Conservation as Cultural and Political Practice

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Thirty-three years ago the Evangelical Sisters of Mary, a Catholic order in Phoenix, Arizona, donated three plaques to the Grand Canyon National Park. These plaques quoted Biblical psalms extolling the glory of God and his creations, including presumably the Grand Canyon. For three decades, they hung outside the gift shop and on a lookout tower overlooking the south rim of the canyon. In 2003, however, a park visitor approached the American Civil Liberties Union, which subsequently queried the Park Service about the constitutional appropriateness of the plaques and they were taken down. A protest emerged from the Christian right, including so-called ‘creation scientists’, and the plaques were rehung. The Park Service is currently awaiting a decision from the Department of Justice before taking any further action (Figure 1).

While this debate may seem trivial and local, it is anything but. Despite decades of under-funding and consequent neglect of Grand Canyon National Park, this ‘non-natural’ issue marks the greatest public attention that this World Heritage Site has received in years. It reveals the ways in which ‘nature’ is a contested cultural product – an outcome of people’s beliefs and values. But it also exposes the ways in which ‘real nature’ - the biophysical relations that underlie the superimposed meaning of nature - are subject to cultural struggles. For years, congressional appropriations for national parks – the money that guides conservation management and research – have varied with the need of particular representatives to appeal to constituencies whose beliefs about nature collide. Conservation, as ideology, practice, and outcome, is deeply embedded in these cultural struggles. It cannot escape the institutional realities which gave it birth. This is true not just in the United States, but in any society, within any cultural group. What people take to be ‘nature’ or ‘natural’, the elements of nature that people deem worthy of protection, and the forms that protection take are all dynamic outcomes of experience and cultural political struggles, wherever they occur.1

In this paper, I examine what we might call the ‘culture wars’ surrounding conservation. In doing so I have a number of objectives:
1) To consider the utility of the culture concept in rethinking what we mean by conservation and how it is practiced;

2) A survey of the use of culture in literature related to conservation; and

3) To provide a rationale for adopting a much more focused and nuanced treatment of culture in conservation research and, accordingly, practice.

The Culture/Nature Wars

Last year’s meeting of the World Parks Congress (ref) revealed continuing schisms in the conservation ‘community’ between those who seek to address the social and cultural issues raised by historical conservation practice, and those who feel that this compromises the focus on ‘conservation science’ that should underlie all conservation practice, and detracts from the primary ‘protectionist’ mission of conservation. This divide is likely too neat, but it does reflect positions that stem from different philosophical perspectives on the constitution of nature: one grounded in realism that derives from knowledge produced through rationalist science and interprets nature as an objective reality. The other is grounded in constructionism and, while not denying the objective reality of biophysical interactions that produce, in part, what most of us call nature, asserts that human communities assign meaning to those biophysical interactions, through cultural processes. Nature in this view is as much a cultural product as an objective reality and must be understood as such if conservation practice is to be effective without exercising oppressive domination. Not surprisingly, these two perspectives contribute to different political ends and different mechanisms for getting there. But what is important to the study of conservation is that analysts begin to explore and explain the cultural processes that produce and regulate environmental knowledge and consequent conservation practice in a plurality of social, political and economic contexts, including social formations that typically escape analysis such as government departments and conservation NGOs.

Why culture?

Despite different perspectives on the constitution of ‘nature’ there is a growing focus among conservation practitioners on the need to consider ‘culture’ in the formulation of conservation policy and programming. This derives from (at least) three perspectives:

