and Nature – Only One World." It was not a title that all members of IUCN would have chosen, as there remains in that community a fair number of traditional conservationists who define wilderness in the same manner that the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964 does, "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Masai women living near Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania, collect donated maize. After living in harmony with the wildlife here for centuries, the Masai were banished from the crater to make way for eco-tourism. Yet the Masai see little of the vast revenues that eco-tourism brings, and so live in poverty at the border of their ancestral home.

To followers of that doctrine, known in the field as "fortress conservation," most areas that are designated for protection and that are occupied by humans should be evacuated, and thereby returned to "nature." Of course, the people evacuated should be promised fair compensation and resettlement in areas at least as productive as the ones they lost. Unfortunately, those promises are rarely kept.

And so, the word "people" in the meeting's theme was a long-awaited indication to Indians, pastoralists, Bushmen, aboriginals, and forest dwellers around the globe that at last the international conservation movement was trying to understand the historical role that so many indigenous people have played in preserving the very ecosystems being selected for protection.

"We were the ORIGINAL conservationists. Now you have made us ENEMIES of conservation."

For a quarter of a century now, indigenous leaders have been traveling thousands of miles to conservation, national park, and wilderness conventions around the world. Their message is simple: "We have proven ourselves to be good stewards; otherwise you wouldn't want our land for conservation. Let us stay where our ancestors are buried and we will help you preserve the biological diversity we both treasure."

Here, in one thematic word – people – was a sign that their message was finally getting through. But not to everyone. There remain skeptics and holdouts for fortress conservation. So Bangkok was an opportunity not to be missed. It was Martin Saning'o's moment.

Preserving Wildness

The fortress model of wildland conservation is largely an American invention. It grew from the transcendental and romantic writings of Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Robert Marshall, all of whom spoke and wrote lyrically about Edenic wilderness, and in doing so convinced their followers that what they were seeing in wilderness was primitive and virginal. Truly wild "old growth" forests, they wrongly believed, had never been altered by human

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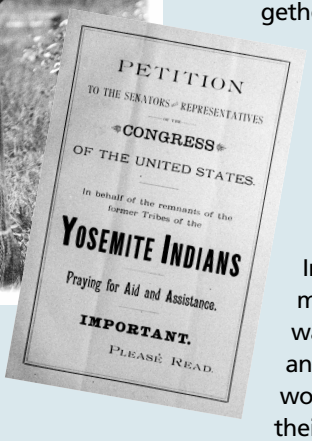
It All Started Here

When gold miner and wilderness romantic Lafayette Bunnell first rode into Yosemite Valley on March 21, 1851, he thought he had arrived, if not in heaven, in Eden. "I have seen the power and glory of a supreme being," he wrote, and "the majesty of his handiwork." Bunnell was not alone that day. In fact, he was accompanying one of the most aggressive militias in western American history, the Mariposa Battalion, commanded by James Savage. A veteran of Indian wars, Savage was there to rid Yosemite Valley of natives so that gold miners would be safe to ply their trade on the banks of the swift-flowing Merced – the River of Mercy.


PETITION
TO THE SENATORS & REPRESENTATIVES
CONGRESS
OF THE UNITED STATES.
In behalf of the remnants of the former Tribes of the
YOSEMITE INDIANS
Praying for Aid and Assistance.
IMPORTANT.
PLEASE READ.

Suzie McGowan and her daughter Sadie pass in front of Yosemite Falls in 1901.

The natives were Ahwahneechee Indians, a small band of Miwoks who had intermarried with the Paiutes of Mono Lake and settled in the valley some 4,000 years before Bunnell and Savage "discovered" it. Bunnell had mixed feelings about the valley's inhabitants. At times he romanticized their way of living, but he also said there was no room for them in the West, calling them "yelling demons" and "overgrown vicious children." The territory, Bunnell wrote in his journal, should be "swept of any scattered bands that might infest it." And Savage was more than willing to accommodate him.

On that early spring day in 1851, Bunnell stood by and watched while Savage and his men burned acorn caches to starve the Ahwahneechee out of the valley. Seventy Indians were physically removed. Twenty-three were later slaughtered at the foot of El Capitan. In his diary Bunnell wrote of being overwrought with emotion at the foot of that majestic edifice. But it was not the massacre that moved him to "tears of emotion," it was the sight of El Cap itself.

