

# **Ethnic Discrimination in “Global” Conservation**

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# Ethnic Discrimination in “Global” Conservation

Larry Lohmann

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1

In most parts of the world, the links between Western nature conservation and ethnic discrimination are common knowledge. Here in Britain, however, these links aren't obvious to everyone. Eeva is to be congratulated for providing a forum where such issues can be discussed.

Ethnic discrimination and racism are subjects which often put white, middle-class environmentalists in Europe and the US on the defensive. “What does racism have to do with us?”, is one unspoken question. If pressed, some greens insist that environmentalism concerns itself with a future common to all humanity, and is therefore by definition race-neutral, class-neutral, “neither left nor right” in the fashionable phrase. Others claim that environmental science is only about “nature”, not humans and their squabbles. Many feel that ethnic discrimination need not be a big worry for greens since surely it is something practiced only by ignorant bad guys. Environmentalists, the implication is, are much too well-educated and well-brought-up to fall into such low-class atavisms.

In some white environmentalist circles, even mentioning the subject of ethnic discrimination can put you outside the pale. The US legal scholar Patricia J. Williams could have been talking about the mainstream British environmental movement when she described, in her Reith Lectures of a few years back, how “race matters are resented and repressed in much the same way as matters of sex and scandal: the subject is considered a rude and transgressive one in mixed company”.<sup>1</sup> Which is why, with some audiences, I've learned to be careful to try to introduce this subject in ways that won't provoke flinching or hysteria. That won't be a worry in this forum, but let me take a gentle route into the topic anyway by looking at a bit of history.

2

There's perhaps no better place to begin than European ideas of "nature" itself, and that of "natural conservation", "parks", and "protected areas". Like everything else, these concepts have histories, and, as always happens in such cases, the more one looks at those histories, the stranger the concepts seem.

It's surprising, for example, the extent to which the history of the idea of "nature" in Europe is that of a landscape for aesthetic contemplation by a certain class. One of the most critical forces in shaping European ideas of nature were paintings of landscapes -- paintings which legitimated the property and authority of whoever had paid for them, landscapes where human workers, people who lived on and shaped the land, were either happy or invisible. Appreciation of the sort of nature which was portrayed in such pictures was an identifier showing what class and ethnic group you belonged to. In the 18th and 19th centuries, to be a card-carrying member of the European middle classes you had to show some yearning or appreciation for the sublime or Edenic.

I don't want to oversimplify, but it's something like this human-free or nearly human-free "landscape" picture of nature that conservationism has inherited. In the 1950s, the famous conservationist Bernhard Grzimek characterized Africa as "the ultimate and last paradise of all our yearnings" and said that its "national parks must remain primordial wildernesses to be effective. No men, not even native ones, should live inside its borders." Grzimek forgot to mention that his so-called "primordial wildernesses" were among the longest-occupied places on earth, but few of his colleagues thought it important to catch him up on the error. A few years later, Africa was fictitiously described in the 1960s by no less a conservationist than the British director general of UNESCO, Julian Huxley, as containing "the last accessible portions of the prehuman world's climax community". Again, this was explicitly to deny the existence of thousands of years of human culture in the places Huxley was talking about.<sup>2</sup>

The word "park", of course, also has a history. "Park" was first used to designate fenced-off deer preserves exclusively maintained for a largely urban aristocracy for whom hunting privileges were a mark of status and power. Later, "landscape parks" became a fashion and mark of prestige and standing which spread from royalty downward, often at the expense of local land claims. Whole villages might be uprooted in order to create

pleasing prospects with manicured lawns and aesthetically-grouped trees. It's no coincidence that the phrase "nation's park" was invented by a landscape painter, the American George Catlin, in the 19th century.

Or take the word "forest". I can still remember my surprise some years ago when I discovered that in English, "forest" meant "place of deer for royal use", not place of trees. "Forest" was a social category, not a biological one. Forests were usually relatively unwooded, and it was only by prevention of customary use and clearing that they became more wooded. Foresters were clients of the monarch who administered forests for his or her personal and political use. Geoffrey Chaucer was a forester. Of course, forestry means a great deal more today, but it's still a discipline which sets and solves problems thrown up by the politics of certain elites -- even if today it's usually a politics of centralized control of land aimed at producing lumber, wood pulp, or "nature experiences" for mass consumption.

One begins to see a pattern here. The ideas of "nature", "parks", "forests", "carrying capacity", "Gaia" and many others which have come down to Western environmentalism over the years didn't fall from the sky. They were developed by particular groups of people for particular purposes. Of course we work on these ideas. We make them into something new. Bob Evans described a few minutes ago how environmental justice movements have worked to modify or overthrow received ideas from more privileged elements of society about what "the environment" is, or what environments are. But no concepts of nature are ever innocent or "unbiased". They're never neutral.