First, culture is being forced onto the conservation agenda by groups who are finally attaining the power and voice to express their discontent with historical practices that have engendered feelings of exclusion, dispossession and alienation. This is not simply, as some would have it, an indigenous agenda embraced by the global political left but can be found across the ideological spectrum. The wise use movement in North America, for example, can be read as a cultural response to the utilitarian actions of a liberal state. The reality of the detrimental consequences of conservation practices for marginalized populations is increasingly evident in either direct physical conflict or more hidden forms of resistance that continually compromise the conservation goals of implementing agencies. As the agendas of new social movements such as environmentalist
conservation have spread out of North America and Europe they have encountered obstacles to their conventional mode of operation.\textsuperscript{3} Dealing with such conflict, through surveillance, exclusion and enforcement, is an expensive proposition for conservation agencies, some of which have come to recognize the legitimacy and utility of engaging with different belief systems in seeking conservation outcomes. In essence, to lower the ‘cost’ of conservation, agencies have sought to achieve docility in opponents and, given the belief that conflicts are result of a failure to account for cultural realities in conservation planning and practice, ‘cultural inclusion’ is one way to do so. However, this increasing concern with culture is not simply reactionary. It also stems from concerns of justice grounded in increasingly powerful notions of cultural diversity and the emergence of so-called second generation rights which seek to codify the protection of cultural practice and identity\textsuperscript{4}.

The focus on culture in relation to conservation also derives from an expectation that paying attention to culture can reveal the multiple understandings of and interest in nature, and perhaps more importantly move beyond the stereotypes that conjur up images of Third World populations whose only interest in nature is to provide for subsistence and development\textsuperscript{5}. In addition, attention to the cultures of conservation can contribute to understanding the situation of ‘nature’ in social and cultural histories and in contemporary politics, helping us to understand the sources of conflict and contestation that surrounds so much conservation practice. It is also important to recognise that attention to the cultures of conservation requires an opening up of the concept of culture to transformative dialogue, opposition and collaboration. This requires not only talking about the cultural assumptions and practices involved in conservation but cultural claims surrounding conservation practice that require a treatment of culture as dynamic and strategic, rather than as something absolute and static as it is so often represented in the literature of conservation practice.\textsuperscript{6}

**What is Culture?**

The cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1976; 87) has famously termed ‘culture’ “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”. William’s points out that culture, like most words, has gone through an intricate historical development but that it has come to mean many things to many people and to assume distinct meaning within distinct intellectual disciplines and within distinct and incompatible systems of thought. While distinct meanings have evolved in English, these share a common history, and while the three dominant meanings of culture\textsuperscript{7} are generally considered distinct, Williams is careful to point out that it is the range and overlap of meaning that is significant. It is, he says, this diversity of meaning that indicates the complexity of culture and the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between these and the practices of art and intelligence. What he is suggesting, then, is an understanding of culture as both substance (the stuff of practice) and process (the systems, including communication, that facilitate practice). Within this multiplicity of meanings, there are fundamental oppositions as well as overlaps but these questions cannot be resolved by reducing the complexity of actual usage.
Unfortunately, most considerations of culture in relation to conservation do reduce this complexity. Not only is culture generally referred to in materialist terms, but a general assumption treats this selective interpretation of ‘culture’ as universal – i.e., culture means the same thing everywhere. Despite the degree of debate within the English language, commensurability between languages – a linguistic uniformity - is assumed. Of course this is a dangerous assumption and one that stems from relative relations of power within the world of ‘modernist conservation’. It is, in part, this lack of correspondence that leads to a consideration of culture as an analytic concept, rather than a material reality – what Anthropologists refer to as the ‘culture concept’. It is the conventional anthropological notion of the culture concept that, I think, most researchers and conservation practitioners invoke when they speak of culture in relation to conservation. Implicitly, they recognize the subjects of their studies or programs as belonging to a culture (an identifiable social group), as having culture (engaging in particular shared practices) and as expressing culture (using particular skills and tools in the act of representation and communication). They recognize the importance of culture to social order – the ability to communicate; to represent in word, action, sound, and image; to act according to some set of rules or structure of laws; to interpret the world according to some coherent interaction of beliefs; and to engage with others according to some set of values. Implicitly they organize knowledge using culture as a key tool of discrimination. But rarely do they subject their own cultural position to the same degree of consideration.

