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BOOK REVIEWS

Review of “Territories of Life. Exploring Vitality of Governance for Conserved and Protected Areas” by Borrini-Feyerabend, G. and Jaeger, T.

Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend with Tilman Jaeger.

Territories of Life. Exploring Vitality of Governance for conserved and protected areas.

ICCA Consortium. 2024. In open access, <https://volume.territoriesoflife.org/>

This large and well produced book traces a history of efforts for convivial biological conservation inside and outside the IUCN since 1948 to today. Such efforts are not made by the rich white environmentalists who rule the IUCN nor by governments from the North or the South but by indigenous and traditional communities. These communities carry out their ways of behaving either being left peacefully alone or facing increasing assaults on their territories. The assaults increasingly come from the extractivist industries but also, sometimes, from the forces of “militarized”, “fortress” conservation that expel humans for the benefit of wildlife in conservation areas.

It is paradoxical that IUCN congresses are sponsored by companies such as Shell and Rio Tinto. They pay a greenwashing fee to ensure that, once local protests are pacified, some areas are left to extractivist companies or to the building of infrastructures. One telling moment in the long chronicle of IUCN congresses since 1948 to today was reached in 2012. <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/jeju-naval-base-construction-republic-of-korea>

The 2012 congress was held in Jeju, South Korea, close to Gangjeong village, and refused to pass an Emergency Motion calling for a halt to the naval base under construction. The motion describes well what was at stake. <https://savejejunow.org/iucn-gangjeong-motion/>

The local community (“custodians of territories of life” as Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, GBF, calls them) had defended and continued to defend the natural environment through referendums, hunger strikes, and daily civil disobedience. However, “an ocean of cement was poured on top of their coastlines, freshwater pools and corals” (GBF p. 243). The Samsung group and respective country governments were responsible.

This event exemplified the structure of power inside the IUCN which Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend and her colleagues at the ICCA Consortium have coped with and learnt to manage for many years. ICCA is an acronym for “territories and areas governed, managed and conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities”. The IUCN call themselves the “world environmentalists” as they gather in the tens of thousands in congresses every few years but they exclude most of the groups representing the environmentalism of the poor and the Indigenous. As it is shown in this book, GBF and the ICCA Consortium have been fighting inside the IUCN with some success for the recognition of the environmentalism of the common people and in particular of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples. The trajectory of the ICCA Consortium which is nearly twenty years old, and now calls itself “Territories of Life”, is one of progress. Despite failures, it has constantly supported local peoples

who protect and conserve nature. It has grown steadily all across the world as this book shows beautifully in its 300,000 words and hundreds of images.

At the beginning such ethnic or traditional groups (could be the ancestral mangrove people of the Pacific in Colombia and Ecuador; could be Adivasi communities from forested areas in Central India) had no place in the IUCN congresses. Some forms of international protection have become available. For instance, Convention 169 of ILO that some states have ratified (mainly in Latin America) protects Indigenous people and demands their prior consent before being victimized to mining or plantations. Or the Forest Rights Act in India of 2006, landmark legislation born from many local protests and aimed at recognizing the rights of Adivasi forest-dwelling communities. On its side, the international Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992 aims at present to fulfil the so-called Kummung-Montreal objectives, some of which explicitly recognize the role of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples. So, from an early practice of what is called “militarized” or “fortress” conservation that still goes on (displacing local peoples in favor of wildlife) there has been some change towards a strong international movement of “convivial conservation” (to use Bram Büscher’s terminology) recognizing the role of local populations. Such grassroots people do not call themselves “conservationists” or “protectors of nature” but they behave as such in their everyday life. This movement can be called “the discovery of community conservation”, a discovery of something that in fact is very old and has been geographically very abundant. The ICCA and GBF herself have pushed strongly in this direction, and the book explains what they have done so successfully.

Conservation by “traditional peoples” overlaps with but exceeds conservation by “Indigenous peoples”. So, some of the case studies in this very attractive book (out of thirty that deserve full-page illustrations) are located in Europe. In the first pages we have one in Galicia, Spain and another one in Mount Athos, Greece. In Galicia, the thousands of *mariscadoras* have been organized in *cofradías* for the sustainable management of shellfish, their own means of living through selling in markets. They have been threatened by commercial interests and also by industrial pollution from the cellulose industry *Ej Atlas*. In Mount Athos, a tradition of male monastic living (within a geography that facilitates exclusion of outsiders) is preserving centuries-old conservation and use of local biodiversity. This goes together with the defense of cultural and religious values.

The protection and conservation of “territories of life” have some characteristics in common. The areas in question are rural although they can be semi-urban. They can protect native forests, or be devoted to agricultural production mostly for local use, or they are aquatic areas with fishing resources or perhaps pastoral areas. They also have in common the outside threats. One finds examples in the book and in real life of “territories of life” still enjoying long-lived peaceful existence, not attracting outside appetites for water grabbing, oil extraction or metal mining. One such peaceful case was the Abolhassani tribal confederacy in Iran (with 74,000 ha of dry land) that Taghi Farvar (one of ICCA’s