But the Ahwahneechee wouldn't give up easily. In the years that followed they kept returning to the valley, despite the near certainty that Savage or one of his successors would find them, kill a few, and move the rest to a reservation created for them in the Central Valley of California.

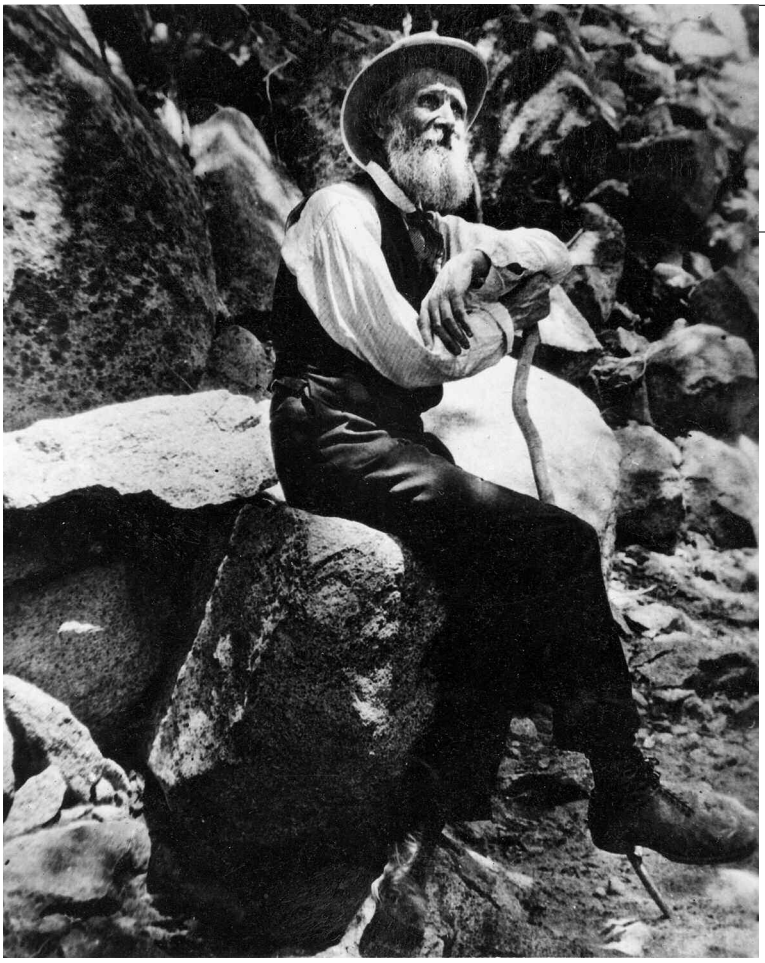
At the behest of Peter Burnett, California's first elected governor, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Act in 1864 and empowered the U.S. Army to protect the area from illegal settlement. Burnett had previously called for a "war of extermination" against the state's Indians, but the Army was unwilling to go quite that far. In fact, a few Miwok families were allowed to return to the park to provide amusement for the tourists. By the end of the 19th century there were six small villages scattered between the valley and Tenaya Lake. In 1900 they were merged into one large village situated in the valley.

In 1868 John Muir moved to California. For two years he worked as a shepherd in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, at times side by side with natives. In his various writings and journals Muir called them "diggers" and found the Yosemite Indians to be particularly "ugly, some of them altogether hideous." He said they had "no place in the landscape," and that he felt none of the "solemn calm" he expected of wilderness while in their presence.

While allowing that the Indians' way of life had minimal impact on the land, Muir was revolted by their diet of ant and fly larva. But "the worst thing about them is their uncleanliness," he wrote, "nothing truly wild is unclean." In 1892 Muir co-founded the Sierra Club, which began almost immediately to lobby to make Yosemite a national park, devoid of all human occupants.

