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Territories of life. Exploring vitality of governance for conserved and protected areas, edited by Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend with Tilman Jaeger, The ICCA Consortium, 2024, 375 pp., ISBN: 978-2-9701386-8-6

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## Enduring custodianship of territories of life: vitality in the face of global polycrises

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### An invitation

Our planet is a place of beauty and wonder, deep mystery and inspiring stories, our home and our heart. Yet, for many of us each day is an odyssey, navigating heartbreak from cascades of military violence and brutal environmental destruction while trying our best to build a just and sustainable future. It is too easy to doubt that we will ever achieve such a future.

So it is a joy to open this book and enter a world of ‘yes we can’, of ceremonial dancing and singing in the Vaupes region of Columbia, walking alongside handsome long-horned Ankole cattle in Uganda, kneeling in a sacred forest grove in Guatemala and much more. The book also carefully details how communities encounter the nightmares of permanent war, injustice and genocide, and resist proposals to convert their territories of life into fields of gas wells, mines and pipelines.

Borrini-Feyerabend layers the ‘yes we can’ into a delicious, nourishing and challenging feast of who, where, how, why and at what cost ‘territories of life’ flourish. Communities continue to revitalize their territories of life while grappling to overcome oppression and neo-colonialism. The critique of modernity and of our ‘economic evaluation and commercialization of everything’ at the centre of the book is riveting and powerful. The book encourages us to encounter our own collusions and see the scales stripped from the discourses that hide both the glory and the ghastly around us. Thirty case examples drawn from the activities of the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) Consortium, 20 images and a wealth of figures and tables, 25 pages of references and 1700 footnotes, ensure the book satisfies both the scholarly and the artistically literate.

Yet, this book is ultimately practical, written to guide actions towards sustaining ‘territories of life’, by conservation professionals, environmental defenders, conserved and protected areas managers, custodians of territories of life, policymakers, staff of non-

governmental organisations (NGOs), researchers, students and the many economic and political actors concerned with the multiple dimensions of people-nature connections, livelihoods and biocultural diversity. The lexicon provided in Part VI will be very helpful to readers unfamiliar with these terms and the language of the global conservation sector.

The term ‘territories of life’ was born among networks of Indigenous peoples in Latin America, and cultivated conceptually through over a decade of partnerships and negotiations among members of the ICCA Consortium (<https://www.iccaconsortium.org/>) (Zanjani et al. 2023). I’m fortunate to be an Honorary Member of the Consortium, working alongside the actual Members, and frequently supporting their opposition to environmentally destructive proposals. The book invites many entry points and journeys to which a reviewer cannot possibly give justice – I hope that my orientation as a scholar-practitioner highlights enough of the material to engage many people in this book, which is freely available as pdf from here (<https://volume.territoriesoflife.org/>) and will soon be available also in Spanish and French. I will now describe it and discuss its seven parts.

### In search of governance vitality

Part I of the work encompasses a ‘search’ for the facets of a vital relationship between custodians and their territories of life, encapsulated as ‘governance vitality’ – the ‘capacity to function through time, fully and in inspiring ways, including by evolving under changing and possibly challenging circumstances’. The search begins with an exploration of the deep-time links between early humans and the lifeways characteristic of territories with a non-destructive relationship between people and natural environments. Today’s foragers, mobile pastoralists, shifting cultivators and monastic communities continue (for over 50,000 years in the case of Aboriginal Australians (Tobler et al. 2017)) complex, diverse, knowledge-rich adaptive strategies, founded on densely connected social bonds and symbolic performance.

Here, the central tension to be addressed by readers/practitioners is revealed – many such relationships between custodians and their territories endure and renew despite clashes with colonialism and modernity, while others wither in the face of

overwhelming odds. What could ever distinguish them? The case examples throughout are drawn from interviews, site-based studies and documentary analysis, and selected to highlight lessons about vitality. The story of women in Galicia (Spain) partnering with researchers and the local administration, rebuilding rules and recovering their traditional shellfish resource uplifted me. On the other hand, the description of the military aircrafts attacks on the Salween Peace Park (created by the Karen) in Burma/Myanmar led me to the internet, where I was shocked by video uploads of the latest bombing.

