

25. Environmental Protection: Socio-Cultural and Political-Economic Dimensions

Convenors:

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This panel is concerned with projects that are intended to protect the natural environment, whether through environmental conservation or through sustainable development, whether in the West or elsewhere. These projects are the sites where environmental relationships and understandings of different sorts intersect with each other, and intersect with other socio-cultural and political-economic forces that emerge from those directly affected by or involved with the projects and from people and institutions at more distant national or even global sites. They are, then, places where orientations and forces that had been distant from each other are brought into proximity. The papers in this panel will consider critically these environmental protection projects as sites of these intersections, and hence as places where we can see how those relationships with and understandings of the natural surroundings can conflict with, shape and be shaped by those other forces. Papers can consider a range of issues, such as the relationship between expert (Western) and indigenous knowledge; the relationship between natural- or life-sciences orientations and social-science orientations; the importance of the global network of environmental organisations, agencies and bodies that fund or support such projects, which have their own interests, orientations and understandings; the relationship between environmental protection projects and tourism or ecotourism; environmental protection as a form of governmentality, and the like.

Introduction: the Social Fields of Environmental Protection

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This presentation presents the analytical orientation of the panel as a whole, and the core issues addressed in each of the presentations. It points particularly to the need to reflect critically on the environmental industry, both its global institutions and its local manifestations, as this industry intersects with the lives of people in different parts of the world. The purpose is to begin to uncover the ways that environmentalist thought and practice, as well as local acquiescence or resistance, reflect the political-economic and socio-cultural positions and interests of different sets of people and institutions.

Environmental Protection and Cultural Politics

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In Cyprus, there has been a long-standing conflict between local environmentalists and the authorities of the British military bases. The first major confrontation concerned military exercises on the Akamas peninsula—the last ‘unspoiled’ area on the island but one in which the British are authorised to

exercise by the independence agreements of 1960. The second round of confrontations began when the British decided to erect a giant antenna in the vicinity of a salt lake located in the military bases themselves. The environmentalists have the backing of other political parties and public opinion, which treats the disregard of the environmentalists' wishes, if not their concerns as a manifestation of British 'neocolonialism'. My aim in this paper is to explore further the idea of metropolitan power after colonialism by examining how the dominated are themselves implicated in its reproduction. My concern is with the way in which core Western values—in this case respect for the environment—become relevant and meaningful to the dominated and are embraced by them.

Too Globally Important for You: How Scientists and Environmental NGOs have Colonised the Coral Triangle

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The recent escalation in international NGO activity aimed at protection of coral reefs in Indonesia and Western Melanesia has generated a range of problems centred on engagement with indigenous users of those reefs. In Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, low population densities mean that threats to the ecological integrity of coral reefs as a result of subsistence and artisanal fishing are unlikely to be demonstrable scientifically in the short to medium term. In support of preservationist agendas, some NGOs have spent significant proportions of their budgets cataloguing and reporting on the immense faunal biodiversity of reefs in this region. But this is a finding that carries little weight with local reef owners. On the other hand, international diving tourists and scientists are impressed. Since these NGOs tend to be dominated by scientists who dive, they have predictably shown greater support for diving ecotourism over fisheries as a development option, despite the relatively poor economic performance of ecotourism to date. This paper examines the gulf between Melanesian conceptualisations of the marine environment, and foreign NGO preoccupations with species extinction and the preservation of 'representative biodiversity'. It analyses the practical difficulties posed by this gulf for the predominantly closure-based approaches currently being proposed by international conservation NGOs to achieve marine conservation objectives in the region.

The Sundarbans Aka 'Beautiful Forests': Whose World Heritage Site?

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In the last few years, there has been a renewed focus on the Sundarbans mangrove forests, declared a world heritage site by the UNESCO. Bureaucrats, planners, investors, ecologists are laying out a master plan for the Sundarbans islands. Poverty reduction strategies are being envisaged to enhance the livelihood opportunities of the islanders. To this effect, the ADB and the Sahara group are planning to invest nearly \$290 million (Rs 1300 crores) on developing tourist resorts on the islands. In the light of this information, the islanders felt that their poverty was being used by the government to attract funds for the Sundarbans. There are no concerted efforts for their development, and the protection of the natural environment has so far been the focus of the project.