In 1914 Yosemite became a national park, and in 1916 the National Park Service was created inside the U.S. Department of the Interior, which also housed the Bureau of Indian Affairs. For the next 50 years park service policy toward Indians in Yosemite vacillated wildly from accommodation to expulsion. In 1969 the last of the Miwoks were removed from Yosemite Park. By then, fortress conservation was a well-established practice that, like most other American inventions, was being aggressively exported. *–M.D.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY J.T. BOYSEN, YOSEMITE MUSEUM, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK



John Muir reposes on a boulder in Yosemite. Muir was a co-founder of the Sierra Club and one of the most articulate and passionate advocates of the conservation movement during the last half of the 19th century.

activities like swidden agriculture, hunting, gathering, or deliberate burning.

So it was proposed by philosopher-activists, and later accepted by large membership organizations like the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, and the Wilderness Society, that vast sections of open space like Yosemite Valley, the Grand Canyon, the Badlands of South Dakota, Mesa Verde, and the Yellowstone Watershed should be set aside, cleared of all human settlement, and kept forever "wild" – a place where all other species could thrive in our absence. Only this way, the philosophers told us, could nature survive the ravages of man. Or as Thoreau put it so exquisitely in his 1854 classic, "Walden": "In wildness is the preservation of the world."

The American model of conservation spread quickly to Europe and beyond. Bernhard Grzimek, a German national whose mid-century campaigns to protect African wildlife became legendary, spawned a continentwide initiative that led directly to the eviction of the Masai from the Serengeti Plains. "A national park," Grzimek wrote in his 1956 book, "No Room for Wild Animals," "must remain a primordial wilderness to be effective. No men, not even native ones, should live inside its borders."

Less than a decade after Grzimek wrote those words, in the early 1960s, there were about 1,000 "protected areas" – national parks, wildlife reserves, marine sanctuaries, wilderness areas, and biodiversity corridors – on the planet. Today there are 108,000, a hundredfold increase in just four decades, with more being added every day. The total area of land under conservation protection has doubled since 1990, when the World Parks Congress set a goal of protecting 10 percent of the planet's surface. That goal has already been exceeded. Today, more than 12 percent of all land, a total of 11.75 million square miles, is now protected. That's an area greater than the entire continent of Africa.

Although all of the preserves do not follow the strict fortress model, thousands do, and there are more than a few prominent conservationists who wish they all did. Among them is the widely read author John Terborgh, director of the Center for Tropical Conservation at Duke University. Terborgh has spent much of his professional life working, virtually alone, in the vast Manu National Park in central Peru. In his most popular book, "Requiem for Nature," Terborgh echoes Grzimek by saying: "My feeling is that a park should be a park, and it shouldn't have any resident people in it."

The Human Cost of Preservation

At first glance, so much protected land seems undeniably positive, an enormous achievement by good people doing the right thing for our suffering planet. But the record is less impressive when we consider the impact of setting aside large tracts of land upon millions of displaced indigenous people.

During the 1990s, the African nation of Chad, with the encouragement of organized conservation and the financial support of international bankers, increased its protected area from 1 percent to 9.1 percent of its national land. All of that land had been occupied by an estimated 600,000 people, who were removed from their homelands, many by force, as conservationists looked on. No other country besides India, which officially admits to about the same number of evicted people, is even counting this growing new class of refugee. Because of this, there are no reliable statistics on the total number of indigenous people that have been displaced from protected areas around the world. Those that have attempted to estimate the impact, like the United Nations, IUCN, and the few anthropologists who study the problem, place the number between 5 million and tens of millions of people.

Charles Geisler, a professor of rural sociology at Cornell University who has studied displacements in Africa, says the number on that continent alone may now exceed 14 million. He also lists 14 African nations, among them the poorest, where "more land is greenlined than cultivated," and most of the greenlined land is evacuated. He calls the evacuees "a new breed of invisible refugee … conservation refugees" kept invisible, he says,

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE YOSEMITE MUSEUM, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

What needs to be kept in mind about the IMPACT of global conservation on indigenous people is that this is a GOOD-GUY vs. GOOD-GUY story.

"because visibility raises the price of conservation."

Geisler also points to a troubling inconsistency in the conservation community. "Environmentalists are quick to point fingers at the environmental injustices of urban areas wherein waste incineration, water contamination, and industrial pollution end up disproportionately in minority and low-income neighborhoods. They are less inquisitive when it comes to the environmental injustices of protection policies in biodiversity hot spots. Conservation refugees are an important consequence of this lack of inquisitiveness."

