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January 2010

# Re-imagining the nature of development: Biodiversity conservation and pastoral visions in the Northern Areas, Pakistan

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## Recommended Citation

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Ali, N. (2010). Re-imagining the nature of development: Biodiversity conservation and pastoral visions in the Northern Areas, Pakistan. In P. McMichael (Ed.), *Contesting development: Critical struggles for social change* (pp. 64–80). New York: Routledge.

## 5.

### RE-IMAGINING THE NATURE OF DEVELOPMENT

#### *Biodiversity Conservation and Pastoral Visions in the Northern Areas, Pakistan*

*Nosheen Ali*

Examines how, in the mountainous village of Shimshal, national parks and “community-based” conservation projects such as trophy hunting are deeply problematic, promoting exploitive ideologies of nature and development while delegitimizing the values and rights of pastoralists. The Shimshalis have creatively resisted the appropriations of their land by creating a Shimshal Nature Trust, implementing a model of ecological sovereignty instead of “community participation”—challenging the very logic of protected areas in international conservation.

#### **Introduction**

Over the last thirty years, almost 40 percent of the territory of the Northern Areas in Pakistan has been converted into government-owned protected areas, in the form of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, game reserves, and hunting areas. Indeed, it is not unusual to hear that state authorities wish to transform the biodiversity-rich Northern Areas into a “living museum” for wildlife. This vision has been critically supported and shaped by international conservation NGOs, particularly the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), both of which have a major presence in the region.

In this chapter, I explore the conflicts and contestations that such a vision of conservation has generated in lived practice. My focus is on the trajectory of the very first experiment embracing this vision—the Khunjerab National Park (KNP) that was founded in 1975—as well as more recent community-based conservation programs of international trophy hunting that have become popular in Northern Pakistan. I examine two key questions: First, what are the ideals and ideologies that underpin the projects of biodiversity conservation in the Northern Areas? And second, how and why do local communities in the region—specifically the pastoral villagers of Shimshal in the case of the KNP—critique and contest the practices of global conservation?

I argue that national parks in Northern Pakistan as well as more recent community-based conservation approaches are deeply problematic, as they are contingent on relinquishing the very land and livelihood on which pastoral communities are founded. Such projects often assume that practices of local societies pose a key threat to nature, instead of

acknowledging that nature is embedded in social relations and cannot be protected without recognizing indigenous values, rights, and ownership. Further, conservation projects such as trophy hunting have introduced a market calculus in the management of nature, by commodifying it for elite, mostly Western tourists. These projects are framed as initiatives for “sustainable development,” but in effect, they have served to entrench the power of the state and capital over local ecologies and communities.

Faced with displacement and distress as a result of conservation projects, villagers of Shimshal in Northern Pakistan have responded with courage and creativity, and hitherto managed to protect their homes and pastures from being seized in the name of global conservation. They have done this by creating a Shimshal Nature Trust (SNT)—which has established indigenous ownership and management of Shimshali ancestral land to counter its appropriation by the Khunjerab National Park. A biodiversity hotspot owned and managed entirely by a local community has long been considered unthinkable in global conservation practice, which mandates that the territory be owned by state authorities and managed primarily by national and international conservation agencies. The villagers of Shimshal have hence challenged the fundamental logic of international conservation.

While the Shimshalis have struggled against the KNP in order to protect their land and livelihood, their struggle is especially significant for it contests the epistemic exclusion of pastoral visions from the very definition of development. It challenges the dominant meanings of “nature” and “conservation” in global environmental practice, questions whose knowledge counts as “expertise,” and recasts the very process through which “global” development ideals and projects are framed and terms of “community participation” defined. By creating a Shimshal Nature Trust which proposes indigenous ownership of local land and ecology—as opposed to a national park or revenue-sharing conservation schemes—Shimshalis engage in what Jean Franco has called the “struggle for interpretive power” (1999). This involves active appropriation and new repertoires of representation through which marginalized communities carve a space of maneuver within dominant paradigms (Pratt, 1999; Cornwall, Harrison, & Whitehead, 2007). Shimshalis have to strategically represent and position themselves in relation to conservation, in order to claim voice and value, and simply to survive. Simultaneously, they puncture the epistemic privilege through which state and international institutions construct particular visions of the world as natural, and particular interests as the right, universal, and inevitable path of progress.

### **From Natural Areas to Neo-Liberal Resources**

The idea of a “natural protected area” such as a national park for biodiversity conservation emerged from an ahistorical construction of nature, in which nature was viewed as a pristine, peopleless wilderness instead of a lived social landscape (Cronon, 1995). Inspired by Enlightenment and Romantic values, this imagined wilderness had to be created, scientifically managed, preserved, and toured—primarily by urbanites for their own use and

luxury. Such valuations of nature emerged in the context of an ongoing unfolding of liberal capitalist modernity, which produced the “natural” and the “social” as separate and distinct realms of existence. The social alienation and environmental degradation resulting from the process of capitalist development was partly the reason behind the conservationist impulse to find and preserve “untouched” and “endangered” nature—untouched by and endangered from capital.