I say this is implicit in part because the co-constitution of culture and nature is rarely made explicit in discussions of conservation. A glance through many project proposals or conservation planning documents reveals stated needs to address issues of culture. Rarely, however do they go much further than this and engage in sophisticated cultural analyses of conservation practice, or even bother to define or describe the constitution of culture. The word is used in a taken-for granted sense; as if we all know what is meant when it is deployed. And this is the trap. For in the absence of specificity lies a failure to recognize, analyze and discuss the complexity of the culture concept. ‘Culture’ in its entirety is difficult to grasp and articulate, and much more difficult to address in any comprehensive way. Failing to address this complexity leaves ‘culture’ as a catch-all term, subject to easy dismissal by those who would make the distinction between culture and science, or culture and nature – distinctions all too readily made in the world of modernist conservation - as if science and nature are the stuff of objective reality unaffected by the shared systems of knowledge, communication and practice (i.e., culture) from which they have emerged.

This brief critique of the deployment of culture in conservation is not meant to suggest that cultural concerns are unimportant in the design and implementation of conservation practice or that they are too diffuse to identify and analyse. On the contrary, my point is that considerations of culture need to be much more specific in their definitions and analyses in order to demonstrate the direct relevance of culture to achieving (or failing to achieve) the ends of conservation. In many ways culture has become a term not unlike development or sustainability. Used to avoid the need to attend to the specifics of context, it relays a vagueness that can lead to operational paralysis. It also indicates a failure on
the part of modernist conservation to treat ‘culture’ seriously. This failure has a number of dimensions and sources. One is certainly the dominance of a rationalist scientific perspective within conservation organizations that is dismissive of the importance of culture in understanding human-environment interactions. This is compounded by the failure of the conservation establishment to reflect on their own institutional cultures and histories, to critically evaluate their modes of knowledge production, and to take ownership of the oppressive acts committed in the name of conservation. One outcome of this has been the simplistic treatment of culture by those doing applied conservation research. And this has been added to by the failure of academics who adhere to a complex and nuanced understanding of culture to engage with work in the area of conservation.

Culture and Conservation

Williams’ observations are important for they point to an immediate problem in addressing the relations between conservation and culture. What exactly, do we mean when we refer to culture? Culture is one of those words, much like nature, community, development, or sustainable, that gets used loosely in conservation discourse terms. But it is clear that even within a language, the possibilities of interpretation are broad let alone when translating between languages. When we speak of culture, do we mean systems of communication? Modes of practice? Hierarchies of symbols? Sets of beliefs? Systems of moral evaluation? The material products of these? The relations between all of these? The process through which these change? Do we think of culture as substance (i.e., what changes or does not change?) Or do we think of it as process (i.e., the mode of change within a social group?) Despite the variety of meanings applied to the term, I suspect that many of us share an implicit sense of the intended meaning when the term is applied to the concerns of conservation. And it this characteristically anthropological (as opposed to aesthetic) concept of culture that is invoked in relation to conservation. This perspective on culture treats it as the beliefs, values, capabilities and habits that are developed in people through membership in a society. Importantly, culture is learned and is dependant upon the human capacity to use symbols and assign meaning to the world around them and correspondingly to grasp and appreciate such meanings. Through a variety of mechanisms people gradually internalize a previously established set of meanings and symbols which help to structure practice throughout their lives. People who experience the same cultural context tend to share a variety of social characteristics including beliefs, values, expectations, knowledge systems, language. However, people are not prisoners to culture but use it actively and creatively to seek particular ends. Culture is contested; different social groups struggle to define cultural ‘authenticity’ and determine whose values, beliefs and practice will become a dominant model for the group. Common symbols, then, come to have radically different meanings to different people in the same ‘culture’. Culture, then, rests on certain abilities – particularly people’s capacity to think symbolically, and to use language and material products and practices to organize their lives and their environments. This understanding of ‘culture’ has important ramifications for understanding the politics of conservation for it means that what counts as ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’ – the popular objects of conservation – are culturally defined and not static. Rather they are dynamic, and appropriate attitudes and
behaviour toward them are the site of constant struggle both within and between cultural groups. We cannot be distracted by the cozy invocation of consensus present in much applied conservation writing. There are fractures and oppositions. Social and cultural contradictions exist within the whole just as they exist within the individual. In some places this is increasingly true as the global spread of particular ideologies of environment present opportunities for material gain, while challenging existing cultural knowledge systems.\textsuperscript{14}