Many years ago Raymond Williams remarked famously that a "working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation".<sup>3</sup> Williams's way of helping to distance us from the "landscape" idea of nature is useful for helping us recognize not only its class and lifestyle biases, but also its ethnic biases, and how it transforms and reinforces structures of ethnic discrimination -- which is my topic today.

3

One of the things that even middle-class, more-or-less white individuals such as myself have noticed about ethnic discrimination and racism is that, whatever else they do, they tend to locate social problems in the breaching or mismanagement of fortified boundaries between different, mutually

exclusive ethnic groups. Call it the Norman Tebbit theory of ethnicity. One ethnic group is said to “contaminate” another. Or the mixing of two groups is said to cause disorder, social confusion, or an unseemly homogenization.

In practice, this picture often functions to justify either the assimilation or the exclusion of certain ethnic groups. Of course, exclusion can mean many things, depending on circumstances: segregation, resettlement, repatriation, dispossession, repression -- even extermination, which is when you get excluded from the planet entirely.

The crucial thing about the Norman Tebbit theory of ethnicity is that the person who has authority to define ethnic boundaries always has to be Norman Tebbit. Norman Tebbit defines the limits of his own ethnic group, and he defines yours for you, too. Otherwise you might get the wrong idea and think that you belong to his ethnic group, or that you belong to both his and yours, or that sometimes you’re one and sometimes the other, or that *he* doesn’t really belong to the ethnic group he *thinks* he belongs to and is really Flemish or something, and then, of course, all hell might break loose. Yet at the same time, the way Norman Tebbit goes on demanding monopoly rights over the definition of all ethnic groups is guaranteed to get him into long arguments with everybody else -- which is one reason why the work of ethnic discrimination is never done. People themselves like to have some say over how they are named.

The Norman Tebbit theory of ethnicity is surprisingly widespread in Western environmentalism.<sup>4</sup> That, however, is a topic for another day. What I’d like to talk about today is something a bit different: human/nature dichotomies and their practical effects. I’d like to suggest that conservationists often unwittingly behave a little like Norman Tebbit when they insist on certain human/nature boundaries -- and when they disrespect constructions of “the environment” which are different from their own -- and that these boundaries do a lot of the work of ethnic discrimination and racism.

4

One thing that a conservationist human/nature boundary can be very good at is in reinforcing or concealing ethnic discrimination in the allocation of land.

Let me begin at the level of speech. Take the word “pristine”. This term has long been a favourite among conservationists and conservation scientists, who will often tell you that some forest or desert or other area worthy of conservation is “pristine” or “near-pristine”. What does the word mean?

You anthropologists out there are probably used to interpreting notions of purity and contamination as they irrupt into everyday discourse. With me it’s a bit different. I’ve had to learn to remind myself constantly to ask what this word “pristine” means. For example, does it mean “clean”? When you touch the soil in a “pristine” area, won’t it get your hands dirty? Is it that there aren’t any bad smells in the air?

“No, no, no,” comes the impatient answer from my more hard-core conservationist friends. “Don’t be silly. ‘Pristine’ means ‘undisturbed’ or ‘unmodified by humans’.”

But then, I can’t help wondering, looking around the “pristine” area, who are all these Conservation International officials, scientists, ecotourists, dam-builders, road-builders, miners, and World Bank bureaucrats? Who are these firefighters attempting so assiduously to modify the fire regimes with which the local flora and fauna have coevolved? Who are these individuals in olive-green uniforms shooting “poachers” from helicopter gunships? And isn’t that David Attenborough over there behind those binoculars? Aren’t these people human? And aren’t they busily working over the environment?

“You don’t understand,” comes the exasperated response. “These are people we entrust with the management of wilderness.”

Manage? Wilderness? I ask. How do these two seemingly opposed concepts go together?

My hard-core conservationist friends sigh. “Perhaps you should acquaint yourself with the relevant literature,” they say. “The people you mention are the people who have to disturb the landscape in order to make it undisturbed.”

So at last I understand what “pristine” means. What it means is: *you* can do things within these boundaries which you feel are essential to your

identity (like modifying the landscape for contemplation and scientific study or watershed protection), but others cannot do things which are essential to *theirs* (like pursuing swidden agriculture or building community woodlands or herding animals).