The true worldwide total of conservation refugees, were it ever known, would depend on the semantics of terms like "eviction," "voluntary displacement," and "refugee," over which parties on all sides of the issue argue endlessly. People moved from one part of a nation to another are not regarded by most international bodies as "refugees" simply because they have not been forced across a recognized national boundary (although most of them consider the border of their ancestral homeland a national boundary).

Regardless of which estimate or definition of "conservation refugee" is chosen, the larger point is that they do exist on every continent but Antarctica. And by most accounts they live far more difficult lives than they once did, banished from lands they thrived on for thousands of years, often driven into the lowest reaches of the money economy without the means to participate in it fully.

Each category of protected area treats indigenous people differently. Policies range from leave-them-there to push-them-out. National parks are the *bête noire* of the indigenous world, as they are the most likely of all forms to be cleared of human inhabitants.

The few aboriginals allowed to remain in parks are most likely to live in small, peaceful, and colorful communities that agree not to cut down too many trees, hunt bushmeat, or use modern tools and equipment, thereby forfeiting their only sources of protein and revenue. They can also improve their chances of staying if they dress up in ceremonial garb once or twice a week and perform ritual dances at the growing number of eco-resorts, which governments allow to operate inside parks to attract tourists.

The Five BINGOs

While there are thousands of conservation organizations from

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMI VITALE/GETTY IMAGES

A Masai elder greets a young herder. Most protected spaces in East Africa are on former Masai lands. Left without enough space to graze cattle, the Masai struggle to survive. Meanwhile, eco-tourism pollutes, deforests, and disrupts the ecosystems of their homeland.

Bigger May Not Be Better

Gordon Moore in Brazil

Behind the story of the impact that fortress conservation has had on indigenous people lies an age-old question that has haunted the nonprofit sector for a century or more. Does size matter? Are vast international organizations like the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Nature Conservancy – with their massive brick-and-mortar and transportation infrastructures, huge professional staffs, power-and-celebrity boards, six-figure executives, in-house PR firms, and offices in 50 or more countries – more productive than 50 local organizations with the same basic mission? It's not an easy answer.

Proponents of global conservation institutions say that only large, prestigious organizations with strong ties to multilateral banks, powerful political leaders, large foundations, and transnational corporations can effectively work the crowd that needs to be worked to protect the world's remaining natural environments. Grassroots advocates, on the other hand, argue that without the flexibility, innovation, cultural familiarity, and commitment to place that are best found in homegrown organizations, alliances with indigenous communities can never be formed.

Both arguments are compelling and both contain some truth. But the financial imbalance that leaves grassroots groups starved for resources and politically weak, while large, Northern

hundreds of nations represented in IUCN, the global conservation agenda and the strategy IUCN pursues is increasingly defined by five large organizations based in the United States – the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the World Wide Fund for Nature,[1] the Wildlife Conservation Society, and the African Wildlife Foundation. Together these five organizations, affectionately nicknamed "the BINGOs" (Big International NGOs), have captured almost 40 percent of all funds donated to conservation.

International conservation, like most NGO enterprises, is supported in large part by individual donors and philanthropic foundations. But unlike most conservation nonprofits, BINGOs also receive or transfer billions of dollars from bilateral and multilateral banks, national governments, government agencies (like the U.S. Agency for International Development), and increasingly from multinational corporations. This development has not only brought hundreds of millions of dollars into BINGO treasuries, it has also forced them into close alliances with global economic interests like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. At the same time, it has distanced the organizations from local communities.

In a world where money is power, the influence over global conservation policy and strategy held by five organizations with more than $5 billion in assets and over $1 billion in combined annual revenue is considerable, particularly when measured against the economic strength of the communities affected by their actions. Organizations created to defend the rights and cultures of indigenous peoples, like Survival International, the Forest Peoples Programme, EarthRights International, and Cultural Survival, are also weak relative to the BINGOs.

