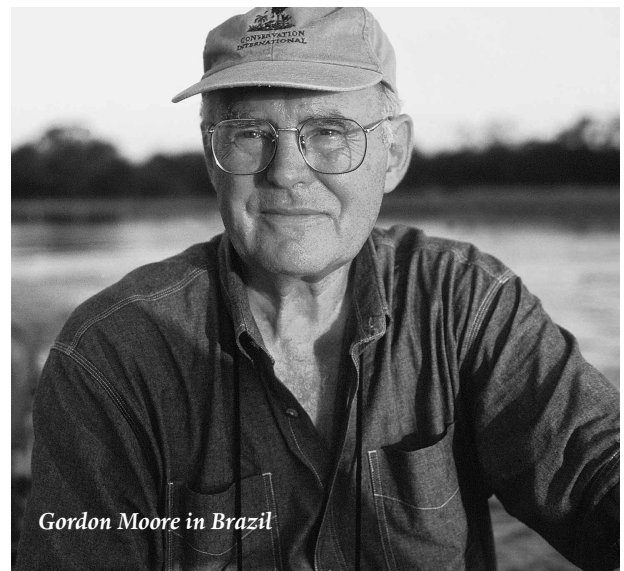


# Bigger May Not Be Better

**B**ehind 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, presti-

gious 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.



*Gordon Moore in Brazil*

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,<sup>1</sup> 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-

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, philan-

thropists 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-