**Conservation as a cultural product**

Such an understanding of culture leads to a consideration not simply of the ways in which conservation is practiced by distinct cultural groups, but to an understanding of conservation as a cultural product; as deriving from a system of beliefs and values symbolically expressed within particular knowledge systems that relate to particular patterns of behaviour and practice, all of which are contested. When we understand conservation from this perspective, we can begin to acknowledge it as a cultural phenomenon not simply in the so-called Third World but also in places – like Europe and North America - where, based on self-representations, ‘subjective culture’ would seem to have been replaced by ‘objective rationalism’. We can understand the ways in which environmental behaviour is grounded in particular structures of knowledge (e.g., rationalist, indigenous), expressed through dominant modes of communication (conversation, media), codified (formally and informally) in societal institutions (religion, law), which structure practice (tradition). We can also appreciate how these differ within and between cultural groups and perhaps most importantly, the role they play in contributing to identity; how they help to tell people who they are. To say that something is cultural, is to observe the effect of this interplay. But it is not be to say that something is uniform, homogeneous or unchanging.

This theoretical starting point implies much for applied research seeking to understand relations between culture and practice for not only does it point out the need to be contextually specific and to remain cautious of the abstracting potential of managerial language such as ‘best practice’, but it also points to the need for the detailed, intensive, and long-term collection of ethnographic data in a variety of contexts. Unfortunately little work of this nature exists. There is a need not only to understand cultural systems but to appreciate their dynamic nature; how they change through processes of transcultural interaction; and how they give rise to and are structured within relations of power. While studies have addressed some of these components, few have taken a comprehensive systematic approach to addressing conservation as a cultural product. What is more common are studies that attempt to relate conservation to a particular aspect of culture. A partial synopsis of this work is provided below:

- **Conservation and knowledge systems** – Since the early 1980s an almost overwhelming amount of literature focused on what are variously termed indigenous knowledge traditional ecological knowledge, or local knowledge. The beginnings of this can be located in the work of David Brokensha\textsuperscript{15} and Paul Richards\textsuperscript{16}. This early work laid out detailed procedures for investigating
contextualized knowledge systems and contributed to an understanding of localized conservation processes. By investigating the knowledge structures of small-scale societies, an important shift of emphasis has been achieved that has allowed these groups to be seen as active decision-makers and knowledgeable actors, motivated but not determined by cultural values, economic goals, or unpredictable events. They are actively and creatively shaping their surroundings - sometimes experimentally - and when confronted with the results or consequences of their own work, decide autonomously how and when to react.

There is little doubt that so-called local people have significant knowledge of ecological dynamics and diversity that can contribute to the promotion of conservation goals, but there is no reasons to believe that such knowledge indicates a uniform willingness to maintain resource uses that are consistent with the goals of conservation organizations. Unfortunately, however, knowledge studies in the realm of conservation have often been simplified and romanticized through activist promotion of an indigenous politics. This has resulted in a two-tiered approach to local knowledge – one of which pays attention to the complexities and subtleties of knowledge systems and appreciates how knowledge is dynamic and changes through processes of interaction, and another that simplifies these complexities. Unfortunately, applied conservation studies on local knowledge have been dominated by an approach based on documenting modes of classification and categorization rather than knowledge of ecological processes and dynamics and connections between these and forms of social structure and social organization, language, the emergence of economic structures and systems of livelihoods. What this means is that there is rarely a connection made between systems or structures of knowledge and practice. Yet, it is particularly important to make this connection because practice can be constrained through a variety of mechanisms in ways that knowledge is not. What people know and say does not necessarily translate into what people can do or enact.

