

# Displacement and Relocation from Protected Areas:

## Towards a Biological and Historical Synthesis

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**T**he displacement of people has been a central feature of 20<sup>th</sup> century nature conservation all over the world. This issue of relocation has lately acquired centre-stage in debates on biodiversity conservation in India. Between 1969 and 2001, the area under national parks and sanctuaries in India grew ten-fold to cover 5 % of the total landscape.

This expansion of protected areas was accompanied by displacement of an estimated 49,000 to 120,000 forest-dwelling people during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Further large-scale displacements from tiger habitats are planned during the next decade, in response to the recent crises of forest degradation and local animal extinctions.

When and how should such relocation be done, if at all? How does one analyse the efficacy of such relocation in terms of conservation and social justice? These questions are easier to pose than to answer.

Closely linked to these questions are the sharp differences between the

dominant cultures in the practice of conservation, represented by biologists on the one hand, and social scientists on the other. Biologists tend to assess the issue of relocation in terms of the viability of habitats, ecosystems, and endangered species, and point to the relatively tiny proportion of habitats that house intact populations of large-bodied vertebrates. The sustainability of ecosystem use by forest-dwelling groups is seen, by most biologists, to be doubtful, as is the possibility of coexistence of wildlife with human populations inside protected areas, whose mandate is long-term conservation.

In contrast, social scientists tend to see the issues of equity and justice as central to the sociological and historical analysis of conservation processes. Studies of displacement, and particularly their role in biodiversity conservation, have shown that impoverishment and dispossession of the displaced is a common feature. Such analyses have also shown why displacement, even when a biological success, can impose high costs on under-privileged groups, particularly itinerant and indigenous communi-

ties. Social scientists tend to support the notion of coexistence between forest-dwelling people and nature, and believe that displacement should not be attempted at all, given its high costs, historically, to the culture and economies of local people.

The set of case studies reviewed in this issue of *Current Conservation* were commissioned with the aim of finding a middle ground between these two streams in conservation scholarship. These cases, based on rigorous field study, point to a couple of important issues that were not so obvious even a few years ago. First, biologists (along with forest managers, who generally tend to align with them on this question) need to be sensitised to the socioeconomic and cultural needs of resident peoples. So also, social scientists do need to understand the ecological requirements of endangered species. Such sensitisation has to be coupled with coordinated engagement of social scientists, biologists and forest managers on critical questions such as whether, how, and where, to relocate. This is still a far cry given the current divide.

Second, the wide extent of the problem of displacement, across the developing world, is brought out starkly through these studies. The approach adopted for wildlife conservation has been similar across continents, with relocation being a central goal of management, until very recently. Such a focus has, in many cases, precluded possibilities for local-community participation at any level, whether it be decision-making, sustainable extraction, benefit sharing, or joint protection. At the same time, the entry of destructive development projects into areas vacated by communities is becoming alarmingly common, showing that there may be larger forces at work in protected area decision-making than are immediately visible.

Village relocation has clearly emerged as an important issue in conservation that needs to be examined far more closely than it has

been in the past. This issue, which is fast becoming the central pivot of the international conservation discourse, urgently calls for informed engagement across disciplines. Public discussion of this issue has recently expanded, as is seen by a spate of studies on conservation-induced displacement, including those in this issue of *Current Conservation*. Rigorous field-based research has led to more informed discussion than in the past, and has created possibilities for seeking a middle ground between the two dominant cultures of conservation. Field research also makes likely greater accountability and transparency in bureaucracy due to the emergence of independent sources of information.

In the case of India, the issues of equity and justice impinge on conservation today in larger ways than they did in the past. The maturing of electoral democracy and

the assertion of once marginal groups has not only made coercion more problematic but has also opened up spaces for more just and balanced approaches in the pursuit of biodiversity conservation in the future.

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## Eviction for Conservation: A Global Review

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**D**isplacement resulting from the establishment and enforcement of protected areas has troubled relationships between conservationists and rural groups in many parts of the world. This paper examines one aspect of displacement: eviction from pro-

TECTED AREAS. Opinions about the natures and scale of this problem are divided. Some authors have stated that the literature on evictions from protected areas offers ‘a massive cataloguing of past, recent and ongoing abuses’, while others assert that ‘to date little empirical evidence exists to substantiate

the contention that parks are bad for local people’. We believe that the truth lies somewhere between these two positions. There are many cases of displacement which the latter authors are ignoring. But the first statement exaggerates the quality, extent and order of knowledge. Our grasp of the subject is simply not as good as they claim.

We carried out a global review of protected area evictions, looking for as many as we could find in published literature. The reports we