

Summary

Place, Conservation, and Displacement

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Conservation is place-based politics. Implementing conservation is about placing current and future limits on the rights of people to use nature. One of these limits that has drawn substantial public attention of late is displacement.

Displacement of people from protected areas has generated, and continues to generate strong, often well argued, and sometimes fixed positions — evident in some of the contributions to this special section. The assembled texts, far from hewing to a common set of tightly developed statements, demonstrate the diversity of data, intellectual arguments, politics, and emotions that get mobilized when the interests of people living in and near protected areas are seen to rub up against those of conservation. They are also testimony to disagreements over basic terms and issues in the debates over displacement: What is displacement? Who is responsible for displacement? What can or should be done about past, ongoing, and future displacements? Did displacement occur on a large scale, and does it continue to occur in a substantial way? Furthermore, underpinning all these questions, what leads to desirable terms of engagement between people and nature?

The different authors in this section have varying, even divergent, answers to the questions posed above. However, even among the many disagreements, there are areas in which the discussants stand on common ground. Their articles hint at this common ground, and one of the goals of our effort in drawing upon the main themes of this debate is to highlight this ground. Displacement, although usually contentious, need not always be. Indeed, for a debate to occur, its participants must share or even agree upon some assumptions. Without such agreements, debates generate only heat and no light. With such agreements, even acrimonious debates bear the potential to illuminate. However, first, the disagreements...

The special section contains different and differently articulated views about whether displacement is a term more appropriately reserved for physical removal and resettlement (Agrawal and Redford) or if it should include the economic,

social, cultural, and other forms of loss resulting from protected areas (Krueger, Bray, and Velázquez). The issues at stake are both intellectual and practical. One might ask if using the same term of reference for quite different categories of impacts is appropriate — even if qualifying adjectives can be used to modify the meaning of the central term. In everyday use, displacement refers to removal from a place, an uprooting that is qualitatively different from the loss of livelihood or separation from a particular source of income. Using “physical” to qualify displacement is redundant. It only becomes necessary because other qualifiers (such as economic, cultural, or social) are deployed so as to make it possible to use displacement to refer to fundamentally different phenomena — loss of livelihoods or estrangement from landscapes holding symbolic or cultural significance. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the term displacement, when used to refer to loss of livelihoods or income sources, provides its users strong emotive grounds from which to attempt to shape policy and decision making in favor of those who are displaced.

The contributors have definite and implicitly divergent opinions on whether it is the national governments and their right of eminent domain that are ultimately responsible for any conservation-related displacement within national boundaries, or if it is the non-government organizations and their donors / sponsors. (Thankfully, unlike Coasian economists for whom pollution would not occur, but for its victims, none of the contributors blames the victims of displacement for the fact of it). The question of responsibility is essential to address, but very difficult to resolve; not because of the need to allocate blame, but because the answers point toward the agent who bears the responsibility to address the harms resulting from displacement, or who must undertake decision shifts to prevent displacement. Central governments bear ultimate responsibility for displacements occurring within their boundaries, but it is the resources and advocacy of other powerful actors — among them conservationists — who are proximately responsible

for government actions, including the situations where such actions lead to displacement.

The contributors are also divided when it comes to questions about what is to be done with regard to displacement. Bray and Velázquez outline a different model of conservation than the one that is usually viewed as being typical of modern conservation — place-bound initiatives that rely for their perceived and real effectiveness on separation of people from animals and biodiversity — “national parks”. This stereotypical view is of the “national park” that expelled local residents and continues to severely curtail their actions. In fact protected areas that fully incorporate local people and their activities represent a larger area (41.4%) than the protected areas that strictly limit humans and their activities (38.3%) (Chape *et al.* 2008).

The vast apparatus of theory and investigation that provides much of the intellectual and scientific basis for contemporary protected areas has only slowly come to admit the vital role of social sciences. Springer illustrates some concrete ways in which a role for communities, local populations, and indigenous people has been incorporated by conservationists. It is indeed the case, as Chicchón reminds us, that different international conservation organizations occupy very different positions with regard to people’s involvement in conservation. She points out that different levels of inclusion can depend on the particularities of a place — the social, political, and cultural context of conservation. Moreover, the example of Latin America suggests that a more collaborative relationship between the interests of conservation and the rights of local residents can be forged in ways that benefit both. However, both Springer and Chicchón hint at the distance yet to be traveled before communities and people affected adversely by conservation become a part of the conservation solutions.

The dissensions among the contributors are strongest over whether substantial levels of conservation-related displacement has occurred in the past, or if displacement continues to occur now. Chicchón’s article documents the complex story of displacements in Latin America, to note the relatively minor role of conservation in historical cruelties that indigenous groups have borne — it also suggests the very different nature of conservation-related displacement in the region compared to that in much of Africa or South Asia. These differences in the processes and dimensions of displacement between Latin America versus Africa are particularly evident as a flashpoint for the relatively ungenerous exchange between Curran *et al.* and Schmidt-Soltau.

This exchange — in a manner of speaking, since the two pieces are not so much an exchange as assertive position statements — articulates arguments that mostly flow past each other. One is founded upon the conviction that many humans have suffered many wrongs, and the other upon the certainty that these wrongs have been exaggerated without much evidence and are not due to recent conservation activities; one is based on projections of social data gathered

during visits of varying length to field contexts, and the other on long-term and intimate field-based knowledge about conservation; one deploys powerful rhetorical strategies created by defenders of human rights and human livelihoods, and the other finds its defense in the knowledge that human beings — rich and poor alike — have successfully devastated non-human life forms in all regions of the world. Both are convinced of the correctness of their positions and evidence. Their disagreements show how available data do not constitute compelling evidence for either position. Rather than adjudicate between the two — since readers themselves have a chance to do so in this issue, and will have a similar opportunity in a later issue — we are more interested in pinpointing the common grounds of both.

The common ground as we see it lies in the widespread and shared discomfort with the idea of displacement, displayed by those who care about livelihoods as well as those for whom conservation is life’s calling. Both parties to the debate know and acknowledge that in any specific conflict where interests of humans are pitted against those of animals, humans win. Unlike in the past when displacement might have been tolerated as the necessary price to be paid for the national good of development or the global good of conservation, no reasonable person would argue today that the costs of forcible displacement are justifiable, purely in terms of a greater good.

This might appear to be a small point. However, we believe that for the advocates of conservation and livelihoods to come together, when displacement is the issue, this common position is the prerequisite for any larger area of convergence to emerge. To agree on the basic principle that forced displacement of humans from their homes is wrong and must be avoided, and that those who are displaced or whose economic well being has been harmed must be compensated, is to agree to take the next step in the direction of engagement and negotiation.

The ensuing negotiations will have to determine the extent of past and current displacements, the appropriate bases and levels of compensation, the relative roles of the government and conservation actors in providing and managing compensation, and the ways in which local residents can be involved more integrally in conservation rather than being viewed as impediments. The disagreements manifest in the contributions and form only a step in the unfolding relationship between conservation and livelihoods. It is a future that some may not find attractive. After all, finding convenient scapegoats and ignoring people, to pursue conservation, are simpler alternatives. Fortunately, a feasible future for conservation demands more complex visions of the possible. Gathering global forces — climate change, alternative demands for land (such as for alternative energy development), and increasing consumption pressures — all require that those interested in conservation and livelihoods resolve their differences. Without such a resolution, alternative futures will undoubtedly be worse for both conservation and livelihoods.

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