

Conservation Issues in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve

Keith Bosak



Herb collectors in the buffer zone of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, Garhwal Himalaya, India

The Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR) has been called one of the last great wilderness areas in the Himalaya. As such, the region has been designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site for its unique biodiversity. However, this area was not always under the influence of international conservation programmes. The current management policies came about as a result of the heavy mountaineering activity on the peak of Nanda Devi (7817m) from 1974-1982. The many expeditions to the mountain left behind mounds of garbage and there were also problems with human waste and the cutting of wood for fuel. By 1977 the environmental degradation was being documented, and in 1982 a 625 sq. km area surrounding Nanda Devi was declared a national park and promptly closed to all people including locals. This was a blow to local people who had enjoyed a high standard of living previous to the closure. Locals, known as Bhotiya for their ethnic Tibetan heritage were forced to sell their sheep and goats because

grazing lands were greatly decreased with the closure and many had to return to subsistence agriculture just to survive.

After years of economic hardship, local people began to protest. The first major protest occurred in 1998 when villagers entered the forbidden core zone en masse to symbolically 'take back' the NDBR. Since that time, the Bhotiya have continued to protest and in 2001 formed an organised campaign to resist the conservation policies of the NDBR.

The case of the NDBR serves as an example of the many people-protected area conflicts occurring worldwide. Well-intentioned conservation models such as biosphere reserves that are developed by global agencies (such as UNESCO, IUCN and the WHC) and applied by national and regional governments often meet with resistance from local people living in or around these protected areas. One factor in this conflict is competing conceptions of nature.

Conceptions of nature show themselves through prevailing cultural narratives of human-environment interactions and are associated with material practices such as resource management policies. Differing conceptions of nature can produce competing discourses of nature and ultimately different ideas of how the NDBR should be managed.

The dominant global discourse attempts to reconcile conservation with development and recognise indigenous knowledge. However, this discourse breaks down when policies such as the closure of the core zone reflect a view of nature that presents humans and their livelihood activities as detrimental to biodiversity. At the same time, local people assert their rights to manage the resources of the NDBR according to their view that highlights the exchange between humans and nature. In this case local conceptions of nature such as those of the Bhotiya can be difficult to understand from a western perspective as the Bhotiya conceptualise

nature differently. Understanding that Bhotiya ideas of resource management are based in ideas of a sacred landscape that they identify with through livelihood activities and religious rituals may serve to create conservation policies that will accommodate local people and help to preserve biodiversity. However, policy

makers must be willing to accept and try to understand multiple conceptions of nature and empower local people with resource management schemes that reflect those local conceptions of nature.

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Narratives and Policy – What’s the Connection?

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One of the most elusive concepts with which policymakers have to contend is the idea of narratives. What are narratives? How do they affect the way we work? And how do they affect the way decisions are made? Elusive they may be, but as banners with which to promote projects they are extremely influential. Indeed, narratives dominate the environmental agenda. The greatest environment and development narrative of them all, that of ‘sustainable development’, is *carte blanche* for the allocation of USD 5.89 billion of World Bank funds, dispersed between 106 ongoing projects.

But what is a narrative exactly? To give an example of what narratives can do, Emery Roe has published some extremely interesting work on the subject, most of it pertaining to the idea of ‘Except-Africa’. ‘Except-Africa’ is a crisis narrative which through various policy documents, newspaper reports and other media channels assails us with the constant idea that nothing is ever going to work, or even get better in the whole continent to which it refers. What then results, is that subject to the constant battering of this collage of fact, semi-fact and spin, policymakers begin to adjust strategy, expectation levels and even areas targeted for funding on the basis of what seems an irrefutable ‘truth’.

What is of great interest to many people in conservation is how these narratives come about in the first place, what makes them stick and what consequences can occur as

a result of their propagation. To answer the first two questions, an unlikely source presents itself with some interesting ideas. Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who was also interested in how stories worked at a basic level. He analysed poetry and plays to produce a list of components which he felt all stories needed in order to function properly and hook the audience. He listed these factors as: a believable plot which recreates the world; the experience of catharsis (empathising with the characters through pity or fear), the need to feel as though you are learning something from the text and most importantly what can be described as ‘emplotted characterisation’ – the author guiding the reader to side with certain characters over others.

What is interesting is that when you analyse successful (widely known) environmental narratives they tend to have the full set of these components. ‘Except-Africa’ for example has a solid believable plot. It is one of the steady irreversible decline of a once rich land. It is also a frightening story, one with which we can empathise. Indeed, even a cursory glance at any news outlet concerning Africa is sure to contain stories of piracy, fires, AIDS, fixed elections, war amputees, plane crashes... And the lack of development and the unbridled environmental destruction is a particularly keen appeal to our fears. Also when listening to these stories we feel as though we are learning something, that we are being informed, but what is

difficult for policymakers is the idea of emplotted characterisation – who is the story encouraging you to side with? The ‘white’ hunter? The ‘black’ poacher? The ‘savvy’ NGO worker? The seemingly ‘ignorant’ pastoralists? At the end of the day, the consequences of action depend on how the stories are phrased and delivered.

Narratives will always be part of how we lead our lives. It is impossible to produce or react to information without taking part in them at some level. So the question becomes, what can be done instead of signing up to narratives like ‘Except-Africa’ which result in conservation projects like Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania that result in the expulsion of thousands of people from their homes? As Emery Roe suggests, new counter-narratives have to be created which can provide policy direction for strategists who disagree with for example, fortress conservation projects. These narratives however, must be created in a certain way if they are to stick, i.e., to be propagated and influence conservation thinking. But importantly, how successfully they stick may well depend on ideas over 2000 years old, but still relevant today.

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