More importantly there has been a failure to subject all communities involved in conservation to similar modes of investigation. While so-called indigenous or traditional societies have been the subject of studies, conservation organizations have rarely been the subject of research designed to investigate how they produce and act upon environmental knowledge. Given the power of such organizations to transform material environments, this is a serious oversight that needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, given the power of such organizations, they are better able to escape (or control) the scrutiny of researchers than so-called traditional or indigenous communities. Conservation research and practice requires greater attention, within a variety of institutional contexts, to: the relation between knowledge and particular social practices such as cooperation and collective action; the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, skills and strategies; reliance on local environments; practices of restrain in resource use; the bases and selectivity of particular moral attitudes or environmental ethos; and the relation between particular forms of social and economic organization and the management and conservation of biodiversity.
• **Conservation, values, and beliefs** — Any understanding of the relations between culture and conservation must begin from an appreciation of the ways in which systems of beliefs and values, derived in part through experience and expressed in terms of knowledge, not only act to produce conceptions of nature but contribute to dominant modes of environmental behaviour. A large body of work has addressed the cultural bases of different understandings of the environment. Few, however, have explicitly or sufficiently addressed connections between conceptions of nature, the role of humans in ‘nature’, and conservation practice. Where studies do attempt to do this, they focus on the concept of environmental ethics. An ethic can be defined as a set of guidelines or principles, derived from beliefs and values, meant to govern social behaviour. But to make the connection between the realms of belief/values, principles and practice, it is important to understand the dialectical relations between them. Rarely do studies assigning a conservation ethos to a ‘culture’ or group of practices provide a detailed analysis and explication of this relationship. There is no shortage of descriptions of religious belief systems, the ideal values they underpin, and modes of environmental behaviour. Often these make the point that religious beliefs or cosmologies have a significant impact on human-environment relations, underpinning practices with conservation outcomes such as sacred groves and taboos. But they are typically not accompanied by discussions of value hierarchies, mechanisms for the resolution of value conflicts (the traditional role of ethics) and detailed descriptions of ethical deliberation in relation to environmental considerations (e.g., conservation practice). Rarer still are considerations of the values, beliefs and ethics espoused by conservation bodies and the implications of the bureaucratic capture of the movement and the growing corporate outlook of the conservation establishment.

• **Conservation and identity.** Much anthropological research has documented the role of nature in the symbolism of identity, often focusing on totemic symbols commonly associated with small-scale hunter gatherers or pastoral clans. Elements of nature are also used as collective identifiers of modern nation states and an important marker of cultural identity within those political formations. It is apparent within all of these contexts, however, that symbolism does not translate into a political commitment to conservation practice. And we should not expect it to if we understand symbols to be signs with no necessary connection to the objects they signify. This is often overlooked in work that attempts to draw a connection between the presence of a natural symbol within societies and consequent attitudes of ‘respect for nature’. However, anthropologists have argued that in small-scale face-to-face cultures, the rational for choosing biotic and landscape phenomena as markers of identity are important. Social groups identify with a particular plant or animal that is believed to bear ancestral relations to the clan or individuals within a social group, in part because the notion of a relationship of descent from a tangible part of their environment has a clear logic. While this may provide a protectionist attitude toward particular species, this is by no means universal and does not necessarily
extend to other species or ecoregions as a whole (Figures 2 and 3). And rarely has the meanings of particular species within specific belief systems and the connection between the symbolism and practice regarding particular species been investigated in detail. Some authors have pointed out the potential value of such systems of symbols in promoting conservation within local cultural contexts, but once again it is particularly important to separate ideals of a cultural system from actuality, in which the ideals, perhaps expressed symbolically, do not necessarily translate into practice (at least for a majority of a population).