The nature–society relation has undergone significant changes under recent conditions of neo-liberal capitalism. To begin with, nature has been transformed from a factor of production external to capital into a commodity that itself must be bought and sold according to the dictates of capital (O’Connor, 1994). In practice, this commodification of nature has been achieved through the institutionalization of tradable pollution permits, transferable fishing quotas, intellectual property rights over crop varieties, the privatization of public utilities, and other such market-based mechanisms for managing nature. Far from the claims of “efficient” and “sustainable” use, these practices in effect deepen the exploitation of natural resources and heighten the inequities characterizing their access. Countries in the Global South, and particularly their indigenous communities, which depend directly on natural resources, tend to lose out the most, as their rights and use values are delegitimized to make way for the interests and exchange values of global elites.

In the specific arena of biodiversity conservation, neo-liberal values have steadily encroached and become dominant over the last thirty years. In the 1970s, the protected area model and its conception of nature as divorced from society began to come under severe criticism for being exclusionary and ineffective, both from within the conservation community as well as from rural communities whose rights were being superseded by the imperatives of biodiversity preservation. By the early 90s, a series of conferences such as the 1982 and 1992 World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas (WCNPPA) as well as the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, had decisively transformed the discourse on biodiversity conservation against the “island mentality” (McNeely, 1993) that had hitherto guided the management of protected areas. The aim now was not strict preservation, but rather conservation combined with “sustainable development.” International conservation organizations such as the Conservation International, WWF, and IUCN subsequently set about investigating how the goals of conservation could be achieved while simultaneously ensuring “community participation” and “benefit-sharing.”

Part of the answer that they came up with was decidedly neo-liberal: the use of protected areas for the promotion of market ventures such as ecotourism, trophy hunting, and bioprospecting, which would commodify nature to serve mostly Western consumers, but also give local communities a share in the resulting revenue. This commodification of nature is presented as “conservation,” employing the circular logic of selling nature in order to save it (McAfee, 1999) and saving nature in order to sell it (Breunig, 2006). It is also presented as a form of “community-based conservation” for “sustainable development,” while simultaneously perpetuating a protected area model of conservation that is fundamentally anti-community: protected areas mostly convert commonly owned pastoral

and agricultural land into state-owned territory in which subsistence-based uses of nature such as grazing and farming are severely curtailed. Frequently, indigenous communities are altogether evicted from their lands to create the imagined “natural” landscape, leading to an alarming number of “conservation refugees” around the world (Geisler, 2003). Indeed, subsistence uses have become delegitimized by the very definition of “biodiversity,” which has come to be constructed as a national and global preserve that needs to be protected mostly from local “threats” such as “unsustainable grazing practices” (e.g., IUCN 1999, p. 31). Through such logics of protected areas as well as their neo-liberal uses, global biodiversity conservation has opened up a new frontier for the appropriation of local space by capital and state, thus embodying a form of what Harvey has called “accumulation by dispossession” (2003).<sup>1</sup>

The accomplishment of this neo-liberal conservation depends critically on the discourse of “sustainable development” and “community-based conservation.” This discourse has served to re-legitimize the protected area model, leading to a vigorous expansion of protected areas, particularly in the developing world. Between 1986 and 1996, there was a 60 percent increase in the number of natural protected areas in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America (Breunig, 2006). While critiques of neo-liberalism often target the policies promoted by organizations such as the World Bank and IMF, those of conservation organizations are rarely analyzed as linked to the realization of a neo-liberal agenda. This is partly due to the ways in which the aim of conserving biodiversity has become naturalized as “common sense”—an abstract, global value to be aspired toward by everyone for the sake of the earth as well as for future generations. Certainly, attention to the sustainability of the natural world and equitable access to it is of ultimate significance, and is made possible precisely by a language of environmental conservation that has the potential to offer a powerful counter to an ecologically and socially destructive consumerism driven by capitalist modernity. However, what this commonsense environmental ethic has come to embody in actual conservation practice deserves critical study, as the latter constitutes one of the modes through which rural livelihoods around the globe are being superseded by free market ideologies.

### **The Context of the Khunjerab National Park, Northern Areas**

Historically known as Gilgit-Baltistan, the region today called the Northern Areas covers a vast terrain of some 72,496 square kilometers at the northern borders of Pakistan, India, China, and Afghanistan. It encompasses some of the world’s highest mountain ranges, and is incredibly rich in plant and wildlife diversity, supporting several rare and endangered species such as the snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*), markhor (*Capra falconeri*), and Himalayan ibex (*Capra ibex siberica*). This ecologically fragile region also has a tenuous political status. It is claimed by both India and Pakistan as part of the disputed territory of Kashmir, but it is effectively ruled by Pakistan, and constitutes 86 percent of the territory of Kashmir under its control.