The villagers raised questions around the use of the labelling of the Sundarbans region as a 'world heritage site' and felt that the absence of their interpretation of the forest and its fauna in decision-making had relegated them to the position of being considered as the site's mere 'tiger-food'. In this paper I will look at how the interpretation of political-economic discourses need to be situated within varying socio-cultural understandings of nature.

The Problem of Wild Elephants in Jharkhand, India: Conflicting Notions of Environment

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Between 1997 and 2002, wild elephants in rural Jharkhand have killed at least 230 people, caused more injuries, broken many houses and destroyed much crop. This paper looks at conflicting notions of the environment that are used to explain the problem of wild elephants. On the one hand, the villagers who are victims of the damage understand the presence of the animals to be linked with an increasing density of the forest in the area, a direct result of state protection. Wild elephants, threatening the people's livelihoods, are thus seen as one more example of the danger of the expanded reach of the state, and the forests inhabited by the wild elephants is increasingly a dangerous, dark place where humans should not venture. On the other hand, local elites argue that the wild elephant problem is linked to the increasing degradation of the forests, evidencing the need to further to protect the environment. They argue that rapacious outsiders, *dikus*, cut the forests for timber, proposing that this forest reduction not only destroyed the natural home and livelihoods of the state's tribal communities but also led to the depletion of the food and space of the elephants, resulting in their attacks on crops, houses and people. In showing why the latter view is reproduced as the dominant one in local journalist, academic and social activist accounts, the paper argues that notions of environment often can not be understood without taking into account the political economy of environment and development policy.

Environmental protection versus Boom and Bust Economy: Socio-cultural and Political-economic Dimensions of Indigenous Forest Exploration in Campeche, Mexico

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Indigenous agriculture and forestry, such as swidden cultivation and the extraction of forest products, have long been considered as backward, inefficient and harmful for the natural environment by most governmental development agents. However, many NGOs have recently begun to idealize indigenous people as 'guardians of the forests' and precursors of sustainable development. Of course, reality is more complex than these stereotypes suggest. Based on ethnographical and archival research in the Mexican state of Campeche, the paper discusses the complex relationship of Yucatec Maya peasants to their communal lands of tropical forest and the results of governmental policies regarding environmental protection since the early 20th century. Special attention is given to practices of communal forestry from a historical

perspective. The paper shows, among other things, how the necessities of survival within a context of a boom and bust economy shaped the peasants' economic strategies. This historical experience and the often-contradictory government forest policies have resulted in an attitude favouring short term exploitation of forest products instead of sustainable management practices.

Smoke and Mirrors: The Changing Political Context of Fears of Pollution and Environmental Damage on Lihir, New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea

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This paper analyses changes in Lihirian understandings of environmental damage caused by mining operations over the decade since an open-pit goldmine has been operating on the island and the associated emergence of new political ideologies and pressure groups. Local interpretations of pollution and its effects on the environment – in the form of smoke, deep-sea tailings disposal and overburden dumping – are examined as illustrations of the persistence of ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ and the mimetic incorporation of environmentalist and scientific understandings of environmental impact. The changes in demands for benefits and compensation for environmental impact reflect more general political shifts as a ‘new guard’ of Lihirian men assumes political leadership, using arguments and understandings of the trade-off between ‘development’ and ‘environmental damage’ that are drawn from global environmentalist and scientific critiques. On Lihir, these are inflected by the exclusionist cultural politics underpinning a new political movement ‘Lihir Pawa Mekim Kamap Asosiesen’ (The Lihir Power Development Association).

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, Who is the Greenest of Us all?

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A good deal has been written about the ways in which international environmental NGOs represent (or misrepresent) tropical landscapes and indigenous peoples to well-heeled donors and consumers. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which they adapt (or fail to adapt) their behaviour to the institutional environments surrounding these landscapes and peoples. I propose to investigate this second question by considering the ways in which four international NGOs – the Worldwide Fund for Nature, Conservation International, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and Greenpeace – have engaged with the conservation policy domain in Papua New Guinea, which is of course one of the world’s ‘last great places’. While the images generated for the benefit of global donors and consumers may well limit their capacity for effective political action in this national setting, there is another story to be told about the differential local impact of distinctive planning and management styles which are no less significant than their marketing strategies.