5

We laugh, but this has been the practical effect of the preservationist human/nature dichotomy since Bannock, Sheepeater, Shoshone and other Native American bands were kicked out of Yellowstone to make it into what was called a “pleasuring ground” for white visitors. It’s what has often happened in protected areas ever since Miwok warriors were cleared out of the Yosemite Valley to make it into a tourist attraction -- the same Yosemite whose pleasantly wooded scenes, so attractive to the white painters of the day, were in fact the direct result of thousands of years of indigenous fire management, planting and husbandry.<sup>5</sup>

Let no one imagine that such actions are part of some distant, illiberal past. In the 1980s, the densely-settled nation of Viet Nam was generally described by international conservationists as a pretty dismal place for wildlife. Yet three new large mammal species were “discovered” there in the 1990s. Suddenly World Wide Fund for Nature put out press releases about a “lost world seemingly untouched . . . and possibly teeming with new species”. As my colleague Pam McElwee acerbically notes, WWF neglected to mention that this so-called “lost world” where the new species were discovered “was previously a timber enterprise, that 20,000 people lived there, and that the heavily bombed Ho Chi Minh trail ran through it”.<sup>6</sup>

Vietnamese researchers subsequently found that the saola, one of the “new” species, thrived on secondary forest growth and cleared land. Yet the same researchers simultaneously advocated total protected area status for the saola’s habitat, which would necessitate the eviction of local minority-group peoples who maintain that habitat. It’s as if such areas have to be cleansed conceptually -- made “pristine” in people’s minds -- before they are cleansed in reality.

The idea that ethnic groups who raise animals or crops on their land are implacably opposed to a (conservationist-defined) “nature” often becomes, over time, something close to a self-fulfilling prophecy. One familiar case is that of the Maasai who used to occupy areas along the Kenya-Tanzania

border raising animals in areas also occupied by wild animals and who were resettled early on in favor of European planters. During the 1940s and 1950s sedentarization led to the Maasai making more money out of cattle -- and to competition for water. Then, when parks were set aside for European hunting, grazing and local hunting were restricted. Locals retaliated by, among other things, poaching, again arguably beginning to give a bit of substance to one human/nature opposition. Wildlife tourism increased in the 1960s and 1970s, and national parks became more aggressively advertised as “non-human” areas. By 1990 this process had separated Maasai from their earlier economy so thoroughly that it began to seem almost plausible to see them as “naturally” opposed to the wildlife they had in fact previously coexisted with for hundreds of years. WWF provided weapons for “conservation” which were duly used by the government in ethnic violence. In an international process, a human/nature boundary had been fabricated which ultimately helped make the ethnic boundary between Maasai and white tourist and hunter into something of an armed frontier.<sup>7</sup>

6

So far I've been describing a Western human/nature boundary as if it were something defended only by people interested in parks, green trees and furry animals. But of course this boundary cuts a good deal deeper into everyday European culture than that.

Take the discourse on “overpopulation”. On the one side you have “population”; on the other, “carrying capacity”. Here's another human/nature boundary. In fact, on close examination, it's a human/nature boundary very much like the one we've been looking at. Just as “humans” are always threatening “nature”, so “population” is always using up “carrying capacity”. Just as a “pristine” protected area cannot stand the slightest touch of an unauthorized human activity without becoming “degraded”, so “available carrying capacity” cannot bear the slightest touch of “population” without shrinking. These boundaries resemble each other so much that it's hardly any wonder that environmentalists themselves are always running them together. “If you took our planet and just put one human being on it,” one of Britain's best-known Greenpeace activists told a television interviewer in 1997,



“that human being would be consuming resources which otherwise would be available for nature -- for wildlife, for wild animals, plants, whatever. Two human beings consume twice as much, and a million consume a million times as much. . . . Everything we do impacts on nature and to my mind what we need to concentrate on is limiting that impact.”

The ways in which such views intersect with ethnic discrimination are extraordinarily complex, but let me make two quick points here. First, the dichotomy between “population” and “carrying capacity”, like the broader one between “humans” and “nature”, often coincides with and reinforces boundaries used in racial oppression. Forgive me for making such an obvious and low-grade sociological observation, but “population” in our culture usually means black people. In fact, it generally means African people, and most often African women and children. In 1992, on the verge of the Earth Summit, *The Economist* magazine published a “population” issue with the cover headline “The Question Rio Forgets” against a background of a street full of lively African children. Brochures on the “population problem” usually feature dark-skinned women, often with swelling bellies. Even the superb critique of Malthusianism recently published by Zed Books under the title *The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics and Population in Capitalist Development* featured as cover art a photo of an African woman and her child.