In 1975, the Northern Areas Wildlife Preservation Act was passed, under which the Northern Areas administration could declare any area in its domain as a national park, wildlife reserve, or wildlife sanctuary, and alter the boundaries of such areas as deemed necessary. Through a government notification in the same year, the Khunjerab National Park was subsequently established by the then Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, as the first national park in the Northern Areas. The KNP covers an area of 2270 sq. km, and comprises the grasslands of the Khunjerab, Ghujerab, and Shimshal valleys in the upper Hunza region of the Northern Areas. During the time of princely and colonial rule, the village communities which inhabited this area enjoyed grazing rights on its pastures and paid livestock and livestock products as tax to the Mir, the princely ruler of Hunza. Some pastures like that of Shimshal had been bought from the Mir and were directly owned by the local agro-pastoral communities.

The official rationale for the KNP was the protection of the endangered Marco Polo sheep, as well as the preservation of other Asian wildlife species such as the snow leopard, blue sheep, and Himalayan ibex. The park was recommended and delineated by the famous American field zoologist George B. Schaller, who was affiliated with the Wildlife Conservation Society and visited Pakistan several times between 1970 and 1975. It was designated as a Category II park; according to the guidelines provided by IUCN, this meant that human activity such as grazing and hunting would be banned and visitors would be allowed only for “inspirational, educational, cultural and recreational purposes at a level which will maintain the area in a natural or near natural state” (IUCN, 1994).

### **Contesting Conservation**

While all the other villages that were going to be affected by the Khunjerab National Park eventually accepted its authority, the village of Shimshal still refuses to give up its land. This has been a major impediment in the implementation of the KNP, as two-thirds of it is comprised of Shimshali territory.

As the map in Figure 5.1 shows, Shimshal is located at the northeastern periphery of the Northern Areas, along the border of Pakistan with China. It comprises about 2700 sq. km of high altitude land in the Central Karakoram region, and is exclusively controlled by an agro-pastoral community of approximately 1700 people.<sup>2</sup> Within this area, Shimshalis maintain several village settlements, enough irrigated land to fulfill their food requirements, and over a dozen communal pastures for seasonal herding of their sizable livestock population.

Shimshalis offer a number of reasons to explain why they have been resisting the conversion of their territory into a national park. To begin with, Shimshalis argue that the Khunjerab National Park was created without any consultation with the affected communities regarding its boundaries, regulations, or management. They were simply informed that most of their pastures and even some of their village settlements were now part of a state-owned national park.

Beyond concerns about the arbitrary and undemocratic foundation of the KNP, the main apprehension of Shimshalis is the loss of their land and livelihood. The community



Exhibit 5.1 The Location of Shimshal in the Northern Areas (Gilgit-Baltistan), Pakistan (Source: Butz 1996).

of Shimshal stands to lose the most from the park due to its exceptionally high dependence on livestock herding as a source of livelihood. In 1995, Shimshalis owned a total of 4473 goats, 2547 sheep, 960 yaks, 399 cows, and 32 donkeys (Ali & Butz, 2003), and they continue to have the largest livestock holdings in the Hunza region. An enforcement of park regulations would entail a complete ban on grazing and hunting in most Shimshali pastures, so that wildlife species and their habitats can be preserved. This would directly threaten Shimshali livelihoods not only because of the loss of pastures, but also due to the prohibition on hunting certain wildlife predators of livestock. As Shimshali villagers said to me:

We are supposed to protect the snow leopard, even though it eats up our goats and sheep and causes a huge economic loss for us. Who will compensate us for this loss? We have to pay the price for conservation. First our rights should be honored, then those of wildlife.

These statements challenge the modernist, universalizing agenda of biodiversity conservation that privileges the protection of wildlife for the “future of the earth” over the protection of pastoral livelihoods and futures. For Shimshalis, conservation—as promoted by international conservation organizations—is not of inherent value because it entails an appropriation of their territory, and because one of the rare species that needs to be protected is a deadly predator of livestock. Yet, to prevent their displacement by the Khunjerab National Park, Shimshalis have themselves implemented a self-imposed ban on wildlife hunting. As a Shimshali shepherd commented to me:

We believe in conservation. That’s why we imposed a ban on wildlife hunting ourselves 10 years ago. In other places, if a snow leopard eats up livestock, it tends to get hunted down in a retaliatory killing so that the helpless shepherd can recover his loss by selling the leopard’s pelt.

Indeed, Shimshalis go beyond claims of merely fulfilling the responsibilities that modern conservation expects of them. They claim ownership of the very “nature” that external authorities wish to conserve, by pointing out their historical role in producing this nature:

My ancestors planted the trees in Shimshal. How can someone come and tell me that these trees do not belong to me?

The markhor (*Capra falconeri*) is alive because of us.

Through such claims, Shimshalis challenge the dominant tendency of viewing nature as a self-existing, untouched entity, instead of one that is historically produced by and fundamentally linked to human activity and labor. These statements can also be read as claims to a local form of ecological nationalism, in which the right to place is asserted through a discourse of lived landscape, nature intimacy, and stewardship (Cederlof & Sivaramakrishnan, 2006).

To support this assertion of local sovereignty based on a historically grounded, indigenous conservation, Shimshalis further point out the state’s incompetence in conserving nature:

We have inhabited and tended this difficult terrain for centuries. What does the DFO<sup>3</sup> or the consultant know about conservation? A while back, a park official came and told us that we need to sign a Memorandum of Understanding and give up the rights to our territory for the KNP so that wildlife habitats can be protected. I told him, “Come, I will show you the area where we have protected wildlife.” And he responded, “I don’t think I can trek that far.” Then I politely asked him, “If you cannot walk to the area, how will you ever conserve it?”

