



Competing Cultures of Conservation

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In the last quarter century, environmental conservation efforts by nongovernmental organizations, private companies, or nation states have most prominently featured expansion of formally protected areas and the integration of elements of biological and social sciences in their monitoring and management. For most involved in such efforts, culture has been either an obstacle to wider adoption of practices intended to achieve conservation or a characteristic of societies who protect nature through their management practices and belief systems. The next quarter century would benefit from a broader awareness of conservation culture, which I define as a series of distinct aesthetic, technical, and ideological positions. Conservation cultures pertain not only to small societies, but also to the institutions and initiatives that characterize conservation as a complex transnational field of experts, policy makers, private and public sector leaders, and community members. I write of my own experiences in Appalachia and equatorial Africa and of popular novels and films to show how a reflexive idea of culture, or awareness of symbols and meanings in one's own self and society, is a key to future conservation success.

Contrast and Conflict in Conservation Cultures

I grew up in Tennessee, along the perimeter of the U.S. Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a suburban youth whose family often went backpacking in the park on weekends. Oblivious to the history of the park's designation, I relished that landscape's contrasts with my ordinary routines. After time in the mountains, my sister and I basked in the hour-long return drive to our home, our bodies salty and streaked with the loamy black soil of southern Appalachia. We would ride out of the park through valleys dotted with shacks, where pickup trucks almost all sported gun racks.

As we crossed the Tennessee River into Knoxville we saw emblems of a suburban landscape. The first was the groomed lawn of a graceful yet dilapidated old mansion that housed the Teen Board of Knoxville, a social club

that invited us to attend both cotillions and meetings to organize volunteer projects. From that mansion onward we looked out at a parade of carefully mulched dogwood trees and azalea plants nestled around splashing stone fountains. In my residential neighborhood, named Sequoyah Hills after the famous Cherokee leader, such fountains were designed in the 1920s to emulate Native American symbols and designs. They are interspersed with an actual Indian mound, badly eroded but affixed with plaques provided by a neighborhood preservation association that offer a terse history of Cherokee settlement in the region.

As an adolescent, I was vaguely conscious of ways of life that had been displaced in favor of the settlements that matured into today's suburban riverbanks. Not until my early twenties, after working at conservation sites in the Congo Basin as a Peace Corps volunteer and researcher, did I find myself avidly reading reprinted works from the early 1900s such as James Mooney's ethnography (Mooney & Ellison 1992) of Cherokee culture and Horace Kephart's (1976) accounts of his time with white farmers and hunters in the southern Appalachians. These books were early attempts to debunk stereotypes about so-called rural or primitive peoples, yet each unwittingly established new stereotypes. In trying to translate alterity, or otherness, in relation to dominant cultural norms, these books also marked cultural difference in ways that inadvertently reinforced boundaries among contemporary land uses. Suburbia and wilderness are distinct, yet both preclude the kind of local subsistence use of resources that Mooney or Kephart chronicled.

The Coen brothers' film *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?*, set in eastern Tennessee, includes an apocalyptic vision of small farms washing away in a flood during dam creation by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The TVA was created in the 1930s in part to bring hydroelectricity to a large proportion of the U.S. southeast. An emblem of modern state control and the forces of technology, such dams have transformed river valleys throughout the southeast. *Oh Brother* also captures the social atmosphere of the early 1900s, an era that saw the creation not only of TVA, but also the Great Smoky Mountains

National Park, the ALCOA aluminum smelter near Maryville, and the Highlander Research and Education Center near New Market, Tennessee. Conflicts about environmental governance in eastern Tennessee, a region that has experienced intense cycles of economic growth, have for a century focused on competing agendas of energy generation, environmental conservation, and labor organization in rural montane populations.

There has been no single flood of transformation in eastern Tennessee; rather, there has been piecemeal yet relentless creation of suburban corridors along riverfronts, lakeshores, and mountain parkways. Conservation zoning has entailed conversion of land use from farming, logging, and other extractive activities. Funding for the original purchase of the parklands was cobbled together from philanthropic and public coffers. Often the purchase of land from small farmers still residing within the boundaries of protected areas has been contested, with evictions persisting throughout the 20th century. *Oh Brother* portrays elements of this political and economic complexity through the rich and varied folk music performed by characters in the film. But the film most powerfully conveys stereotypes about languid, corrupt, backward southerners.