Imagine what would have happened if an artist commissioned to do a cover for a magazine or book on population submitted instead a mockup showing a wealthy white family clumped around a television set or working in its garden. Or -- to be a bit more playful -- picture a cover photo that, instead of showing pregnant black women, displayed a row of anonymous white male groins. No editor in his or her right mind would pass such covers. They wouldn't communicate what is meant in our culture by “population”, which is, essentially, female black fertility.

In this respect, popular intellectual culture is a faithful heir of the Reverend Thomas Malthus. Although the issue of race and ethnicity is less visible in Malthus's writings than in contemporary tracts on “population”, for Malthus, as for many contemporary populationists, it is the breeding habits of the lower orders, not those of the higher, that are constantly pressing on resources, or “nature”. For Malthus, “population” was poor commoners. The rich, who had culture and status to worry about, could be trusted to fit the number of their children to available resources. Provided they were rich

enough, they could have as many children as they liked. But the poor had fewer incentives for self-control. Their numbers could be limited only by available food. "Nature" provided no "cover" for newborn poor children whose numbers exceeded these limits and who also wanted a place at the table.<sup>8</sup> Malthus, in other words, saw no difficulty in taking it upon himself to define, once and for all, who "the poor" were, and what "nature" was. The poor were breeders, a form of nature which responded only to natural limits, often to their doom. Ensuring that they had food and land would only postpone that fate.

More hip contemporary Malthusians, of course, have moved on from this view. They recognize the difficulties in saying that "nature" limits the welfare of the poor but not of the rich. They do their best to present a more "objective" opposition between raceless "humans" and a race-blind "carrying capacity". "Nature" is held to be opposed not to poor people with dark skins but to the product of human numbers times affluence times technology level. That seems to make overconsuming white North Americans more guilty than anyone else of "overpopulation", and to correct for Malthusianism's traditional biases against the poor and nonwhite.

Yet -- and this is my second point -- there remains another, subtler ethnic discrimination concealed here. This new, enlightened Malthusianism continues to insist on a concept of nature which excludes the experience of many groups who live on the land and who consciously constitute and modify "carrying capacity" in ways difficult to calculate in advance. Among these are many peasant groups and groups who have learned to characterize themselves as indigenous, who are well aware of the dependence of forests on human-set fires, of soil fertility on human stewardship, of elephants or birds on human presence in the environment, and so on.<sup>9</sup> To these groups, the idea quoted earlier that "we" need to concentrate on "reducing the impact of humans on nature" often seems not only alien and counterproductive but also discriminatory.<sup>10</sup>

7

The fact that the human/nature distinction used by some conservationists conceals a human/human distinction has always seemed pretty obvious to those ethnic groups who find themselves oppressed for reasons of Nature. Just as there probably aren't that many people in England who would be willing to leave the definition of Englishness entirely up to Norman Tebbit,

there aren't that many people engaged in local struggles over land, water and air willing to leave the definition of the human/nature boundary entirely up to conservationists.

Yet having been witness myself to quite a few occasions on which local people have fruitlessly expended their sarcasm on the human/nature boundary I've been speaking of, I know it is sometimes quite a job to convince even the most well-intentioned conservationists of the one-sidedness of their experience. To borrow language from the anti-racist movement in the US, some conservationists' own "Whiteness" has become invisible to them. At a recent conference which brought together anthropologists, conservationists and others concerned with dispossession, I was struck with how often even those participants critical of standard national parks policy, and sympathetic to indigenous rights, seemed to reproduce in their speech a hard-core conservationist nature/human dichotomy. They kept repeating oxymoronic phrases like "the state's policy of excluding people from parks" and "people vs. parks", or "community-based wildlife management".

The US writer bell hooks talks somewhere, tongue in cheek, about a condition she calls White People Fatigue Syndrome. Even the most forbearing black people get tired of having to take it upon themselves to explain to their well-meaning and often condescending white friends that despite everyone's fine intentions, the dirtiest power plants still get built in black neighbourhoods, blacks are still stopped on the streets by the police in disproportionate numbers, city planning exercises still exclude consideration of cultural rights, and property values still fall when blacks move into a white neighborhood. Although they have possibly not yet put a name to it, I feel sure that many of the rural villagers I know suffer from Conservationist Fatigue Syndrome.

8

It's important to stress that what I've described is not necessarily a symptom of unprofessionalism or of discriminatory or racist beliefs or values. I don't imagine that staff members of WWF or the World Conservation Society or Zero Population Growth sign racist petitions, or that they go home to their partners or husbands or wives to brag how many wogs or niggers they kicked that day. At least I hope they don't. Nor do I suppose (a fact I've grown weary of repeating) that the conservationists

I've mentioned are somehow less moral than I am. If the observations of my closest friends and colleagues on my own behaviour is anything to go by, the reverse is rather more likely to be the case. Painful as it may be to say so, personal morality is not the issue here.