Part I highlights successful commonalities among custodians governing territories of life: shaping formal and informal rules and cultural norms (i.e. institutions); forging cultural and spiritual connections; fashioning livelihoods based on ties of knowledge and *mētis* (the know-how that is only acquired through engaged local practice); and bonding through collective identity and struggles for self-determination. Autonomy and self-determination, based on customary practices, provide the foundation in Cherán (Mexico) for repelling industrial loggers and restoring their forest. Cooperation, collective organising and government support enable traditional cheese-making and animal husbandry to be renewed after impoverishment in Gruyère Pays-d'Enhaut (Switzerland). A key risk to these community-based approaches came with the emergence of 'fortress parks' governed by States, starting with Wyoming's Yellowstone in 1872, which justified the displacement of original residents. Recognition of diverse governance types such as community-governed protected areas emerged only in the early 2000s and was reaffirmed at the 2014 IUCN World Parks Congress in Sydney. Following the Congress, the ICCA Consortium, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the United Nations Environment Program's (UNEP) World Conservation Monitoring Centre, with support from the Government of Germany, launched the ICCA Global Support Initiative. This global suite of practitioners conducted site-based assessments of governance across multiple countries, and reflected together, using documentary analysis and workshops, to identify attributes that enable some territories to endure and thrive – leading first to *what makes a difference* (Part II) and then to *why* (Part III).

### What makes a difference

Five characteristics are identified in Part II as key to making a difference to governance vitality, allowing territories of life to maintain their functions and evolve positively over time. *Strategic adaptability* is the first, responding and learning in flexible, timely ways, that improve functioning, reduce conflicts and

enhance effectiveness in solving problems. *Creativity and empowerment* is next, demonstrating conscious autonomous agency, which is often associated with innovation, curiosity, balanced by a sense of history and humility. *Connectivity and collaboration*, the third characteristic, highlights the crucial roles of alliances in protecting territory. The Penan case study shines light on the role of partnerships for detailed mapping work, international protests, and legal action that forced dam proposals to be placed on hold while the Penan continue efforts to secure their territory as part of a larger Baram Peace Park. *Wisdom from local experience*, the fourth characteristic, highlights mindfulness, respect, precaution, decency, empathy, respect for human rights and combating the potential tyrannies of localism emerging in parochialism and prejudice (Lane and Corbett 2005). The final characteristic *inspiring collective values* includes a sense of solidarity towards future generations, of spirituality, and a willingness to act together, based on context-specific values. This is best illustrated by the statements in the case example of the Kichwa Indigenous People of Sarayaku (Ecuador): 'Our territory does not need to be sacrificed for the sake of modernity and money. It must come first, and then other values can be pursued. Our people must maintain a sense of what is fundamental'.

### Purpose, meaning, emotions and chance

Part III explores why people are so deeply attached to their territories to endure violence, intimidation and impoverishment to continue governing them. This seems counterintuitive given that humans have been incredibly mobile in our evolutionary history, occupying every continent except Antarctica. Part III explores how humanity functioning in social groups – aptly described by David Attenborough as 'the compulsive communicators' (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01qryj9>) – use symbols and stories that create meanings and become embedded in the diverse institutions of these groups, amplifying the energy connected with securing livelihoods. These institutions shape and are shaped by nature, with music, dancing, art, expressing the socio-cultural and spiritual significance of territories, while at times practices such as sacrifice emerge to exorcise fear and darkness. Diverse cultures and political-economic structures reveal the interplay and tensions among the life-affirming aspects of justice, solidarity, interdependence and the hegemonic forces of greed, supremacism and selfishness. An image of the Trimurti stone relief from the Island of Elephanta near Mumbai (India), depicting Brahman the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and the Shiva the Destroyer highlights the tensions among the many cultural and political

factors attached to the purpose, meaning and emotions at the heart of territorial governance.

Borrini-Feyerabend's deep exploration nourishes our desire for sophisticated and nuanced understanding of human factors influencing territories of life and leads to the conclusion that while intrinsic characteristics and motivations are essential for vitality in governance, contextual conditions, such as having the good fortune to avoid overpowering territorial invasions, are key contributors. There is no ultimate merit or ultimate blame in maintaining or losing a territory of life ... only a powerful combination of efforts and circumstances. But from there we segue to Part IV, the exploration of recent threats faced by custodians in conserving their territories, and some of their responses.

### Territories of life as 'conserved areas'

Custodianship is explored in Part IV as the ongoing affective care and meaningful relations that bond a community to its territory, to practices grounded in mutual respect and co-evolution, generating biocultural diversity, heritage and identity. Such custodianship is contrasted with modernity, through a series of questions: 'whose reality? whose development? whose economy? whose democracy?' Borrini-Feyerabend points to arrogance and selfishness as the attitudinal foundations of some key projects of modernity, including the enclosure of the commons, the State-driven taxation and colonial imperialistic adventures, and the shift of power from rural to urban spheres through industrialisation. She critiques the ideas of the 'Enlightenment', described by Kant as emancipation through the authority of reason, and links these to the prioritisation of personal freedom and individual choice over community and solidarity, leading to today's neo-economic liberalism that views the economy as engulfing social relations (Polanyi 1944). This broad overview of the contest between humanitarian and non-humanitarian ideals, between the market and social relations as the basis of life, among thinkers such as Weber, Malthus, Bookchin, Scott and many others should be compulsory reading for today's conservation practitioners, influenced so much by the proposed economic solutions of economic valuation, commercialization and financialisation of nature.