Whereas environmental relations play a significant role in the formation of cultural identity, little emphasis has been placed on identifying or understanding ‘conservation’ as a dominant frame for identity production, and even less on the relations between identity and action. Yet conservation has obviously become such a frame for a number of groups around the world who seek to define themselves as conservationists in efforts to ward off the efforts of states or NGOs to appropriate their lands or limit their access rights in the name of conservation. Cultural identity, however, also has more pragmatic applications within conservation, particularly as it is increasingly dominated by bureaucratic managerial logics. These treat culture as an instrument - a mechanism through which the goals of conservation can be achieved, rather than the basis for reflecting on the legitimacy of those goals. Bowen-Jones and Entwistle provide a classic example of such strategies. Seeking to maintain the mobilizing capacity of flagship species to raise conservation funds, they suggest using local cultural criteria as a ways to select flagship species that have both local and international appeal. They suggest selecting an endemic species and directly engaging in the production of a cultural identity that is attached to a local place as the unique habitat area of that species. In doing so they seek to mobilize ‘culture’ in support of extant conservation goals.

- **Conservation and language** – Over the past 15 years, a body of research has emerged asserting that knowledge about how to maintain biodiversity is encoded in small languages because it is their speakers who live in the world's most biologically (and linguistically) diverse areas. Some of this work has used simple measures of linguistic and biological diversity to establish correlations between high numbers of endemic languages and endemic species. David Harmon, for example, has established a correlation between biological and linguistic diversity by comparing simple measures of endemism of languages and higher vertebrates (mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians), with the top 25 countries for each type and noted a significant co-presence of linguistic diversity and biodiversity within these political units. Of course, there are any number of possible (and multiple) explanations for this result. But this data points to a need to understand the connection between knowledge structures and language to fully comprehend the existence of any relation between linguistic diversity and biological diversity.
• **Conservation and social institutions** - ethics and spiritual values may inculcate a respect for particular species, but conservation is grounded in elaborate sets of social institutions including structures that govern access and discourage irresponsible behaviour that threatens community security through threatening the livelihood base. Much research has focused on how such institutions have adapted to altered environmental conditions but found it difficult to adapt to a usurping of local authority by colonial and nation-state administrations. Perhaps the greatest research focus connecting conservation to cultural practice has been in the form of ethnographic studies of social institutions responsible for research management institutions. This literature comes from a diverse area including studies (too numerous to list here) of property regimes (common and private), and political ecological relations. The most sophisticated of these studies are cautious in their evaluation of the conservation benefits derived from so-called ‘traditional’ institutions, pointing out the ways in which institutions alter in both their functioning, goals and capacities as they are drawn into more extensive economic, political and social contexts. They also point out, however, that practice does not occur outside of an institutional context and that understandings of the conservation benefits (or detriments) of specific practices are directly related to institutional functioning. In any cultural analysis, the functioning of these institutions at any point in time needs to be understood in relation to values and beliefs, structures of knowledge and how these are altered as they experience processes of ideological domination in relation to a broader societal context (e.g., how localized understandings of, and relations to, ‘environment’ are altered through programs or environmental education programmes sponsored by large conservation NGOs). But they also help us to comprehend arbitrary distinctions, grounded in perceptions of modernity and tradition, between management regimes. For example, we speak of policy decisions of government agencies (e.g., in the regulation of fisheries resources in Canada), but not of policy decisions of village headmen (e.g., the decision to impose a hunting ban in African villages) and this distinction raises an important question for conservation practitioners: Is policy simply the purview of the state? Presumably not. Other institutions of authority, in different political contexts, establish policy, even if it goes by other names. And its effect is the same: to govern mechanisms of acceptable practice and to monitor and regulate the effect of the object of that practice (e.g., wild fauna and flora). Often these structures of policy-making and their effects conflict. But what is important in understanding the relation between culture and conservation is to look ‘underneath’ or ‘behind’ policy, as it were, and to decode what the processes of establishing policy, the content of that policy (read custom, tradition, innovation, etc.), and the conflicts surrounding policy formation and implementation tell us about authority, belief, value, meaning, power in any given context. What this means in analytical terms is that we can look at so-called environmental crises like the near extinction of North Atlantic Cod or more localised concerns like conflicts between the historical residents of land designated as a protected area and new bureaucratic management authorities as cultural phenomena; as the result of historical cultural practices that reflect the accumulated beliefs and values of a dominant element.
(dominant in ideological rather than demographic sense) of society through time. This does not mean that these practices are uncontested but that they did derive from what are generally considered as appropriate mechanisms of governance, including the setting of policy and the making of decisions by ‘policy-makers’, who operate in accordance with norms or customs. These might include household heads, village elders, civil servants, or federal politicians.