Nor is the professionalism or technical expertise of the conservationists I'm describing in question. They're being perfectly scientific. Of course, in theory, science is capable of proving that many of the things they say are false. But the thing about science is that it can't call everything into question at the same time. It's got to stand on certain assumptions which for the time being are not tested, in order to test *other* things. The tested and the untested elements stand as equal parts of the enterprise. The fact that the latter may be false doesn't make them any less scientific. In conservation sciences the human/nature distinction I've described has been held constant for a long time, for understandable reasons. It's sometimes even held, if circumstances demand, by scientists who know it's fictitious. The WWF officers in Viet Nam, for example, may well have understood that their statements about a "lost world" were false, but nevertheless felt that they were necessary to uphold because of the need to communicate to WWF's "public" the importance of the sites it wanted to "save".<sup>11</sup> Similarly, many Thai officials are well aware of the comparatively marginal role of minority highlanders in deforestation, but have institutional reasons to ignore this evidence.

One practical result of this stance, nevertheless, is that no followup studies are typically done to observe forest decline after locals are evicted. Another is that the presence of good forest is automatically attributed to the relative absence of human influence, rather than the presence of a particular *kind* of human influence. In mountainous North Thailand, for instance forests are officially assumed to have survived despite, rather than because of, the fact that they are occupied by ethnic minorities. Few investigators in the region probe the forest-degrading activities of the powerful lowland majority ethnic group. Scientists tend not to investigate when miners, dam-builders or loggers devastate forests. Instead, the critical scientific gaze is directed mainly onto agricultural activities of highland minorities, who occupy land where, regardless of its ecosystem merits relative to lowland areas, conservation funding is concentrated. Schemes are hatched to resettle the minorities or, at best, to try to "reconcile" their livelihood with "the environment".

Here there's a parallel with a case Gordon noted earlier today of how city planners are often inclined to stick dirty new factories near older ones. The justification is that these zones -- which tend to be the homes of poorer and minority peoples -- are already environmentally "spoiled". In the same way, conservationists in Southeast Asia often concentrate their strictures on highland ethnic minorities who occupy good forests. The justification is that lowlanders' forests have already been largely destroyed. In both cases an impeccably scientific logic leads to a discriminatory outcome.

A final case comes from Guinea's forest margin zone. Here, forest islands have traditionally been seen by development and conservation professionals as the remnants of a process of forest contraction rather than what they are, the artifacts of a process of deliberate forest construction outward from cores of settlement.<sup>12</sup> Again, the problem here was not the fact that research directions were based on an aesthetic choice. All science is grounded in such choices -- one must, after all, see the glass as either half-empty or half-full. The problem, rather, was the particular aesthetic choice that was made. This choice ensured that science has until recently remained ignorant of the practices by which local villagers build up new forests. Discrimination against them has been one result. As Gordon and Liz noted this morning, lack of research is often disempowering -- a symptom and cause alike of racial discrimination.

People who suffer directly from the imposition of the human/nature boundary I've been talking about are better situated to spot these weaknesses than European conservationists and scientists. A couple of years ago, in the little ethnic minority village of Mae Khong Saai in North Thailand, I listened as a Hmong headman warned friends from another ethnic group, the Karen, gathered around a fire: Be careful how you preserve your forest. As soon as you succeed, officials and conservationists will try to take it away from you. He hardly needed to add: they will claim that the reason the forest is still good is that you were never there.

One striking thing about the headman's observation was that, though it had to do with "the environment", it was part of a more general discussion about ethnic discrimination. One young Karen present, for example, went on to complain that whenever he rode his motorcycle through the lowlands, he would be harrassed by the police. An older Karen noted with great resentment that Thai newspapers reporting a crime by a minority person

would always identify them as (say) Karen or Hmong, often using derogatory words for these groups, whereas other perpetrators of crimes were never ethnically identified. Neither story would have been in any way unfamiliar to black US citizens, where, a few decades ago, black detainees were typically be identified in newspapers as “coloured”, while white ones bore no tag whatsoever.

9

I've been describing one way in which an environmentalist human/nature boundary is implicated in ethnic discrimination, but there are also many others. Look, for example, at how the boundary is used in the modern state's own projects of nationalism, ethnic differentiation and ethnic repression.

