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Conservation Refugees. The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples. Mark Dowie. The MIT Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-262-01261-4 (hardback). 341 pp.

This latest book from the investigative journalist Mark Dowie is an uncompromising polemic against the 'exclusionary' approach which has dominated conservation practice over the past century. By demonstrating how the exclusion of indigenous people has consistently underpinned our development of protected areas, Dowie argues that this separation of humans from the rest of 'nature' has been a major failing of the traditional, western conservation paradigm. Rather, he asserts that a new more holistic approach to conservation, which recognises indigenous peoples as the stewards of the land who have helped to shape and enrich it in the long term, is necessary both for the survival of culture and the long term sustainability of conservation initiatives. This provides the central tenet of the book and, in true investigative style he assembles a considerable body of evidence to support this.

The opening chapter sets the tone by outlining the historical development of Yosemite National Park and the often bitter encounters between native peoples and conservation. Thereafter the majority of the book takes a more contemporary view, focusing on the role of the so-called BINGOs (Big International Non-Governmental Organisations) such as The Nature Conservancy, World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Conservation International in driving much of the global conservation which is currently being undertaken. Dowie is fiercely critical of their track record in many large conservation projects and provides much damning evidence of failure to involve or engage with local people as well as their propensity to align themselves with large extractive corporations and to conveniently turn a blind eye when national governments 'relocate' indigenes from conservation areas. Despite this, the majority of the material is fairly balanced in its presentation and does not attempt to deny that 'exclusionary' conservation has achieved success in conserving biological diversity. Nor does there seem to be a deliberate attempt to simply portray the BINGOs as the 'bad guys'; rather, they are presented as organisations with the right goals but often just the wrong methods of realising them. The later chapters attempt to explain how a new conservation approach driven by and orchestrated through local people is being put into practice. However, given the strength of the preceding critique of the current system, this is in many ways where the book is at its weakest. The argument for integrating indigenous people and their traditional practices into the conservation process has considerable merit in its own right but the suggestion in the final chapter that the preservation of cultural practices is necessary for the protection of biodiversity is tentative in that it lacks any convincing empirical support. The presentation is also frustratingly broad-brush in places, with a tendency for over-simplification leading, in some instances, to factual inaccuracy as evidenced by the assertion on p52 that the African Wildlife Foundation's promotion of the CITES ivory ban 'ignored the wishes of every nation in Africa', which fails to acknowledge Kenya's longstanding support for the ban.

Nevertheless, the book does offer a compelling and insightful critique of the current paradigm of global conservation and its effects on indigenous peoples. It is written in an accessible style and adopts an interesting structure by interspersing each of the themes investigated with a chapter providing a case study of a particular indigenous group. It provides a lively and engaging read and although highly political in its stance it has much to offer to both practitioners and teachers of conservation, not least by forcing them to question conventional wisdom.

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