One can only wonder whether the individuals, institutions, and agencies providing this somewhat unbalanced investment in conservation believe that their money is being spent wisely and effectively. As with any such question, it depends on who is being asked and whose promotions they believe. Ask BINGO board members or executives and they will point to world maps of protected areas, then and now. It's an impressive demonstration. A lot of the world that might not otherwise be green is green.

But included in any assessment of conservation should also be the recent report from the Convention on Biological Diversity, which found that during the same period in which all that land was being set aside for protection, biodiversity on the planet actually declined by about 40 percent. There was also the dramatic announcement made at the aforementioned conservation congress in Bangkok that IUCN scientists had found and cataloged 25,000 species of flora and fauna on the verge of extinction. Add to those numbers a host of recent state-of-the-biosphere reports documenting global warming and other environmental problems, and the planet's vital signs look grim.

A Better Way

So does this all add up to a failure of organized conservation? At the moment it would seem so. But all may not be lost, as there is a new conservation paradigm forming. A growing number of wildlife biologists now question the fortress approach, recognizing that finding ways to allow indigenous people to con-

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB SACHA/AURORA & QUANTA PRODUCTIONS

Hemisphere institutions set the conservation agenda, leaves a vital resource out of the whole planning process – indigenous people. At best, large conservation organizations include indigenous people as "stakeholders." At worst, they are ignored or evacuated, which goes a long way toward explaining why the San Bushmen in Botswana, the Karen in Thailand, and the Mursi, Surma, and Nyangatom in Ethiopia continue to be displaced to create or expand national parks at the behest of these very same conservation organizations.

Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel Corp. and chief benefactor of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, clearly believes that size matters. The bigger the better. Moore's foundation has in recent years granted close to $300 million to Washington, D.C.-based Conservation International (CI), without question the richest single foundation grant in history to a conservation organization that was already the third largest of its kind in the world.

The jury is still out on whether a nine-figure grant is healthy for any organization, particularly coming from a foundation that has minimal experience with conservation or environmental philanthropy. (It is interesting to note that despite the Moore Foundation's lack of experience in conservation, Gordon Moore was offered and accepted the chair of CI's powerful executive committee.) It will take the 10-year life of this grant to measure its effectiveness. Meanwhile, philanthropists and conservationists will be watching closely.

Still, one has to wonder what would have been the result if Moore had given half of his grant to CI, and used the other half of his grant to fund 150 small, effective, grassroots conservation projects to the tune of $1 million each. Might he have received a lot more conservation bang for his bucks, even if some of them failed?

It would be an interesting experiment for another venture philanthropist to conduct. Of course, Moore could begin the experiment today by insisting that half of the money he granted to CI pass directly to indigenous communities and local conservation NGOs. *–M.D.*

tinue to live within wildlife preserves may not only be possible, but even desirable. These realizations led IUCN members to support resolutions in the mid-1990s allowing indigenous people to co-manage protected areas and to create within the IUCN a powerful new task force called the Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy (CEESP). CEESP now actively promotes two unique protected area categories – "Community Conservation Areas" and "Indigenous Reserves." These new categories reflect a radical shift away from top-down control of conservation projects and toward co-management arrangements with local communities.

But what is truly unique about CCAs and IRs is that both are initiated by indigenous peoples. ("Indigenous" here is defined as people who resided in a carefully mapped area before the state that enveloped it ever existed.)

Under this new approach, an isolated tribe like the reclusive Trios of northern Brazil will approach their national government, sometimes accompanied by a conservation group, and can request that their homeland be declared a biological reserve, from which miners, loggers, oilmen, farmers, and cattle ranchers are to be permanently excluded. A tribe will also on occasion propose a national park within the reserve's border, where even they may not hunt or fish. But they will manage both the park and the larger reserve, supporting the task with revenues from gate fees, biological prospectors, and research permits.

Although their land tenure and territorial rights will almost always remain vague or in the state's possession, more and more indigenous people are being granted the right to remain in their homeland, agreeing to live as they have for hundreds or even thousands of years, in general balance with nature. Politicians and conservationists are discovering that people who love their land are often the best park guards, and they cost the government nothing.