In areas where the KNP has been implemented, hunting by state officials has become more common and convenient. This is why the wildlife populations have decreased in these areas. And now the government is putting more pressure on us to accept the park so that wildlife in our areas can be exploited.<sup>4</sup>



Such statements assert a local aptitude for conservation that is presented as superior to that of state institutions and international organizations,<sup>5</sup> and also challenge the common portrayal of Shimshalis as incapable stewards of nature (Butz, 1998). This is significant, as the discourse of the state and conservation NGOs in the Northern Areas is centered precisely on problematizing the lack of local “capacity” in attaining conservation goals, which helps to justify an international organization’s own role in creating, planning, and managing state-owned conservation zones. My point is not to romanticize the local community, and its interest and capability in conservation. Rather, I wish to point out that conservation agencies in the Northern Areas assume a priori that local communities lack credibility and experience with respect to conservation. They also do not research whether community practices might have a positive role in wildlife conservation in areas where there remain sizable numbers of rare species.

The tendency to undervalue the role of local communities in sustaining nature has indeed been a constitutive feature of global conservation discourse. It is assumed that natives lack ecological values that are supposedly the preserve only of Western elites (Gareau, 2007). The nature–society relation in communities across continents has come to be described through “degradation narratives” that perpetuate the stereotype of an essentialized, irresponsible native—often without the support of any scientific analysis—as they help to justify national and international interventions for protecting the “global commons” from its local users (Brockington & Homewood, 2001; Neumann, 2004). These narratives emerged from, and build upon a long-standing colonial discourse that helped to legitimize the appropriation of nature for varied interests including commercial exploitation, hunting pleasure, and strategic needs (Rangarajan, 2006). Today, they continue to thrive in conservation discourse, despite the rhetoric of including and valorizing the “local community.”

### **Representation and Power: The Case of the Shimshal Nature Trust**

Until the mid-90s, Shimshali villagers obstructed the implementation of the KNP through informal resistances such as the disruption of information-gathering



*Exhibit 5.2 A Village Settlement in Central Shimshal.*

mechanisms, refusal to follow administrative regulations, and the blocking of government and NGO officials from entering the community (Butz, 2002). However, the pressures on them to submit to park authorities kept increasing, as new programs and funds for conservation poured into the Northern Areas in the wake of a renewed global—and subsequently, national—concern for biodiversity preservation. In this context, the confrontational stance of Shimshalis that emphasized a complete rejection of the park was proving to be counterproductive, and served only to reinforce the stereotype of Shimshal as a backward and “wild” community. Realizing this, a group of men belonging mostly to Shimshal’s first generation English-educated elite—and often employed in development NGOs based in Gilgit<sup>6</sup> or Islamabad—began to rally community members around a politics of appeasement and engagement, instead of one that endorsed confrontation.<sup>7</sup> They strongly felt—and feared—that a small, marginal border community like Shimshal could eventually suffer massive state action unless it was able to counter its negative image, and negotiate cordially with conservation organizations. As one of them said to me, they had to “fight with dialogue.” After much deliberation, they came up with an answer: a community-based organization called the Shimshal Nature Trust (SNT) that would manage and showcase Shimshal’s conservation efforts, and represent the community in dealings with external organizations.

Created in 1997, the key purpose of the SNT was to formally articulate, and give material force to the representational claims discussed in the previous section—claims to livelihood dependency, native authenticity and ownership, environmental responsibility, and a place-based conservation capability. As the “Fifteen Year Vision and Management Plan” of the SNT explains:

Our largest challenge is not to develop a system of utilizing the natural surroundings sustainably, but rather to express our indigenous stewardship practices in language that will garner the financial, technical and political support of the international community, and that will persuade Pakistani authorities that we are indeed capable of protecting our own natural surroundings (SNT, 1999).

The SNT “management plan” is precisely a response to this representational challenge: how to counter the language, and hence, the power of a global conservation discourse that refuses to acknowledge indigenous values and rights? The plan describes the socio-economic context of the Shimshali community, the ways in which a conservation ethic has been historically practiced, and the community-initiated programs through which natural resource management is envisioned in the future.<sup>8</sup> Following the tropes of developmentalist writing, these programs are divided up into implementation phases, with various activities planned for each phase. The SNT management plan has been distributed to all the major government and non-governmental organizations working on conservation and development in the Northern Areas, and is also accessible through the Internet. Between 1999 and 2002, SNT members also conducted a series of “workshops” in Gilgit with different “stakeholders” to create awareness and legitimacy for their approach toward conservation.

