



CESAB
CENTRE FOR THE SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS
OF BIODIVERSITY

Project summary

JUSTCONSERVATION

Towards ‘just conservation’: linking theories and practices of justice in biodiversity conservation

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Over the past three decades, biodiversity conservation has expanded, from a focus on nature preservation alone, to more ‘people-friendly’ approaches integrating objectives for both conservation and human well-being, as visible in the governance of protected areas and other conservation measures worldwide. The *JUSTCONSERVATION* project has analyzed how social and environmental justice concerns find support and integration in biodiversity conservation.

Context and objectives

Integrated approaches have not necessarily led to benefits to local people, giving rise to a further shift from a focus on economic development, to one on social justice.

This shift is gaining high-level attention in international environmental agreements and in conservation organizations, and requires the support of an intense research effort.

This research project analyzes how justice concerns find support and integration

in biodiversity conservation; a research need which is currently under-addressed. It asks:

- how different conceptualizations of justice and equity influence the governance of protected areas and other effective conservation measures, and
- to what extent and through what mechanisms the integration of social objectives in conservation governance influence conservation effectiveness.

Adopting a strong interdisciplinary approach and dialectically studying both theory and practice of justice in biodiversity conservation, it will (1) conceptualize the idea of just conservation by drawing on existing theories of social and environmental justice; by (2) using narrative synthesis to take stock of the dominant practices of justice mobilized by the conservation community, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data on the governance of conservation extracted from relevant databases, existing empirical research and assessment tools used by conservation organizations; and (3) explore the convergences (or divergences) to thinking and acting about just conservation. The project fills a critical gap in current efforts to significantly advance the knowledge underpinning the pursuit of just and equitable conservation, which is critical to the achievement of both social and ecological objectives associated with conservation policies.

Methods and approaches used for the project

JUSTCONSERVATION has conducted an in-depth **synthesis of published, empirical studies of site-level conservation at the global scale, over a long timescale (50 years) and including a wide range of initiatives involving diverse actors and institutions**. The review has explored the state of knowledge about biodiversity conservation practice in terms of (i) the types of conservation interventions, (ii) the extent of involvement of Indigenous people and local communities in conservation governance, (iii) the ecological and social outcomes associated with conservation interventions, as well as factors influencing these outcomes, and (iv) the most prevalent justice issues arising from conservation, as well as the underlying drivers (root causes) reported in the literature. In addition, the data sheds light on where and by whom knowledge about conservation is produced, on the potential conflicts of interest in conservation research, and on how these characteristics might affect the outcomes reported.

Principal conclusions

Shown here for the first time in a strongly significant causal relationship based on a review of published evidence from 662 empirical studies of conservation initiatives over the 50 years from 1970-2020 at sites in 102 countries: effective conservation is dependent upon equitable governance, involving a central, leading role for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities and recognition for their local customary institutions. **Our data shows that conservation interventions are not commonly led by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, but those that are tend to produce better social and ecological outcomes** than when they are excluded or have only partial involvement. Essentially, equitable governance and effective conservation go hand in hand, regardless of the region or type of ecosystem. However, inequity persists as most conservation initiatives, even in recent times, provide only low levels of community participation. Trends over the last 50 years indicate that change has been slow, with global conservation efforts still characterized by low levels of participation, representing a counterproductive disconnect that has endured between the standards and practices implemented on the ground.

Anticipated (or actual) impact of these results for science, society, and public and private decision making

Our results imply that a major, rapid, global shift in the logics, design and implementation of conservation is urgently required. This shift is needed not only to respect human rights but also to harness the contributions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities for greater success in global conservation. Inversely, **there is no evidence to support conservation approaches based on strict protection and the exclusion of IPs and LCs, or even low levels of participation.** Hence, there is no justification for top-down decision-making in conservation in which Indigenous and local knowledge and institutions are marginalized. These findings are highly relevant for policies and initiatives aiming to address the biodiversity crisis such as the newly adopted Global Biodiversity Framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity, adopted in 2022.

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