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BOOK REVIEWS

Strengthening vitality in conservation

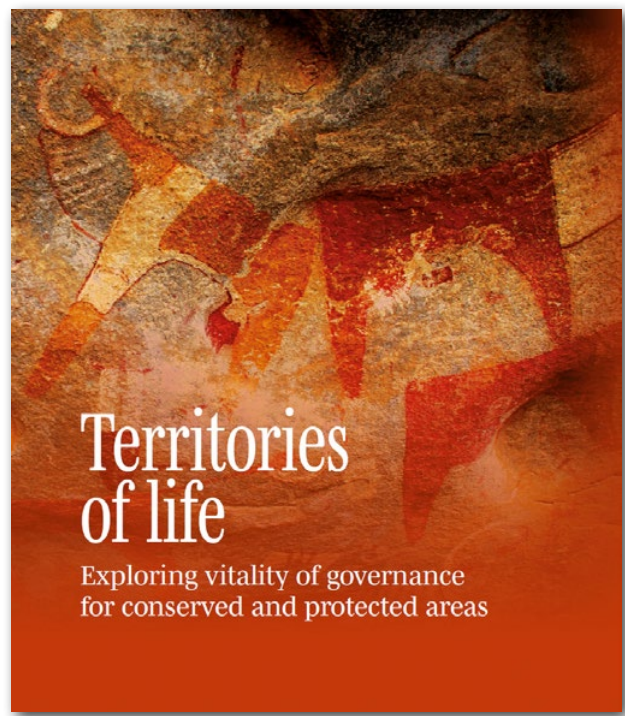
A review of *Territories of Life: Exploring vitality of governance for conserved and protected areas* by Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend with Tilman Jaeger (open access pdf in English, forthcoming in Spanish and French <https://volume.territoriesoflife.org/>)

Reviewed by David Barkin, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City

About fifteen years ago, a network of Indigenous peoples and communities, committed to protecting their territories, bootstrapped itself into a volunteer association. It included activist-scientists and organisations that had worked together since the early 1990s, developing mutual trust in efforts at enhancing equity in the policies and practices of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), to which they were variously affiliated. As it developed, the network became known as the [ICCA Consortium](#). The meaning of ‘ICCA’ went through several iterations but mostly stood as an abbreviation for “areas governed, managed and conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities”.¹ Today, even that is superseded as ICCAs are internationally known as ‘territories of life’ (non-capitalised) – a name derived from Spanish. Officially established under Swiss Law, the Consortium has hundreds of member organisations and individuals on all continents. I joined the association in its early days and saw it go through a whirlwind of constant change. And I loved its unbounded vitality.

This work is an extraordinary tribute to the conservation concepts and practices that enlivened the Consortium as it flourished, some of the most innovative to emerge for decades. Beautifully written by one of the uncommon individuals who accompanied the Consortium’s growth from its beginning, the text is enriched by vivid pictures and dozens of case-examples of conserved and protected areas – an entry into the history, cultures and worldviews of custodian communities and their territories. For the scholarly reader, the text is complemented by 1,700 footnotes and

1 Sajeva, G., Borrini-Feyerabend, G. & Niederberger, T. (2019). *Meanings and more...*, ICCA Consortium Policy Brief No. 7, Tehran: ICCA Consortium and CENESTA.



25 pages of references. For readers in general it is good to know that the volume is open access online.

The volume can be approached from different perspectives and sections. I was first caught by the stories of peoples who overcame oppression, theft of their territory and attempts to erase their cultures, languages and existence. Those were balanced by communities who celebrate life, enrich their traditions and learn from their societies. In splendid diversity and against the odds, some do not fall into the traps of the global system, the adoration of material abundance and alienating rhythms of competitive advancement. And some seem to thrive. Why so? How?

The first of three concepts explored by Borrini-Feyerabend emerged as she coordinated the governance stream at the 2014 World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia. The volume begins by highlighting the remarkable diversity and vitality of institutions governing protected and conserved areas, demonstrating their capacity to function through time and under challenging circumstances. Vital institutions are thus capable of “navigating change and nurturing meaning”. The work describes a variety of common traits and draws lessons to govern conserved and protected areas in meaningful and inspiring ways.

We find that some institutions that function well through time exhibit “strategic adaptability”, others appear “creative and empowered” (autonomously active) and others are “well-connected and capable of collaboration”. While all three characteristics are convincing, I found the latter most telling considering my experience with members of the Consortium in Latin America, where alliances are crucial to negotiate and defend autonomy and avoid the deleterious dynamics of competition. A fourth characteristic of governance vitality is “wisdom from local knowledge”, described by James Scott as *mētis*.² This reminded me of the conflicts between scientific solutions and solutions unique to territorial governance institutions. Finally, a fifth crucial characteristic is the presence of “inspiring collective values”, expression of the culture and worldview of each community.