The very language, format, and content of SNT practices reflect how communities have come to understand and reconfigure the nature of the power exercised by international conservation organizations. The global discourse of “community-based nature conservation” and “sustainable development” is appropriated by positing Shimshalis as the original and most suitable conservationists, who are equipped to ensure the sustainable future that international conservation NGOs are striving toward.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the “participatory” approach adopted by NGOs in recent years—in part a response to the failure of and resistance to earlier development projects—is reconstituted to argue that effective participation must entail complete *ownership*. As the management plan explains:

While we appreciate recent efforts by external agencies to develop [a] community-based nature conservation project...it is not enough that external initiatives be managed locally; rather, a culturally and contextually-sensitive nature stewardship programme should be developed and initiated, as well as managed, from within the community (SNT, 1997).

The existence and legitimacy of such a community-centered program is then established by describing how indigenous ways of environmental management have historically been based on ecologically sound practices such as land use zoning, as well as on culturally

specific values such as the “Islamic religious ethic of nature stewardship” in which nature is respected as “God’s ultimate creation” (SNT, 1997). The emphasis on such a moral ecology grounded in religion has an important discursive effect—it provides a way to unsettle the scientific authority of international conservation agencies by highlighting how the interpretation of nature and its conservation through ethical values is more locally appropriate and significant than one based on scientific principles.<sup>10</sup> However, this is not to suggest that religious and cultural practice does not have any real role in local systems of nature conservation. On the contrary, long-standing religious and cultural institutions have enabled Shimshalis—who follow the Ismaili sect of Islam—to collectively organize for conservation efforts ranging from hunting control to pasture management. The SNT itself is managed partly by local volunteer corps and boy scouts, who are affiliated with the *jamat khana* (religious center) in Ismaili-Muslim practice.

While the key purpose of SNT is a strategic celebration and vindication of an indigenous, ecological sovereignty, the role of external support is also valued. Indeed, as SNT members emphasize, foreign scholars from universities in Japan, Canada, and the United States have played a critical role in shaping local consciousness and enabling community initiatives.<sup>11</sup> The SNT also acknowledges that for activities such as a wildlife census and wildlife monitoring, the support of organizations like the WWF and IUCN is especially needed and welcomed.

Unfortunately, such collaborations have rarely materialized, as international conservation organizations continue to insist that any project of conservation in Shimshal must be linked to the conversion of community-owned land into the KNP. Even if it is now occasionally acknowledged—as the new rhetoric of respecting the “community” demands—that Shimshalis have responsibly taken care of the environment, it is argued matter-of-factly that their main livelihood practice of livestock grazing poses a fundamental threat to wildlife survival, and hence they cannot be trusted with the task of conservation.

### **Reorienting Livelihoods**

The ban on livestock grazing in the Khunjerab National Park was marginally enforced until 1989, when the newly formed government organization—the National Council for Conservation of Wildlife (NCCW)—drafted a plan for a stricter enforcement of the Category II criteria. The affected villages nevertheless continued to practice their customary grazing rights, particularly since the government was not forthcoming with the promised compensation. Things came to a head in 1991, when the government used the paramilitary Khunjerab Security Force to evict herdsman from the park’s no-grazing zone and even killed some of their livestock. Eventually, in 1992, all the aggrieved communities except Shimshal signed an agreement with the KNP authorities that allowed them some concessions on their grazing rights as well a share in park-generated revenue in return for accepting the authority of the park (Knudsen, 1999).

While the ban on livestock grazing was somewhat relaxed, it soon gave way to a new emphasis on a reduction in livestock holdings. This reduction has in effect become a precondition for obtaining the community share in park-generated revenue such as entry fees. In fact, as a state wildlife official informed me, the very point of sharing the park revenue with the community is to enable them to engage in “conservation activities such as the reduction of their livestock over a period of time.”

In recent years, this new logic of equating community conservation with livestock reduction has meant that park officials have withheld payment of the community share in KNP’s entry fees for long periods on the grounds that the concerned communities are not reducing their livestock holdings.<sup>12</sup> Despite strong evidence of decreasing livestock ownership and grazing in the Northern Areas (Kreutzmann, 2006), KNP officials continue to claim otherwise. Such a claim about livestock holdings has thus become a tool in the hands of KNP officials to retain their hold over communities and their resources.

Conservation NGOs, on the other hand, concede that dependence on livestock herding is indeed decreasing in areas affecting the KNP. This, however, does not necessarily bring any credit for the community. As a manager at an international conservation NGO remarked:

Communities are not reducing their livestock because they care about conservation. It is happening itself because people are increasingly seeking off-farm employment. It is only when they will consciously reduce livestock that we will achieve true community participation.

In other words, it is not just particular conservation outcomes that are desired; rather, a disciplining of community attitudes is being struggled for, and represented as the legitimate form of participation. Community participation is thus reconfigured as a measure of how well people in the Northern Areas have internalized the international conservation discourse, and sacrificed their own livelihoods for its sake.

Because it is believed that communities are not “participating” well, international conservation organizations have sought to go beyond the process of awareness-raising regarding the negative impact of livestock on wildlife conservation. They wish to actively steer people away from livestock herding by providing alternate sources of income (WWF, 1996). These alternate livelihoods must ideally be linked to the implementation of the park, so that people can realize that conservation can be a source of their “development” as opposed to pastoralism. Linking the global project of conservation to “income-generating opportunities” at the local level has become known as “community-based conservation” in the discourse of international conservation NGOs operating in the Northern Areas, and it is to its contested operations that I now turn my attention.