Critic Evan Kindley (2000) points out that stereotypes “allow for mobility and adventure: by holding on to some simple mental categories, you can range pretty far afield and take in a lot that might overwhelm you if you took everything on its own terms.” He quotes Walter Lippman’s 1922 work *Public Opinion*, about the perils for democracy of public penchants for oversimplification in the U.S. media. Lippman would recognize all too well today’s popular-media stories on environmental challenges, with characters who are starkly good or evil. This trend is exemplified in a range of film types, from blockbuster fantasy films, where villains fell trees to forge weapons, as in *Lord of the Rings* and *Avatar*, to more human interest or documentary works, where they poison water sources, as in *Erin Brokovich* and *Gasland*.

Children’s films and television programs are no exception to such idealistic, even naïve narratives that both condemn us for and distract us from the destructive elements of our own economies. From *E.T.* to Eddie Murphy’s performances in *Dr. Doolittle*, adult worlds are portrayed as rapacious, dangerously mechanized, and often destructive of nonhuman life forms on Earth, and even beyond. Characters who are children, on the other hand, mediate and prevent such damage. Even internationally popular television story lines that target toddlers feature characters, such as *Dora the Explorer* and the *WonderPets*, who repeatedly save animals from harm.

It is no wonder that young people who view such content grow up to volunteer for charity projects like those sponsored by the aforementioned Teen Board. This creates a culture of gestural help to those in need, while maintaining systems that are structurally prone to social

inequality and environmental damage. Nor is it surprising that conservationists portray their work to wider publics in ways that pit the forces of pollution and urban development against the beauty and inherent value of wilderness. In so doing, they set aside the way actual landscapes are governed by multiple institutions, providing livelihoods and leisure activities that make both bad and good guys of us all.

Of course, specific struggles do exist, and they should not be elided through overly fragmented or overly monolithic ideas of culture. Throughout the 1970s my parents were activists against the TVA’s last dams constructed in the region. This connected us with a circle of avid young lawyers opposed to displacing rural farmers, archeologists advocating for Cherokee who feared flooding of burial grounds, and concerned ecologists. By the age of 13, I had inherited a contradictory culture of conservation from my parents. It hinged on the pleasurable experience of our weekends in wilderness, but also on our political struggles to protect land adjacent to that wilderness. Our family’s conservation culture was thus simultaneously indebted to and opposed to U.S. government interventions in Appalachian landscapes. However, such ironies were less important to all of us than the pleasure we took in our various activities within and about wilderness.

Conservation cultures, like cultures of sexuality, social status, philanthropy, or consumption, emerge experientially, but are also shaped by formal education or organized religion. They are often characterized by contradictory interactions among scientific and other knowledge forms, ideals of cultural heritage pitted against changing cultural practices, and the perceived urgency of economic growth in tension with other values ascribed to landscapes. Conservation cultures are thus themselves fragmented and anchored sensorially by texts, films, and memories. As Lippman would remind us, they merit critical analysis, or careful thinking about powerful systems of meaning that enable and constrain our actions.

Social struggles, whatever their environmental outcomes, can reveal submerged conservation cultures, in fiction as in life. I was raised in a Unitarian church in which we read biblical scriptures, texts by transcendentalists (Emerson and Thoreau), with notions of humans as a humble part of complex systems, and Buddhist texts that advocate withdrawal from the material world. It was an eclectic education friendly to notions of a web of life, and it contrasted with the dominant conservative Christian culture surrounding us. This became especially clear when my parents spearheaded the capital campaign for the construction of a new Unitarian church that would lead to the demise of the historic Teen Board mansion. The new church protects a massive tree that stands on the grounds, encircling it with a contemporary chalice-shaped building.

A bitter political struggle ensued, pitting Baptist historic preservationists against progressive Unitarians.