Supposedly human-free wildernesses have long been useful symbols for nationalistic elites. In the US, for example, national parks were originally established not for “environmental” reasons so much as to enshrine majestic scenery which was felt to be an emblem of US identity and a fitting answer to European cultural achievements. Part of the appeal to wilderness to white US citizens is that it forms the backdrop for one of the origin myths of the US: the conquest of the frontier by civilized Europeans. In 1991 the Smithsonian Institution dared to question this human/nature boundary by staging an exhibition pointing out that European expansion in the Western US was not just an encounter with “nature”, as it had often been presented in painting, but also between whites and other ethnic groups including African-Americans, Native Americans and Chinese. Nationalistic right-wing US Senators went into an uproar, fearing that the idea menaced national identity and stability. Similar if somewhat more subtle patterns are noticeable elsewhere as well. For example, environmentalist groups from the Italian mainland with names like “Italia Nostra” have recently been engaged in contestations with highland Sardinians over the establishment of a national park on their island.

The implications for ethnic discrimination are often clear-cut. In South Africa, for instance, Kruger National Park was established in 1926 as unifying symbol for white national identity. As Jane Caruthers notes, the park was “part of the process of the systematic domination of Africans by whites and . . . the struggle between black and white over land and labor”.<sup>13</sup> More recently, urban elites and middle classes in Thailand have

been laying increasing claims to the country's remoter forests for their appreciation and use, categorizing them as "national" and "natural" spaces not to be left in the hands of ethnic minorities.

The concept of nature as non-human is even the same *kind* of concept as the concept of a nation. Just as every place on the planet has now become part of a nation, and every nation has acquired a capital and a president and a five- or ten-year development plan, so too every nation must now have national parks in which a fictitious ideal of a humanless nature is made real, often at much pain both to people and to other living things. "In the modern world . . . a country without a national park can hardly be recognized as civilized", Julian Huxley, the UNESCO director general I mentioned earlier, informed African nations in the 1960s. Such parks spread as many other practices of the nation spread, not by imitation, not because they're necessarily a good idea, but through, among other things, contact and coordination among world-traveling professional classes and the funds to which they have access. While many aspects of Western culture are seen in the South as corrupting, the idea of "nature" and national parks, like those of the nation and of development and of science themselves, pretty nearly universal.<sup>14</sup>

10

Just as nations help create spatially-bounded, mutually-exclusive ethnic groups with their maps and censuses, so national parks and protected areas are used to assimilate peoples the state regards as wayward into citizenship and cultural conformity. In Indonesia, declaring an area "protected" affords the state a chance to resettle minority ethnic groups in regimented, observable communities.<sup>15</sup> Such programmes, of course, get a lot of help from abroad. In a scheme which would affect 60 million people in China, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam, the Vice-President of the Asian Development Bank has recently proposed to "reduce the population of people in mountainous areas and bring them to normal life".

The nature/human boundary is also connected with efforts to create *non*-citizens, to exclude, which is the other part of the racist double bind. In

Southeast Asia, dominant lowland ethnic groups who used to discriminate against highland dwellers on the grounds they were “lazy” and “uncivilized” have, with the rise of conservationism and growing resource conflict, learned to attack them in addition as “threats to forests and ecosystems”, blaming their ethnicity as threats to the well-being of lowlanders.

In Northern Thailand, for instance, elite conservationists, state bureaucracies and politicians routinely scapegoat ethnic minorities for deforestation and watershed deterioration. Their solution to these environmental problems is to separate these minorities from “nature”. Barbed-wire fences have been erected to divide mountain communities from “watershed forests” which are held to be “undisturbed”. The posts of one such fence were even painted in red, white and blue, the colours of Thailand’s national flag. Land has been dichotomized into permanent agricultural fields and forests in which no agriculture is supposed to be practised. Little room has been left for intermediate or transitional forms crucial to certain minorities’ ways of life, such as forest fallows.

Simultaneously, conservationists and officials have attempted to erect a conceptual fence between minority highlanders and the rest of the nation. Ethnic minority members, even those who are Thai citizens, are tagged as “non-Thai”, *khon thuen* (jungle people) or “opium-growing peoples”. One result is to sanction official and unofficial violence against ethnic minorities both in remote villages and in demonstrations and other urban contexts. The conservationists and bureaucrats encouraging this ethnic violence have attracted a great deal of international support.<sup>16</sup> They’ve received so much financial and moral backing from British environmentalists and the Danish government in particular that delegations of mountain-dwelling ethnic groups actually had to undertake arduous trips to London and Copenhagen in 1998 and 1999 to try to convince their distant and no doubt well-intentioned European antagonists to cease and desist.

11

What might be some constructive ways forward? As a person who somewhat reluctantly considers himself an activist, I can’t be satisfied with just outlining some of the problems of ethnic discrimination in environmentalism and conservation science. I understand that not struggling with this discrimination surely means falling victim to it.