Of course, there are covenants attached to these new reserves that restrict farming, selling bushmeat, and extracting natural resources for commerce. But the heartening development is that conservation biologists are beginning to accept the scientific veracity of what is called traditional ecological knowledge – the orally transmitted skills and information that allow a people to keep their land productive without compromising its ecological health.

This is not to suggest that relations between global conservationists and the people whose land they seek to protect are improving everywhere. In many parts of the world they are not, as tensions between traditional preservationists and indigenous communities continue to rise. This is particularly true in Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, where indigenous people are particularly offended by the irony that conservationists covet their land because it has not been degraded by traditional resource practices. Or as a Karen leader facing eviction from a wildlife refuge in Thailand recently put it: "When we moved into these forests over two centuries ago, Bangkok was just a small village surrounded by lush vegetation. Over these many years we have protected our forestlands out of respect for our ancestors and our children. Maybe if we had cut down the forests, destroyed the land, and built a big city like Bangkok, we would be allowed to stay here."

But as natives from every continent network and strate-

gize, and more Community Conservation Areas and Indigenous Reserves succeed in providing sustainable livelihoods for their human inhabitants, the wisdom of the new conservation paradigm becomes more and more evident. Slowly but surely the conservation establishment is beginning to abandon its fortress model.

Where We Stand

What needs to be kept in mind about the impact of global conservation on indigenous people is that this is a good guy vs. good guy story, involving a tragic but soluble conflict between two admirable social movements, one advocating cultural diversity, the other biological diversity.

Although the United Nations, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Labour Organization (ILO), every BINGO, and even the World Bank have issued proclamations in support of indigenous rights, people are still being evicted from forests in Southeast Asia and India, traditional homelands in the Kalahari of Botswana, Omo National Park in Ethiopia, and several new parks in Gabon. It is happening less frequently and much less violently than it did in decades past, but it is still happening. All too often the same organizations that issued those lofty declarations against forced relocation fail to raise a finger to stop it.

Their excuses are resoundingly similar: "We cannot interfere with the policies of sovereign states, particularly those with whom we need to cooperate in the management of new protected areas." And they point out that in most cases the countries involved have refused to support any of the aforementioned declarations. Not one African nation, for example, has ratified ILO Convention 169, which specifically addresses the land rights of indigenous people and opposes their forced displacement. By the same token, there is no indication that any international conservation groups has lobbied an African government to ratify it either.

Peter Seligmann, co-founder, chairman, and CEO of Conservation International (CI), denies that his organization has ever "encouraged, condoned, or supported the eviction of any people from their ancestral lands." Taken literally that may be true, but like the other four BINGOs, CI has frequently stood by, working closely with national governments as repressive state agencies carried out evictions, as they are doing today in Gabon.

Despite their mutual obsessions with institution building, power networking, and fundraising, Seligmann and other BINGO leaders are beginning to see through the haze of bureaucratic imperatives to understand that creating millions of embittered refugees has been a big mistake – not only a moral, cultural, and economic mistake, but an ecological one as well. "We [now] recognize that indigenous people have perhaps the deepest understanding of the Earth's living resources," Seligmann writes in a CI promotional brochure.

By working more closely with anthropologists, conservationists have also come to see the strong correlation between cultural and biological diversity. When one declines, so does the other. Thus "even without considering questions of human rights and the intrinsic value of cultures," observes Alan Thein Durning, a senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute, conservationists now pretty much agree that "indigenous survival is a matter of crucial importance." He adds, "We in the world's dominant cultures simply cannot sustain the Earth's ecological health without the help of the world's endangered cultures."

SLOWLY but surely the conservation establishment is beginning to ABANDON its fortress model.

So after a century or more of favoring various versions of fortress conservation, this vast and wealthy global movement is finally heeding the cultural survivalists' long-standing challenge to environmentalists: If in the course of conserving biological diversity we somehow destroy cultural diversity, what have we gained? Given the clear decline in biodiversity and the impending extinction of 25,000 species, the answer is nothing, or perhaps something worse, for as Pae Antonio, a Guarani holy man from Argentina forewarns us, "When the Indians vanish, the rest will follow." □

1 While WWF is actually a network of 29 autonomous national organizations, loosely coordinated through WWF International in Gland, Switzerland, WWF-US is the largest – and often the most influential – of all members.

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