

Green grabbing: a new face of conservation

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Conservation from a neoliberal perspective

The neoliberal conservation management approach has been highly criticized with emerging evidences of the social and ecological cost of displacement in the name of “wilderness” when setting aside protected areas. While there is no question on the fact that both biodiversity and social livelihood need to be taken into account, the argument move around *how* we can create a “double sustainability”, and *how* a “degrowth framework” could contribute to frame a new model of conservation based on a more holistic vision of nature, and solve the dichotomization between society and nature.

The rise of neoliberal globalization –the *neoliberal turn*– has had profound consequences on green movements. The interplay between environmental narratives and industrial modes of production shifted from antagonism –opposing environmentalism to the growth-based model of capitalist development– to friendship –fostering green capitalism. The *neoliberal turn*, characterised by a universal movement towards privatisation and commoditization of environmental areas (Arsel & Büscher, 2012), upholds commercial drivers as the *conditio sine qua non* for the safeguard of the environment. The neoliberal restructuring of nature-economy relations could be then considered as the starting point of a new phase of capitalism: if, during the 20th century, economics valued ecosystems for what they were able to offer –either for biodiversity conservation, resource production or conservation–, in the 21st century it values what they are able to repair: “it is the repair of a damaged nature, and efforts to price the downside of growth, that have brought into being and enhanced the value of commodities such as carbon, biofuels and offsets of all kinds” (Fairhead et al., 2012). Smuggled under the rubric of sustainability, climate adaptation and resilience, the neoliberal ‘green’ *economy of repair* is based on the idea of equivalence –what can be emitted with unsustainable resource use here can be subtracted with ‘sustainable’ approaches there– attributing to nature a mere instrumental value to be efficiently managed by attaching a monetary value to the metabolic functioning of ecosystems (see Payment for Ecosystem Services).

The Ecosystem Services concept became widespread after the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA, 2005). Assigning a monetary value to nature has been used by the market forces as an *opportunity* for new source of capitalism accumulation under the auspice of “being green”. In the name of saving the planet and the endangered species, nature has started to be commoditized and conceptualised as a new source of accumulation for the market.

Protected areas as a mechanism for conservation: from local social impacts to global inefficacy

The creation of protected areas (PAs) is one of the most frequently applied conservation actions, which in the last decades has concentrated in the *global South*, given it harbours the

greatest part of global biodiversity (Brooks et al., 2006). However, the management of these areas has been based on premises inherited from the western concept of conservation: it requires the exclusion of subsistence demands and other resource uses, a centralised trained bureaucracy, with no role for local communities and their knowledge (Kothari et al., 1995; Saberwal, 2001). Human inhabitation and the use of forest resources in these created “inviolable spaces” are prohibited, generating major conflicts between the communities and the state intervention. The number of people affected by conservation projects was estimated in 173 million in 2003 (Agrawal & Redford, 2006), creating a new huge category of ‘internal displaced’ people in the name of “wilderness”.

On the other hand, several studies have acknowledged the inability of protected areas to guarantee biodiversity conservation in a wide sense. Fencing nature will not stop additional impacts in other areas (sometime contiguous to PAs), derived mainly from industrial agriculture, which is predicted to keep rising in the forthcoming years (Schmitz et al., 2014). Moreover, reducing biodiversity loss and climate change would rather need a radical change on global consumption patterns rather than relying only in PAs (Mora & Sale, 2011). All in all, PAs seem to fail in achieving their theoretical goal: preserving as much biodiversity as possible.

Degrowth as a local and global alternative

In opposition to the main conservation wildlife approach, today a number of communities are getting organized and recreate a new system of conservation based on a community management approach, aiming to ensure “double sustainability”. Major examples can be drawn from India and Latin America, where indigenous people of Soligas and Mapuche have regained control over their natural resources in the declared PA. In India, the 6000 Soligas, inhabiting the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Wildlife Sanctuary (Karnataka), got organized and successfully fought back, regaining lost rights and ownership. This was possible thanks to the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights), understood as a legal and political instrument to undo the process of deprivation of forest communities. Supported by civil society groups, the Soligas have also initiated a process to prepare community conservation plans for the management of the BRT Wildlife Sanctuary (Dash & Kothari, 2012). In Latin America, the Mapuche indigenous community in Chile have also regained control on the commons of Villarica National Park, using their traditional knowledge, medical practices and auto-determination to ensure the biodiversity protection while creating a more sustainable livelihood for the community (Marín-Herrera, 2015).

While these could be seen as localized solutions, a new political conservation agenda could be drawn from these successful modes of conservation based on the management of the commons, where individuals become directly responsible for the benefit of their own society, overcoming the created dichotomy between society and nature. In order to do that, we believe that strengthening the role and the responsibility of indigenous people in the institutions that rule the governance of common good and natural areas is a pre-condition to ensure a new conservation model that responds to the need of people, toward a new era of degrowth-based society.

As from the global perspective, reducing the demand for food, fodder, fibre and bioenergy are crucial steps to slow down biodiversity loss and climate change. This is a task concerning primarily the *global North*, whose levels of consumption are increasing at a rate without precedent. A degrowth framework directly addresses these issues and advocates for integrated changes in life-styles to reduce the use of resources and slow down the consumption in general, with the subsequent benefits for nature.

From local initiatives to global changes, a degrowth alternative offers solutions to preserve nature, moving away from the ruling neoliberal framework, whose main goals are far from guaranteeing conservation of nature and people well-being.

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