## **Community-Based Conservation**

For international conservation NGOs in the Northern Areas, community-based conservation has become synonymous with projects of ecotourism and the international sport of trophy hunting. The latter has particularly come to dominate the conservation scene in the Northern Areas over the last ten years, during which twenty-two “Community Controlled Hunting Areas” (CCHAs) have been created in the region. These have been established primarily by IUCN, through the GEF/UNDP funded Mountain Areas Conservancy Project (MACP). The CCHAs have a strong appeal for communities, as 75 percent of the revenue generated through trophy hunting goes to the community that manages the relevant area.<sup>13</sup> Communities also earn income through the porters and guides that accompany the hunter. Moreover, hunters are also known to be generous, and might give up to \$3000 as a donation for local development after a successful hunt.

International conservation organizations in the Northern Areas promote trophy hunting as a form of “sustainable community development” because of the cash it generates, which is either distributed evenly to all the households in a village, or saved with a recognized community-based organization that can utilize the funds for local development projects. It is also represented as a useful tool for conservation: the income that can be generated by occasionally catering to the needs of rich Pakistani and foreign hunters is deemed to be a significant disincentive for rampant local hunting which might be undertaken for subsistence, cultural significance, pleasure, or trade.

Conservation agencies perceive no contradiction between projects such as the KNP that seek to preserve landscapes in their “natural state” for the protection of wildlife, and projects such as the CCHAs that turn this wildlife into a commodity that can be killed for pleasure. In many cases, a CCHA is in fact located right along the boundaries of a national park, in what is called the “buffer zone.” It is assumed that the hunting of treasured wildlife in these buffer zones does not disrupt their natural habitats, but the practice of livestock grazing and local hunting does. In effect, local use values of nature are delegitimized in order to secure its global exchange value.

This commodification of nature in the name of conservation is perfectly aligned with the interests of hunters. As trophy hunting faces increased resistance in North America and Europe, “hunters, like multinational industries, flee to grounds where they can escape those restrictive conditions” (MacDonald, 2005, p. 266). The continuation of their sport, however, is dependent on the protection of wildlife in these freer areas from local use and abuse. This link between local conservation and global hunting is captured tellingly in a Safari Club International (SFI) sticker which I saw at the head office of a prominent international conservation organization in the Northern Areas. It read: “Conserve Now, Hunt Later.” No wonder that conservation agencies perceive no contradiction between saving nature and selling it: they want nature to be saved precisely so that it can be sold.

Community-based trophy hunting also serves the interests of the state, and particularly of the local forest bureaucracy that oversees the management of protected areas. It provides an important source of revenue, and also reinforces the power of the state to distribute patronage through the granting of hunting quotas to particular communities. This serves as an indirect means for regulating community behavior. Indeed, the KNP management has used trophy hunting as a lure to put pressure on Shimshalis for giving ownership of their land to the KNP. As a KNP official explained:

In 2006, we gave a permit to an American hunter to hunt in Shimshal. The community got its due share for the trophy as well. We then allowed the creation of a Community Controlled Hunting Area as an additional incentive. Since then, we have given more permits, but we will not release the money till Shimshalis sign an MoU in which they accept the KNP and its regulations. We have to bring these communities in line. They think they can extract the benefits of the park, without obeying the writ of the government.

Hence, community-based conservation schemes that provide a community share in trophy hunting and in park entry fees, have come to perpetuate a state–community relation in which the very terms of participation are based on exclusion and dispossession, as they require communities to surrender ownership of their land on the one hand and abandon their livelihoods on the other. These projects have become forms of political and social control that help to entrench the power of the state over rural spaces and communities. This control is often asserted through sinister tactics. For example, in 2006, the Directorate of the Khunjerab National Park lodged a court case against a number of Shimshali youth for assaulting park rangers who had been sent to Shimshal. Members of the SNT, however, contend that there was only a verbal argument between the rangers and local youth, and that the case has been filed only to malign Shimshalis and further coerce them into accepting the authority of the KNP.

Analyses of community-based conservation initiatives elsewhere have likewise demonstrated how environmental agendas framed in participatory terms have served to intensify state power, often diminishing the political and economic security of rural communities instead of enhancing it (Neumann, 2001; Agrawal, 2001a; Li, 2002; Breunig, 2006). These agendas are defined by a dense network of national and transnational actors that cut across the traditional divides of state, non-governmental organization, and corporation (Igoe & Brockington, 2007). What is truly baffling and dangerous about the global conservation agenda is its insistence on promoting activities such as tourism and trophy hunting—which commodify nature primarily for the leisure of rich, Western consumers—as sustainable alternatives to local subsistence-based livelihoods. In this neo-liberal logic, the “sustainable development” of a community becomes equated with the ability to raise cash incomes through the market, and the development of “nature” is presumed to be achieved by turning it into a commodity that is subject to market forces of production and exchange. Such logics cannot be implemented without the necessary cultivation and appropriation of local subjectivities. Through promises of “benefit-sharing,” already marginal, local communities are first expected to compromise their own livelihood

concerns and take on the burden of conserving “nature,” and then led to treat nature as a resource from which they can and must profit from.