- **Conservation and practice** – The above discussion converges on practice, for it is only through the long term observation of practice that we can understand the dimensions of any relationship between culture and conservation (defined both as an end and a process). In terms of understanding the relations between environmental beliefs, knowledge, sanctioning authority and conservation we need to be able to observe practice and the effects of practice on environmental quality. Many have pointed to traditional practice as indications of the conservationist tendencies of small-scale societies. While there is much to be learned from this work, we must be cautious of the romanticizing tendencies of the ‘tradition concept’. Tradition, as with other dimensions of culture, needs to be defined monitored and enforced, and this occurs within the dynamics of power relations and changing environmental conditions. Tradition, contrary to modernity theory, is dynamic, and must be interpreted not simply through oral assertions but through observed practice. Too often applied conservation research treats not only ‘culture’ but ‘tradition’ as static and unproblematically uniform across particular social groups.

- **Conservation, culture and power** – My final point in this section relates to the need to consider conservation through a lens of cultural politics. Increasingly, historical studies reveal conservation practice to be grounded in histories of domination that have seen the rise of the postcolonial state and the dominance of an ideological perspective on development that has contributed to dispossession, the alienation of peoples from their historical connection with land and resources, the assertion of the moral and intellectual superiority of particular belief systems and the consequent implementation of particular practices that reflect assertions of cultural and racial hierarchies. But the fact that ‘culture’ has now become a focus of positive concern within conservation practice, highlights the dynamic quality of ‘culture’ and emphasizes the importance of understanding ‘culture’ itself as a phenomenon that requires the consistent reproduction of identity formations, through the assertion of meaning, language, normative behaviour, appropriate belief. Culture requires subjects and subjects require formation. It is this requirement of constant reproduction and the constant formation of new cultural subjects that provides the basis for ideological competition. Culture is not primordial. It is not static. It is not absolute. It is both the mechanism and the outcome of a process that involves the production of meaning, the transmission of meaning, the definition of appropriate beliefs and behaviour, and the surveillance and enforcement of social formations. This means that certain cultural forms and practices will assume dominance in relation to the power of particular individuals and groups to produce and circulate knowledge, and achieve ideological
domination (conservation organizations, practitioners and researchers among them). Culture then is always a site of political struggle, pointing out the pluralism and instability of ‘local cultures’. Conservation practitioners, organizations and researchers need to engage reflectively with their own role in this struggle for as much as they may desire order, coherence and stability within culture, it is not ‘natural’. It is produced and maintained and increasingly derives from the practices of states or other large scale organizations. Increasingly the most isolated locales are affected, and perhaps even constituted, by power and influence flowing from dominant centers and institutions.

Accordingly, in seeking to comprehend relations between culture and conservation we need to consider the complicity of local agents with state and NGO programs and agendas.

**Conclusion**

To address the problems of contemporary conservation, state agencies and conservation NGOs will need to apply much more effort to understanding conservation in practice as the outcome of interactions between disparate cultural groups, often in radically inequitable power relations. And they will need to take this knowledge and apply it to the design and implementation of future conservation planning. It is no longer good enough to accept the assertion of an intellectual and technical superiority when the agendas of institutional conservation are politically and economically skewed to match the priorities of their donors. When project proposals are written to address the stringencies of the GEF at the expense of the contextual socio-environmental realities of the project area, long-term conservation will not be achieved.

Recent reviews point to a diminishing institutional resistance to incorporating cultural considerations within conservation planning. But they also highlight the inadequacies of current research and point to the need for more comprehensive research focused on understanding the relations between culture and conservation. Too often, the conservation effects of sacred space or taboos are listed as an afterthought in research reports. But more than simply an emphasis on cultural practice, research is needed that addresses the institutional context of conservation outcomes wherever they are found. How are use or access regulations codified (orally or textually)? What sanctions are imposed for breach? Who is responsible for imposing sanction? What is the utility of sanction? How do cultural norms operate to support conservation practice? How are cultural meanings applied to explanations of environmental degradation? How is this responded to by relevant institutions?