Barbara Kingsolver (2001) illustrates in her novel *Prodigal Summer* some of the links between land use on a particular site and social tensions regarding human use of natural resources. Her characters live in rural communities in a Tennessee valley and argue over management of their contiguous farms. One uses pesticides freely and feels others should too. He is a strong Christian who embraces what writer Matthew Scully (2003) has called a philosophy of “dominion.” The other advocates organic pest management practices and believes chemicals should be limited. She is a Unitarian and does not hold with hierarchical views of nature or human relationships. Like the Coen brothers, Kingsolver uses stereotypical characterizations that have some basis in fact, though they belie less dominant strands of Christian environmentalism chronicled by Mallory McDuff (2010).

In my parents’ case, the “bra-burning, nature-worshipping” Unitarians (Kingsolver 2001: 220) won the right to build their tree-hugging church on a corner of prime bible-belt real estate after all. Competing conservation cultures continue to flourish in eastern Tennessee’s landscapes, connecting with religious faiths, political parties, and economic development processes.

Choice, Change, and Complexity in Conservation Practice

As an anthropologist teaching in the School of Environment and Natural Resources, I encourage students to think critically about their desires for overdrawn contrasts, either social or ecological. Yet my own propensity to tell environmental stories of us and them, and my cravings for contrastive experience persist unresolved. These cravings no longer hinge on weekends in the Smoky Mountains and weekdays in a Tennessee town. Now I jet off self-consciously to protected areas or research sites in rural France, the Congo Basin, South Africa, and Kenya. Returning via London or Paris, I struggle against the pleasure of eating in upscale restaurants and cafes after time spent in wilderness or agrarian settings.

These personal challenges reveal similar ones in the institutions around me, all of which are constantly changing without necessarily resolving their contradictory environmental roles. The TVA has divested itself of land management responsibilities and become an energy provider focusing increasingly on nuclear power. ALCOA aluminum’s home page boasts of aluminum’s infinite recyclability and praises employees as environmental activists because they participate in organizations like Earthwatch. The school I teach in was established over a century ago as a forestry school, but its mandate has broadened to include management of other terrestrial and aquatic resources across international boundaries. Some alumni still have fond memories of the school as a haven for hardy

foresters in training, rather than as a melting pot for students from all over the world seeking skills related to new economies of environmentally sustainable land use.

Conservation organizations, too, have changed, with more personnel who resemble other white-collar professionals. Yet many such organizations collaborate with the media to glorify field staff as iconic hands-on figures who grapple with the intimate human–animal encounters and conflicts that conservation sometimes entails. One representative from a large international wildlife conservation organization said to me, “We all know conservation success is not about heroes; we do our best to tell stories of engagement and compromise alongside the tales of exploration and discovery.” Nonetheless, positive stereotypes of conservation heroes out in the bush, veld, or forest continue to mobilize support from donors and provide charisma for advertising campaigns.

When I first began working with field conservationists in 1990, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in southwestern Central African Republic (CAR). I met doctoral students from U.S. universities working in the Congo Basin with BaAka forest foragers to observe and survey wildlife species. One such colleague had procured funding from CAR’s government, World Wildlife Fund-US, and the World Bank and was assuming the mantle of director of a formal reserve with growing budgets and staff. Living in the abandoned villas originally built for logging personnel during a 1970s boom along the Sangha River, he sat up nights by kerosene lamplight in wood-paneled living rooms, coordinating antipoaching patrols by 10 newly trained locals.

By the time I returned for field research in 1995, his efforts had made conservation into a second local employment sector, alongside logging. There were two company bases in town: the older one again occupied by loggers and a newer one built for the conservation staff that included 30 guards, fewer of whom were local people. These bases flanked the town, each with villas, garages, and offices. My former field colleague, however, was based in Washington, D.C., directing programs from a distance. In this respect, he had followed in the footsteps of Savorgnan de Brazza and other French colonial explorers-cum-colonial officials who ascended the administrative ladder from the field to the metropolis. For many, such upward professional movement is bittersweet. As he put it in a recent video interview: “I’m a muddy boots guy. . . it is stomping around in the forest I love, and that is what gives me the passion to do the other kinds of work that conservation requires.”