The appeal and importance of such market-driven approaches to nature management for local communities should not be underestimated. In a context where the state is pushing for park development but shows very little interest in social development, communities like Shimshal tremendously value the revenue that they may get from projects like trophy hunting, as it can be directed for self-help initiatives ranging from water channels to health care provision. What they find problematic, however, is the contingency of “community-based conservation” schemes on relinquishing the very land and livelihood on which communities are founded.

The discourse of “alternative livelihoods” is also problematic because it assumes that a pastoral community’s relationship with nature is merely about economic need, and hence alternative sources of incomes would, and should automatically translate into a reduced dependence on nature—ideally, a total surrender of it so that it becomes a “protected area” for state and capital. What is erased in such a discourse is the central role of nature and pastoral activity in defining a community’s identity and its forms of belonging. In Shimshal, for example, pastures are considered key sites for historical events, spiritual renewal, and cultural celebrations (Butz, 1996). They are also particularly cherished by Shimshali women as places that provide respite from the constraints and anxieties of village life, by offering a meaningful experience of independence, female solidarity, and peace. Hence, what is considered a “natural” terrain of pristine wildlife is of tremendous material and symbolic value for Shimshalis (Moore, 1993), encompassing identity, history, and livelihood. Ultimately, it is the very source and meaning of life, which is why both its commodification and compensation is considered unthinkable.

## **Conclusion**

Ten years after the establishment of the Shimshal Nature Trust, a number of SNT members expressed to me a sense of disillusionment about their initiative. As one of them commented:

We created the SNT to engage with outside interests, and make them understand our concerns. Instead, we have become perceived as more of a threat, and portrayed as anti-state. This is completely false. We are eager to work with the state, and with international NGOs. We know that conservation is important. All we are saying is, don’t make a park that will prevent us from owning our lands and living our lives.

These were the last impressions with which I left Shimshal in June 2007. By March 2008, however, the tide had changed. Shimshalis had managed to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Northern Areas Wildlife and Parks Department, which clearly acknowledged and guaranteed the land use rights and settlements of Shimshal, in return for cooperation in transnational and national conservation efforts—something Shimshalis were



always prepared to do, but on their own terms. Subsequently, the Khunjerab National Park authorities have also withdrawn their criminal charges against Shimshali youth. Shimshal Nature Trust members now speak with a sense of relief and hope, instead of frustration and fear. It can thus be argued that the epistemic “struggle for interpretive power” (Franco, 1989)—which Shimshalis engaged in through the Shimshal Nature Trust—was ultimately successful, though the future course of interactions between Shimshal, state actors, and international institutions remains to be seen.

The case of Shimshal embodies a critical struggle for social and ecological justice, contributing to peasant struggles elsewhere that have sought to reclaim rural agency in global development projects (McMichael, 2006). Such struggles create an opening for alternate visions of being and becoming. Indeed, Shimshalis hope to change the dominant “global” discourse on conservation itself, by arguing that they themselves are central makers of the development project instead of its beneficiaries, and that they are eager to imagine new social futures with “government participation” and “international participation.” This challenges the existing framework whereby epistemic and material powers are concentrated in the hands of a transnational–national nexus of institutions, the agendas of which are scripted from above while allowing “community participation.” In effect, like indigenous communities elsewhere, Shimshalis are working toward an ecological sovereignty in which their community governs itself and sustainably tends the resources on which it depends—as it has always done.

Despite the Shimshali achievement, however, the normative narrative of biodiversity conservation remains wedded to projects that act in the name of community, but are unwilling to listen to it. Indeed, what I have tried to point out in this chapter is not only the unwillingness, but the structural *inability* of the global conservation nexus to understand and value the interests of local communities. Embedded in the global discourse of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development are *assumptions*— for example, about nature as divorced from society, and livestock as an irredeemable threat to wildlife—and *interests* such as those of conservation organizations, their corporate financiers, and hunters, which make it *unthinkable* to acknowledge that a local community can own and manage a protected area. What gets authorized, instead, is the commodification of nature which

abstracts nature from its spatial and social contexts...reinforces the claims of global elites to the greatest share of the earth’s biomass and all it contains...and speeds the extension of market relations into diverse and complex eco-social systems, with material and cultural outcomes that do more to diminish than to conserve diversity and sustainability (McAfee, 1999, pp. 1–3).

This process of commodification has simultaneously enhanced the power of the state to territorialize nature and to regulate subjects through the control of nature. The end result of this process is that almost 40 percent of the Northern Areas’ territory has been declared as

some form of conservation enclosure, benefiting state and capital at the cost of local sovereignty and livelihood.

To be sure, my critique of community-based conservation is not aimed at dismissing the participatory turn in global development and biodiversity conservation. This turn is surely a necessary corrective to earlier approaches which were characterized by a top-down imposition of agendas and frequent use of violence. Indeed, it is precisely the rhetoric of “participation” and “community empowerment” that enables negotiation on the part of Shimshalis. At the same time, however, we need to recognize the ways in which such rhetoric facilitates and conceals the manipulation, violence, and displacement that is still widespread in conservation practice.