How can this issue become discussed more widely? As someone who -- also somewhat grudgingly -- considers himself an environmentalist, I've been listening carefully to my fellow environmentalists for many years in their various encounters with the topic. I've realized that many are accustomed to thinking of ethnic discrimination and racial oppression as something that happens when people with mistaken beliefs or bad morals get hold of something called power. The problem of racism, on this view, is a problem of individuals holding discriminatory beliefs or views which they do not profess in public but hold in private and act on when they can get away with it.<sup>17</sup>

I think it's just the opposite. Although there are such individuals -- and not only in Britain and the US but also in Thailand and India -- I suggest that the characteristic problem of white middle-class Western environmentalism, and the reason we find so many Western environmentalists taking stands which reinforce racism both in the West and abroad, is just the reverse. Individual Western environmentalists may advocate anti-racist or anti-discriminatory agendas privately and often passionately, but, "despite" themselves, are pushed in public into actions which reinforce racist or discriminatory structures by the acceptable practices and repertoires of performance in the professional arena, including the arena of peer-reviewed science. The problem, in other words, is not environmentalists' beliefs, still less their morals, but rather a form of sociability or public game specific to their scientific and other social communities, a condition of membership of which is not to probe racism too deeply.<sup>18</sup>

This game is played most obviously in what might be called official environmentalism. In my work I run across innumerable conservationist white papers and conference reports on biodiversity, wildlife and forestry. I sit through innumerable meetings involving World Bank staff and other technocrats on topics such as how privatization will lead to efficient, sustainable water development. I'm currently reading thousands of pages on how carbon trading can supposedly help industrialized nations meet their pledges under the Kyoto Protocol. Nowhere in any of these emanations of environmentalism is the word "racism" ever mentioned. None devote any attention whatsoever to the questions of ethnic discrimination with which they are so intimately and irrevocably involved. Indeed, the idea that they should even mention the topic would probably seem strange to many of the people involved.

Yet the subject is also conspicuously avoided by many non-governmental environmental organizations, activists and researchers. Professional environment and development culture, including the culture of the conservation science community, is a little like the culture of polite society in the US described in the quotation from Patricia Williams I used at the beginning. No one in this culture sets out in the mornings to create racial disputes. Therefore, they feel, the subject is irrelevant to their actions. Someone who insists on talking about it in the lab or the field obviously does not understand the subject matter at hand and is therefore simply not part of the group. Either that, or he or she is indulging in personal attacks or crusades. After all, racism is held to be a strictly personal thing specific to individuals, and, as everyone knows, bringing up things which are personal is not conducive to cohesion of the social group.

The social groups I'm speaking of build much of their solidarity and sense of privilege and uniqueness on the pretence of neutrality, and on the continual construction and repair of the very nature/human boundaries which, I've suggested, help constitute racism and ethnic discrimination within the structures of environmental science. To raise this problem explicitly is to threaten self-image and the foundations of prestige and identity within the profession. Self-censorship is crucial in order to make sense of this social world and to keep everybody within topics which familiar "conflict-free" scientific practices and other tools can address.

It's a little like the police "canteen culture" of which we heard so much during the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. The unwritten rules of canteen culture are that, to be sociable with and supportive of your police-officer mates, you make racist remarks. Such remarks may well conflict with the private beliefs and morals of some of the officers making them. But knowing that is hardly going to make any black officer want to sit down at the canteen table. It's the same with your average group of blokes down the pub. Many of those present are almost certainly going to make sexist remarks as they reacquaint themselves with (as George Eliot put it in her 19th-century way) "the old flavour of discourse about horses, sport, and things in general, considered from a point of view which is not strenuously correct". What a man says in such surroundings may well bear little resemblance to what he says in the company of a girlfriend or other women. His remarks in pub company may not reflect the feelings of his

innermost secret heart. But that's not much comfort to women who must endure them and their consequences.

An even closer parallel might be voluntary or civic groups in the US, such as the parent-teacher association recently investigated by Nina Eliasoph. Regardless of their members' personal beliefs about race, such groups, which rely on maintaining a common faith in positive community participation, tend to avoid public discussions of racial discrimination as "unconstructive", "conflictual", "discouraging", "impractical", "defeatist", or (perhaps worst of all) "political". As Jeffrey Olick and Daniel Levy have wittily put it, mixing metaphors from Austin and from Marx, "people do things with words, but not in circumstances of their own choosing".