That “other kind of work” entails courting donors, informing key decision makers, training future colleagues, resolving political conflicts at various scales, suppressing illegal trades, lobbying political leaders, fostering policy debates, disbursing conservation-related revenues among rural communities, and much more. Debates about the efficacy and integrity of paradigms for conservation of the

wild animals of Africa tend to focus on those animals and their habitat, rather than on the complexity of institutions and social processes of protection. Little is said about the changes that occur within an individual conservation career, as it changes the circumstances under which diverse actors from Appalachia to the Congo Basin develop internally contradictory but complex and enduring conservation cultures. This silence has more to do with dominant discourses than with actual actors. Around the kerosene lanterns in Central Africa, I overheard earnest assertions from conservation personnel that “we need to protect forest people’s choices in their livelihoods. . .if we leave them with more choices than they would have otherwise had, then we have succeeded.”

Such a vision takes account of the complexity, choice, and cultural dimensions of conservation outcomes, whereas tales of destruction, salvation, and heroism obscure conservation as intercultural social process. Still such tales persist, bolstering roles for conservation celebrities (Brockington 2009). This helps make conservation professionals easy targets for criticism, when instead it is their work that should be scrutinized.

Critical Thinking for Conservation

Future conservation professionals need to have the intercultural tools to identify competing conservation cultures in places as distinctly different as the United States and the CAR and to consider links between them. For instance, there are significant undercurrents of heritage politics in Appalachia among descendants of European settlers displaced by the park and national forests and among Cherokee. The region also harbors increasing populations of people motivated by faith, economics, and apocalyptic visions to return to simple hunting and gathering ways of life. The disconnect of these groups from society is imperfect; many maintain blogs on computers powered by solar panels on their vehicles (Foglia 2002). Forest-forager camps where I have lived in CAR likewise contain both traditional and recent technologies, such as Swiss army knives, which are used to cut lianas for traditional net construction. Such contradictory lifestyles are seen in the United States as quirky, whereas they are seen in Africa as a failure or inability to engage with modernity and development. Both subcultures are more productively considered distinct conservation cultures that connect to and contrast with more destructive strains of dominant cultures.

Over the last 25 years, conservation professionals and activists have learned how to build task forces, finance teams, and lobbying groups. In future, they will need more nuanced understanding of the competing cultures of conservation that they have inherited or instigated within their organizations and in their encounters with other institutions. Anthropologists realize culture is sep-

arate from place and human biology and describe instead how plural and contradictory cultures nonetheless affect how most humans experience belonging, meaning, subsistence, institutions, and landscape.

Actively examining our own desires, beliefs, and consumption practices avoids outwardly focused cynicism about the organizations around us and encourages alternative formulations of future environmental politics. It grounds our thinking in internal conflicts without precluding attention to the power of socially dominant symbols and actors. By focusing on the individual rather than on broader policy or scientific parameters for conservation’s future, I am not arguing for boycotts or consumer-choice responses to environmental woes. Rather, I am advocating attention to genres, categories, and cultural building blocks in our actions and decisions about the natural world. Grounded reflexivity considers how our own memories, sensations, and cultural symbols structure our actions and preclude some actions. It pushes us to consider how human desire for certain kinds of stories or sensations reflects the relation between conservation and colonialism or corporate capitalism.

Such self-examination traditionally has been avoided in mainstream conservation discourse that targets decision makers and political leaders. However, it might find its place in the practices of a highly media-savvy next generation of conservationists. This reaching inward could mean conservationists will forge better outreach and may even transform conservation processes into more institutionally complex, innovative, and enduring solutions to environmental challenges.

About the Author

Rebecca Hardin is an associate professor at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment. Recently she has focused on the increasingly intertwined practices of health and environmental management in southern and eastern Africa. She also studies historical and ethnographic aspects of concessionary politics involving corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and local communities, particularly in Africa. She has been an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies and a visiting professor at the Paris Museum of Natural History in the Department for the Study of Humankind, Societies, and Environment. Before joining the faculty at the University of Michigan she was a lecturer in anthropology at Yale University, a visiting professor in Political Science at the Sorbonne, and an assistant professor of Anthropology and Environment at McGill University.

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