I also do not wish to suggest that the role of conservation organizations in the Northern Areas has been entirely negative. Both the WWF and IUCN are staffed with several local managers who are all too aware of the dilemmas that conservation poses for their region and people, and have pushed their supervisors to be more sensitive to local contexts. These organizations have also undertaken important initiatives that address local needs of conservation, such as training of communities in restoring pastures, in protecting livestock from predators, and in addressing concerns of deforestation and overhunting. Importantly, they have also attempted to go beyond the drafting of management plans for protected areas, to undertaking valuable research on topics such as local understandings of ecology and wildlife management.

Initiatives such as these have the potential to promote a more meaningful attention to the “local” in conservation practice. For example, a report by IUCN (2003) examines customary and statutory regimes of resource control in the Northern Areas, arguing that the former favors conservation and sustainability whereas the latter promotes exploitation. It further explores how communities in the Northern Areas have had a varying historical experience of nature–society relations, and how differently situated actors within communities offer diverse explanations for declining wildlife populations. People point out that road construction, urbanization, and less rainfall due to climate change have been key threats to wildlife survival in their regions. While acknowledging that local hunting has been a threat, they also highlight how it has increased only in the last two decades due to the availability of modern weapons as well as the pressures of new market-generated economic needs.

Importantly, not one person in this comprehensive study argues that livestock is a threat to wildlife. This reinforces the findings of my own fieldwork in Shimshal, which revealed how people perceive wildlife and livestock populations as part of a complex ecological process in which a complementary relationship between plant, animal, and human life has been historically developed and maintained by local communities. From their perspective, they have been conserving all along and cannot understand why they must discontinue their practices *for* the sake of conservation. A shepherd from southern France has poignantly echoed this sentiment: “shepherds...are trapped between the desire to do what they know

and want to do and the requirement to act as a manager of space and biodiversity. The most difficult thing is perhaps to explain that, all told, this is one and the same approach” (Grellier, 2006, p. 163).

Such reflections on biodiversity invite and enable a deeper analysis of environmental issues than that permitted by the dominant conservation discourse that pits local irresponsibility against global concerns. One hopes that for the cause of environmental sustainability as well as of social justice, such local understandings, values, and aspirations are not only researched, but actually allowed a central place in framing the agenda of biodiversity conservation as well as in shaping the future of development.

## Notes

\* Acknowledgments I am especially grateful to David Butz, Amita Baviskar, Fouad Makki, John Mock, and Alex Da Costa for their critical feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

1 However, it entails the nationalization of community land instead of its privatization as Harvey posits.

2 “Exclusive” in the sense that only villagers of Shimshal own and manage this vast terrain. The administrative role of the local or the national state has historically been limited, largely due to the rugged, inaccessible terrain of Shimshal. Shimshalis used to pay grazing taxes during the Mir’s reign, but after the abolition of the Hunza princely state in 1974, no income taxes have been paid to the Pakistan government.

3 Abbreviation for the District Forest Officer, the key government official responsible for implementing state policies of conservation in the Northern Areas.

4 The occurrence of illegal hunting by state officials in the KNP has even been acknowledged by the WWF, which is the main international organization that has been pushing for the formalization of the park (WWF, 1996). Moreover, a higher-up official at WWF also acknowledged to me in a personal interview that “wildlife in Shimshal is most likely being conserved well.”

5 Research elsewhere in South Asia has also demonstrated that replacing local forms of control with state control is not always productive for conserving nature, because the state is generally unable to enforce its own conservation policies (Guha, 1989, Saberwal, 1999, Agrawal, 2001b).

6 A town of around 50,000 people that serves as the administrative center of the Northern Areas.

7 Their intervention was openly vilified at first, particularly by some notable village elders who accused them of being bought by the state and conservation NGOs.

8 These programs include a community-enforced ban on wildlife hunting which was discussed earlier in this article. Keeping local needs in mind, the ban does not apply to the small number of ibex that are hunted for meat by yak herders in the winter.

9 Indeed, due to the unequal power relations embedded in global conservation regimes, indigenous communities around the world have had to re-present themselves as environmentally responsible subjects to ensure their survival (Martinez-Alier, 2002). This suggests that a claim to traditional property rights and livelihood dependency has increasingly become insufficient for preventing the appropriation of their rights.

10 At the same time, a scientific approach is also drawn upon by asserting that nature conservation by the Shimshal community would be based, in the first place, on up-to-date statistical information collected by local youth.

11 The SNT management plan itself was compiled and edited by David Butz, a geographer who has been working in Shimshal since 1988.

12           These communities do not include Shimshal; they belong to the seven Upper Hunza villages that accepted the authority of the park, and are hence, entitled to a share in park revenue.

13           The cost of a hunting permit varies with different wildlife species: for an ibex it is \$3000, for a blue sheep it is \$6500, and shooting an Astore Markhor can cost up to \$40,000.