This institutional context of changing human-environment relations is poorly understood. In many ways, the fault for this lies with conservation organizations themselves which have explicitly or implicitly set out to alter human-environment relations, introduce directed cultural change and introduce new ideologies of nature. Rarely, however, do they effectively trace how localized institutions respond to these programmatic intentions.
(e.g., How have beliefs changed? How has this affected localized ecological practice?). Monitoring and evaluation exercises are more often tailored toward the interests of donor agencies than designed as long-term projects meant to assess the complex outcome of integrated conservation projects. Research funds to accomplish such work are also in short supply. There are any number of reasons for this: a crisis atmosphere surrounding conservation directs most funding to so-called applied projects; competition between conservation agencies for limited funding pushes assessment work to the background and implementation to the fore; for private foundation funding, there is greater public exposure and consequent reward in funding research that is directly related to species or habitat conservation. Providing the funding that leads to the protection of an endangered species generates much more favourable press than unearthing the relations between historical alterations to belief systems and the denigration of that habitat. Yet, as research continues to make clear, there is a need to recognize that conservation is inextricably bound to culture both as a process and a product. Conservation is cultural practice. So long as conservation is not the explicit focus of long-term ethnographic studies, we will be left to read between the lines, to take work out of context and to reach speculative conclusions regarding relations between culture and conservation in a diversity of contexts. And so long as this research is not funded and conducted, conservation practice will continue to fall far short of its objectives.

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2 Soper 2001
3 Guha 1989
4 E.g., Colchester 2003
5 Tsing 1999
6 Haenn 2002.
7 “the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”; the independent noun which “indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a group, or humanity in general; or the independent and abstract noun which “describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.” (Williams 1976; 90)
8 By modernist conservation, I refer to the knowledge systems and practices of formalized institutions such as IUCN, WWF, U.S. Park Service, etc.
9 Watson 1995, Brightman 1995
I.e., rarely do they think of their own knowledge structures as 'local' or 'traditional' knowledge, even though it was generated within particular historical, and cultural contexts.

Haila 1999

Institutional or organizational ethnography is still very much in its infancy, yet there are good examples of the benefits to be had from understanding the culture of organizations (Goldman 2001).

That shared sense is itself a function of culture derived through common educational, professional or institutional relations.


Brokensha, Warren and Warner 1980

Richards 1985

Conklin & Graham 1995, Zimmerman et al. 2001

Note that I am assigning this simplification to an activist community, and not to an indigenous community.

Alvesson 1993, Walley 2002, MacDonald 2002

Gezon 2000

Ingold 1992

e.g., Deb & Malhotra 2001

Posey 1999


But see Jepson and Canney 2003.

Schama 1995

Baker 1993

For an exception to this see Morris 1995

E.g., Rival 2002, Ranger 1999

Johnson Gottesfeld 1994, MacDonald 2004

E.g., Infield 2001, Kuriyan 2002

Chipeniuk 1998.

Butz 2002, Haenn 2002

Bowen-Jones & Entwistle (2002). This notion of using culture as an instrument in the service of conservation (as opposed to understanding culture as a cultural product) is increasingly common within the emerging field of conservation marketing (cf., Pandey 2001, Johns 2003).


Harmon 1995.

Anderson 1997


e.g., Ostrom 1993

Marks 2001, MacDonald in press

E.g., Lewis 1989.

Practice is the measured expression of the relationships between the other elements of culture that I have listed here

e.g., Sierra 1999.

MacDonald 2002.

E.g., Grove 1993, Neumann 2002, Cinnamon 2003,

E.g., Freeman 1999

Steddy 1999

E.g., Ellen & Bernstein 1994

Gezon, 2000, Redford and Taber 2000; Pandey 2003; Thomas 2003