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Defending community? Indigeneity, self-determination and institutional ambivalence in the restoration of Lake Whakaki

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Abstract

Conservation practitioners have scrutinized the credibility and effectiveness of community-based natural resource management, noting its romantic misconceptions about communities and their capacities. Early approaches failed to acknowledge the heterogeneity of collective agents, the synergy between decentralization and neoliberalism, or the need to affirm rural peoples' entitlements to resources. A Maori community's attempt to restore Lake Whakaki on New Zealand's east coast confirms many of these critiques. The restoration confronts institutional ambivalence, obstructive forces from beyond the zone of Maori influence and non-correspondence between community and catchment dynamics. Fulfilment of the project requires exogenous resources and authority, but state conservation agencies are ambivalent towards local demands for self-determined development. Nonetheless, an uncommon degree of agency which is grounded within community aspirations for sovereignty suggests that the motivational characteristics of community retain their importance in debates about integrated conservation and development.
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1. Introduction

Supporters of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) argue that conservation will achieve sufficient legitimacy with rural populations only where it is subject to decentralized governance, community consensus and economic development (Virtanen, 2005). Although I will critique these assumptions through a case study of Maori restoration of Lake Whakaki, a need remains to transcend the narrow, biocentric definitions of conservation which have failed historically to enlist popular support. Even though the three components of CBNRM were not initially evident at Whakaki, Maori initiated restoration to assert their self-determination and sovereignty in a manner which perhaps confirms the necessity of those components in conservation. Outwardly, the rationale for CBNRM is convincing. The epistemic privilege of local resource users,

their capacity to adapt resource use to ecological fluctuations, the equity of local decisions, and the vested conservation interests of the place-bound are all promoted as reasons for decentralization (Lane et al., 2004). Proponents anticipate compliance with regulations that local people determine for themselves and regard small-holder ownership of land and use of resources as an incentive for conservation. For instance, the central premise of Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE[1] programme is that there "should be no conflict between the economic survival of agricultural communities and foraging needs of wildlife" (Wolmer et al., 2004, p. 90).

CBNRM endorses spatial devolution of authority for public and private resources, but it also sanctions greater use of rural commons which would otherwise be destined for expansion of the public conservation estate. This openness

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[1] Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources – one of the first CBNRM programmes.

to concurrent use and conservation may be particularly appealing for Maori, the indigenes of New Zealand, who typically reject biocentrism as an affront to their *mana whenua* (authority over land). Maori are suspicious of collaborative conservation models which offer greater involvement in the management of protected areas, but which do not address their land claims or bestow opportunities for development (Coombes and Hill, 2005a). With its goal to extend conservation and development partnerships beyond public–private boundaries, CBNRM offers considerable promise for resolving sustainably indigenous land claims.

Despite this potential, the privileging of the community scale has attracted academic criticism. In practice, decentralization has been nominal, with lack of empowerment for communities to manage ecological processes and elite capture of CBNRM's benefits. Rather than unity and homogeneity, project leaders encounter community discourses which conceal underlying power hierarchies, threatening the equity and credibility of community management. The restoration of Lake Whakaki validates these criticisms. Community processes cannot be disassociated from catchment-scale politics, so the Maori owners of the lake confront challenges which are beyond their sphere of control. Such external dynamics as ambivalence from non-Maori landowners and state environmental agencies have interfered with Maori aspirations to reinstate the lake's ecology. Many of the external influences have been successfully resisted, however, and the restoration is extensive. As these efforts are grounded in a defence of Whakaki communities, along with demands for sovereignty and self-determination, this may foreshadow an alternative conservation paradigm. Community-scale management may continue to be relevant for indigenous peoples and resolution of their treaty claims to natural resources.

2. From communitarian to institutional models of CBNRM

This section critiques the essential characteristics of CBNRM: decentralized administration of resources, reliance on community consensus, and use of incentives to achieve conservation objectives. Examples are mostly from developing nations, but critics of community management in developed countries emphasize similar concerns (e.g., Lane et al., 2004; McCarthy, 2005; Walker and Hurley, 2004). I also engage with endeavours to remodel CBNRM through institutional reform. Although implementation is limited, responses to academic critiques are converging on new approaches. In a 'second generation' of theorizing (Murphree, 2004), the communitarian assumptions of the first generation have been replaced with a more critical account of institutions and their role in development (refer to Table 1). Recognition of the need for state–local partnerships has supplanted a naive faith in decentralization to non-descript communities. Economistic rationalities and the rewarding of 'good' park neighbours with use concessions have been reconfigured as a need to affirm traditional and tenurial rights, realizing greater scope for self-determi-

Table 1
Conceptual shifts in CBNRM

First generation	Second generation
Alleviation of bio-crises	Resilience of place
Devolution	State–local partnering
Deconcentration	Subsidiarity
Communitarianism	Institutionalism
Economism	Self-determination
Surveillance	Accountability
Concessionary use rights	Security of tenure/rights
Neighbourliness	Sovereignty

nation. However, the second column of Table 1 may be just as idealized as the first: second generation projects also perpetuate unrealistic assumptions about communities and their institutions.

2.1. (Neo)communitarianism in conservation

Decentralization is a key prescription of CBNRM but it sometimes conveys the *appearance* of devolution whilst failing to transfer meaningful powers, reassigning host communities as "powerless facades to legitimise decisions made elsewhere" (Virtanen, 2005, p. 10). Devolved management is often a state strategy for re-regulating its relationships with outlying territories or sanitizing the periphery of opposition to resource extraction. In Bolivia, devolution "serve[s] less to create sustainable, locally based democratic institutions than to provide the appearance of political stability deemed necessary to attract foreign investment" (Perreault, 2005, p. 272). Although communities are popularized as the benefactors of CBNRM, local governments and their elite patrons more often receive new authorities. Nominal reform of Guatemalan forest management resulted in 'decentralization-as-municipalization', diffusing state power at the local level and eroding communal management (Wittman and Geisler, 2005). Communal administrators protected a higher proportion of forests than had the state, but now they must apply for licenses to municipalities which favour applications for expanded harvests and foreign investment.

Incomplete decentralization creates asymmetrical power relations across scales and is widespread under CBNRM because colonial legacies and local political contexts shape the outcome of devolution strategies. Bureaucratic resistance to decentralization of Indonesia's forest management led to ambiguity, policy volatility and clientelism – conditions which spawned short-term extractive logics and alienation of peasant's rights (McCarthy, 2004). Partial devolution may be more inequitable for rural peoples than centralized control of resources. Although discourses of community advancement were used to legitimize decentralization of Honduran forest policy, municipalization was the intent of structural reforms and resulted in income disparities within communities (Nygren, 2005). Faced with ambiguities in the definition of community stakeholders, municipal leaders chose disbursement of logging permits through traditional leadership structures, but this merely