

# BioSoc: the Biodiversity and Society Bulletin

Research highlights on biodiversity and society, poverty and conservation

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## COUNTERING CRITICISM: CONSERVATION ORGANISATIONS' RESPONSES TO DISPLACEMENT FROM PROTECTED AREAS

Conservation has recently come under fire in the academic and popular press for its impacts on local people – in particular those associated with their displacement from protected areas. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), an international conservation NGO, convened a meeting last year to bring together its field and policy staff with representatives of other conservation organisations and social scientists to try to better understand when, and to what extent, protected areas have negative impacts on local people and what policies or other responses conservation organisations could or should adopt to address such impacts.

In the introduction to a WCS Working Paper that summarises the meeting's discussions, *John Robinson* suggests ethical and moral standards that might be used to influence an organisation's policies in cases where conservation generates negative impacts. These include adopting – or advocating – the principle of prior informed consent; providing viable alternatives; and declining to participate in conservation activities that do not meet minimum standards.

*Arun Agrawal* and *Kent Redford*, in the paper's overview, highlight the surprising lack of hard evidence and scientific knowledge surrounding the extent of displacement from protected areas, the consequences for human welfare, and the consequences for conservation. They contrast this with development projects that have the potential to displace people and note that these are now preceded by social impact assessments and cost-benefit analyses. They describe four potential courses of action that conservation organisations could adopt in response to conservation-induced displacement. These range from a negative programme that follows an even more aggressive pursuit of conservation through strict protected areas to a positive-historical programme that seeks to avoid displacement and provide compensation where it can not be avoided – not only to future cases but also to those who have been displaced in the past.

*Peter Brosius*, writing from a social science position, points out, however, that compensation may not be an adequate solution because “throwing money at a problem can create further problems”. A code of ethics – while a useful starting point – will also not solve the problem. The fact that there is already a substantial body of guidance in both hard and soft law, as *Linda Krueger* points out, is testimony to this. Brosius argues that a positive response needs to do three key things: 1) engage with critics and their questions; 2) examine current conservation categories and knowledge-making processes; and 3) examine conservation legitimacy and moral authority. Above all, he suggests, conservation organisations need to “significantly raise the bar on accountability and action” and to think about institutional contexts in more fundamental ways – how they work, what they do, and who they work with.

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### SOURCE

Redford, K and Fearn, E (eds) (2007). *Protected Areas and Human Displacement: A Conservation Perspective*. Working Paper No 29, Wildlife Conservation Society, New York

The report is available to download from <http://www.wcs.org/media/file/wcswp292.pdf>

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