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founders) helped to defend. (GBF, p. 111). But often the struggle for “territories of life” is exercised against outside extractivist pressures. The threats coming from outside are not simply “the hubris of modernity” but the very concrete growth in social metabolism (the extraction and transport of the flows of energy and materials), the mining of sand and gravel or the “new” elements of the whole Periodic Table (as Rare Earths for instance), the increased HANPP (human appropriation of the production of biomass) because of economic and population growth. Outside threats take the form of tree plantations (eucalyptus, oil palm, etc), soybeans or cattle growing for export, extraction of coal, oil or gas, and new forms of solar energy, metal mining, hydroelectricity, commercial mechanized ocean fishing. Thus, one “peaceful” place of conservation (that some years ago escaped a threat of mangrove destruction in favor of shrimp farming) has been the Rufiji River delta in Tanzania, but now the building of a big dam (GBF, p. 199) is an immediate threat to the local communities, hundreds of thousands of people, “expected to face the dry-up of wetlands and small lakes, the end of seasonal flooding beneficial for agriculture, and reduced freshwater to sustain the more than 50,000 ha of the delta mangroves essential for Tanzania’s fisheries”.

Consider the case of the Indigenous people of Sarayaku in the Amazon region of Ecuador. This is the settled place of Kichwa people from which the words *sumak kawsay* were disseminated (words possibly as old as Aristotle) and were chosen (as a replacement for the words “economic development”) in the 2008 Constitution of the country. They mean *buen vivir*. This is a “territory of life” that, though its own communal institutions, defended itself against oil exploration or prospecting (implying “seismic testing” that means many local small explosions), and finally claimed compensation in an successful international court case *Ej Atlas*. (GBF, p. 130, 174).

This marvellously optimistic book praises the vitality of nature inhabited by humans (their autopoiesis) and the vitality of the governance institutions they have created. It remembers the local martyrs and sometimes the foreign martyrs like Bruno Manser with the Penan in Sarawak. It goes from detailed descriptions and analyses of peaceful enjoyment of livelihood and biodiversity conservation from one place to another, and then it also includes many resistance cases against outside attacks. The Kawawana fishing community conserved ten thousand hectares of estuarine villages in Casamance, Senegal (GBF, p. 246) and it is a proud member of the ICCA Consortium but we also know that Casamance, as Gambia and the entire Senegal coast, are threatened by foreign trawlers and by the mining of heavy minerals, such as zircon in Casamance. <https://ejatlas.org/print/local-populations-from-niafouran-g-opposing-zircon-mining-senegal>.

For instance, will the Ju/’Hoan San people of northeastern Namibia, a strongly egalitarian society (GBF, p. 104–105), be now confronted by oil and gas exploration and eventual exploitation by the Canadian ReconAfrica company? *Ej Atlas*. If we resort to German words used at the beginning of European colonialist times, we could use the terms of *Warenkunde und Raubwirtschaft* to study the causes of such external attacks in Namibia and elsewhere. They mean “the science and practice of establishing commodities”, which in Italian is called *Merceologia* (old and new chemical elements and biofuels but also uranium or “carbon colonialism” in the form of REDD schemes) and “the practice of ecologically unequal trade” (the “economy of robbery”). Thus, in the *EJAtlas* there are a couple of conflict cases in Kenya near Kwale, mining

of titanium ore (Ilmenite), and rare earths and niobium in Mrima Hill. This is the area of sacred Kaya forests of the Mijikenda people which the book under review describes in detail (GBF, p. 160–161). Nature Kenya objected to the EIA on grounds that Mrima Hill was a Nature Reserve and National Monument because of its natural and cultural riches. *Ej Atlas*. <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/titanium-mining-in-the-kwale-district-kenya>.

I remember a discussion in Barcelona in 2016 with Ashish Kothari who is an old friend. I had interviewed him in the journal *Ecologia Política* in 1993, *05_Kothari_1993.pdf*. He has been a main collaborator of the ICCA Consortium and Territories of Life. In 2016 I tried to persuade him to add many new cases of environmental conflict in the *EJAtlas* from India and South Asia. He refused arguing that he was tired of conflicts, he wanted to do something more positive, helping ICCA and moreover setting up the complementary *Global Tapestry of Alternatives* as he has done. <https://greattransition.org/images/Global-Tapestry-Kothari-Bajpai.pdf>.

In fact, he also helped to add some conflict cases in the *EJAtlas*, but drawing from this conversation and from GBF’s book we can perhaps distinguish two main lines of research, teaching and advocacy in global political ecology. The first line, those who focus on successful Territories of Life (like GBF’s book exploring the vitality of governance of such territories) and also the *Pluriverse* and *Tapestry of Alternatives* (as Ashish Kothari, Arturo Escobar and so many others do). And the second line, those who persist in collecting and making visible many ecological conflicts, most of which end as failures for environmental justice as we see in the *EJAtlas* though some of them may be deemed as successes (around 20 %), fuelling our optimism on the burgeoning world movement for environmental justice. The book under review is also optimistic but perhaps more realistic and operating on a more subdued scale than the *EJAtlas*, The book is based on the remarkable success of the ICCA Consortium in the field of Biodiversity Conservation (both inside the IUCN but also in the international treaties and agendas) which has been achieved by its unstinting grassroots practice and unparalleled knowledge put at the service of convivial conservation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joan Martinez-Alier: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Joan Martinez-Alier*
Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambiental, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Cerdanyola del Valles, Spain

* Corresponding author at: Passeig del Remei 32 08460, Santa Maria de Palautordera, Spain.
E-mail address: joanmartinezalier@gmail.com.