The five characteristics are frequently encountered in traditional governance institutions – those of mobile pastoralists, shifting cultivators and communities caring for sacred sites or their commons – forests, wetlands, high-level pastures and coastal fisheries. The work takes us on a journey across conserved and protected areas and identifies “a wise mix of biological purpose, culture-based meaning and emotions” as necessary to keep governance institutions functioning through time. Such a mix, however, is not sufficient. Witness to this are the countless communities throughout history that strenuously defended their territories but were defeated. Overpowering forces or lack of indispensable support may overcome even the most vital institutions. In other words, there is no infallible recipe: we need our collective best efforts, aid from nature, and a dose of luck to keep ourselves in the game. To stress the point, the work explores recent history, the hubris of modernity and the colonial and neo-colonial patterns trampling biological and cultural diversity on Earth. Before doing that, it introduces two other concepts in conservation discourse.

² Scott J. C. (1998). *Seeing like a State*, New Haven, USA: Yale University Press.

An almost poetic section describes communities capable of direct, profound, meaningful and respectful relationships in nature across generations. The mix of biological purposes, culture-based meanings and emotions that maintains such governance institutions offers a powerful example of bonding between people and nature. The concept of custodianship describes such bonding – an affective relation of caring between a community and the territory supporting its life and culture. Custodianship takes place in countless ways wherever individuals in solidarity with one another perceive their territory as heritage – much beyond property or a legal management role. Heritage is collective identity and autonomy: it is unthinkable to sell or monetise it. Heritage is a source of shared morality, a common understanding of what is good, precious and just for the community and territory. Crucially, custodianship reveals a territory of life – one that sustains the livelihood of a community while nourishing relations among its members and adding meaning to their lives.

Evident in many examples, the communities that identify themselves as custodians of territories of life ensure more than their own survival and material well-being. They govern, manage, restore and revitalise their territories, but also themselves. We explore the mutual responsibility and collective care that characterise them as we celebrate their territories of life as protected and conserved areas. The work does not dwell in celebrations and soon moves to considerations of political economy. An insightful critique of development accompanies us from the enclosure of the commons to the post World War II decades, including the last fifty years as an uneven “discovery of community conservation” takes place in international policy. She explores such discovery in parallel with the muscular advance of conservation economics, from the omnipresent fight against poverty across the end of the past millennium to the market-based conservation instruments and economic evaluation of nature that characterise the new one.

By juxtaposing the custodianship of territories of life and the commercialisation of nature, Borrini-Feyerabend highlights a series of difficult and politically incorrect questions. These span from “Are legal land rights and financial support the most important needs custodians should meet?” to “Could those usher new conflicts and problems?” and “Is self-strengthening utopian?”. These questions have been debated among the members of the Consortium and are far from resolved. The idea of endogenous strengthening (also expressed as ‘resurgence’ or ‘de-colonisation’) is crucial, and it is notable that a key Consortium product is its guidance to a self-strengthening process – lessons and tools from

communities to communities.³ In the *Territories of life* volume, self-awareness, self-strengthening and mutual support among custodians are described as essential for custodian self-determination – a path for conserving cultural and biological diversity in the new millennium.

Some readers will enjoy exploring governance institutions as systems and comparing vitality with other concepts, from ‘resilience’ to ‘subsidiarity’. Others may use the insightful indicators and tools offered for self-assessing vitality. Hopefully, some decision-makers will be inspired by the policy options outlined to promote custodianship in conserved and protected areas. Borrini-Feyerabend ends with a ground-breaking lexicon, from the most challenging question (“What is conservation?”) to an insightful comparison of definitions among conserved areas, protected areas and other labels.

No one knows how long the governance institutions and custodians of territories of life will remain alive and vital. Custodians embed great capacities and strengths. They also face an onslaught of commercialisation in our increasingly inequitable, militarised societies. In a digital age when many processes accelerate towards unclear ends, it is rare and somehow touching to read words of hope, to be invited to strengthen our vitality. This work does that. It stimulates us to understand and accompany the many institutions of caring that still exist for territories of life, the “many worlds”⁴ that humanity so desperately needs.

³ See <https://ssprocess.iccaconsortium.org/>

⁴ This citation characterises the long-lived Zapatista Front of National Liberation in Mexico. See <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx> and de la Cadena, M. and Blaser, M. (2018). *A World of many worlds*, Durham, USA: Duke University Press.