Borrini-Feyerabend discusses how democracies fail when vested interests, backed by persuasion channels, gain power over the natural environment. Mega-dam projects, often funded by global organisations, portrayed as development, have frequently obliterated territories of life. Nevertheless, seeds of hope are also identified, for example in new hybrid institutions like multi-cultural democracies that are underpinned by self-determination by custodians. Here, I would have enjoyed more examples of successful hybridity, for

example the removal of all dams from the Klamath River (<https://www.gov.ca.gov/2024/10/02/klamath-river-dams-fully-removed-ahead-of-schedule/>), driven by tribes and implemented by governments, both reaching across the colonial divide.

The discovery of community conservation, only traceable in literature over about the last 50 years, is discussed in detail, together with a timeline of key events in its emergence in international fora, highlighting policy retreats and advances in recognition of the contributions of custodians. Part IV ends with a discussion of the current 'crescendo of recognition', driven in part by the quantification of the global importance Indigenous lands and territories of life for biodiversity conservation (Garnett et al. 2018; Oliva et al. 2025). Again, key questions, such as 'are land rights and financial support sufficient to secure territories of life?', stimulates consideration of the risks and benefits of proposed support mechanisms, and potential solutions. Our team's research demonstrates that external actors need to understand the history and characteristics of custodians' self-generated pathways and tailor their support to avoid these risks (Hill et al. 2025).

### Assessing and promoting vitality

Practical tools for custodians (usually in voluntary partnerships with others) to assess, and thereby strengthen, the governance vitality of their territory are the heart of Part V. The introductory discussion of the links between vitality and other concepts, including resilience, social-ecological fit, adaptive social learning, subsidiarity, ethnogenesis, sustainability, diversity and quality of governance, is very useful to guard against the oft-repeated error colloquially framed as 'reinventing the wheel'. Updating the IUCN Green List standards, which recognise governance vitality without clarity on how to assess this, is identified as an important opportunity to strengthen territories of life through application of a conservation standard. The tables, text and photos that illustrate the self-assessment section are clear and useful. This part ends with a call for willing custodians to self-identify, and for policymakers to promote voluntary agreements between States and custodians that recognise and appropriately support conservation and protection of territories of life, based on their specific circumstances, while acknowledging there are no blueprint plans and agreements (Stevens et al. 2024). The text explores potential positive contributions for many other interested parties to strengthen territories of life, through learning networks, decolonisation and resurgence movements, living in solidarity and reciprocity, while paying attention

to questioning the current social and environmental injustice that keeps about two billion people in squalid living conditions, suffering hunger, violence and poor health. A key message is that the hope for transformation lies more in developing caring and meaningful relations with and among people and nature, rather than the oft-repeated technological and economic solutions.

### Lexicon and conclusion

The lexicon in Part VI about territories, governance and conservation is a key guide for readers, with many concepts freshly re-described. While the book draws attention to the lexicon on pp 6 and 10, more reference to it could have helped readers who feel a bit lost when beginning their journey through the book. Finally, the conclusions pull together the lessons from the entire volume. Custodianship, the bond between a community and its territory conceived as heritage, not property, emerges as the foundation to governance vitality. Territories of life are nourished by, and in turn nourish, their custodians, and provide the cornerstone of a different worldview to neo-economic liberalism about the relations between nature and people. The most serious challenges lie in the nightmares of weapons of mass destruction, and the ongoing reach of the fossil fuel industry. The book concludes with an invitation to a radical change of course for humanity, setting limits to financial and military might, and nourishing the collective, diverse, peaceful and just social relations that bring us together and bond as with and in nature. My heart and mind were uplifted by this invitation and the solidarity offered throughout this rich and realistic feast of today's challenges and opportunities.

### Giving thanks

The story of humanity's efforts to create cultures that are self-affirming, wise, benevolent, with deep connections to and custodianship of their territories, while tackling challenging encounters with modernity, 'development' and the forces of commercialization, is what makes this book truly remarkable. The material is extraordinarily vibrant and hopeful, while also being the opposite of naïve: all the inherent contradictions of living in modernity – enjoying its many fruits such as freely available books on the internet – while being appalled at its growing authoritarianism, brutality and destruction of Earth's beauty are laid bare.

With this review, I hope to draw scholars, of both biophysical, social and interdisciplinary domains, out of the world of the journal articles available online, and into reading the book. Many of you who teach at the various academic centres will find a wealth of relevant material, and those who seek to ponder the

big questions will be rewarded. While Borrini-Feyerabend thanks many contributors, the book would be strengthened by a section on the protocols for its creation, including, for example, aspects such as protection of Indigenous intellectual rights, decisions about authorship and the delivery of mutual benefits. For the print edition, an index would be useful, although not necessary when online. Above all, thanks to the authors for a remarkable contribution to understanding what keeps ourselves vital, as we relate with one another, and with nature.

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