Within environmentalism, racism is replicated not so much by reinforcing or "replicating" individuals' beliefs, but by, among other things, structural tendencies to preserve professional boundaries between science and non-science and to maintain a civic self-image and self-identity. For individual environmentalists to try to learn more about racism would be a very good thing, but it's most unclear how far this would go toward tackling the problem of racism in the environmental movement.

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Many of us laughed a while back when the then London Met Police commissioner Paul Condon, under pressure, refused to concede that the police force was infected with institutional racism. To do so, he said, fixing his interlocutor of the moment with his serious "steely look", would impugn the beliefs, values and morality of the many upstanding and nice individuals whom he knew on the force. Presumably Condon was being disingenuous, but maybe not. Possibly he was pretending to misunderstand the question because he knew that people he worked with would need to interpret racism in this moralistic way, and he needed to show solidarity with them. Who knows? The point is that implicitly reinterpreting the question as one of individual psychology, morality, belief or taste, as Condon tried to do, can be quite effective in avoiding the sorts of issue I've tried to highlight today.

Not surprisingly, this also happens in the environmental movement. For some years, my colleagues and I have been trying to encourage dialogue in the UK environmental movement about issues of ethnic discrimination

and racism by making some of the same points I've made today. We've been cooperating with environmentalists and indigenous and other local movements alike to suggest, for instance, how dangerous it is to accept uncritically the conservation science which has been handed down to us; how the population discourse, or cost-benefit analysis, or genetic testing, or the movement to plant trees as carbon sinks to "compensate" for the use of fossil fuels, all contain hidden class and ethnic biases; how development policies and projects such as the Ilisu Dam in Turkey, which UK taxpayers may wind up subsidizing, contribute to ethnic conflict; and how falling into the Norman Tebbit theory of ethnicity, as environmentalists so often do, can lend dangerous inadvertent support to anti-immigrant and racist movements.

We've received a great many positive responses from people here and abroad, many of whom we had never previously heard from. But there have also been long stretches of pregnant silence from some colleagues. And some British environmentalists have had violently negative reactions. As a way of concluding, I'd like to read you a few edited extracts from these latter.

"I am not a racist. Name one person in the environmental movement who is a racist. . . . I think I may have used the word 'race' once in my writing in thirty years. . . . It may be that far-right groups are now quoting from me to support their racist ideas. What can I do about this?"

"[These views are] at best far fetched, at worst utterly barmy . . . [this does] not contribute to a positive dialogue . . . an inflammatory polemic . . . aggressive. . . . insulting . . . contentious."

"[Your] virulent denunciations . . . intemperate diatribes . . . [are] hardly conducive to a negotiated resolution of these issues".

"[This is to] spread poison . . . to conduct a witch hunt . . . to make accusations . . . . We should all back off, and turn our fire on our real enemies. . . . I personally would not be prepared to work with a racist, but I personally am satisfied that [my colleagues are] not racists. For me, that's enough."

Being of a scientific bent myself, I've collected these statements in the hope that, in putting them together, I'll be able to figure out what they

mean. The fact that these responses to accusations which have not been made are so strong and so widespread suggests that there is something very important going on. If we listen carefully and sympathetically, I think we can hear in these responses a powerful if unformed awareness of racism. Hence the defensiveness. Yet there are evidently also deep-lying incentives to misplace the problem, to insist on viewing it not structurally but as a “sensitive” personal matter of individual belief and morality.

One result is that ethnic discrimination and racism are two of the great taboo topics within the environmental movement. There’s been a lot of talk about “political correctness” in the last couple of decades; but here’s one bit of real political correctness: you can’t raise issues of ethnic discrimination in a “scientific” or “responsible” discussion about environment and development because you will not be considered one of the group. The result is bound to be more racism. Yet these group norms are neither universal nor inevitable, and one question for the future must be about paths by which they can be changed.

I’m afraid I haven’t come very far in my allotted time. But I hope I’ve managed to identify an important paradox for practical politics: why we find so many “nice guys” in environmental movements unwittingly supporting ethnic discrimination here and abroad. And I hope I’ve gone some way toward locating one source of that paradox not only in political economic structures of the kind which Bob, Gordon and Liz have mentioned -- institutional routines of risk assessment, reliance on the market for food security, and so forth -- but also in certain forms of sociality or civility. These forms of sociality constitute a deep and continuing problem for a movement which, as it were, practices ethnic discrimination in spite of itself -- a movement which, unfortunately, is far more racist than the sum of its parts.

## NOTES

1. Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race*, Virago, London, 1997, p. 6.

2. Roderick P. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.

3. Raymond Williams, *The City and the Country*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1973, p. 120.

4. Consider, for example, these words from one of Britain's senior environmentalists:

“What is today regarded as prejudice against people of different ethnic groups is a normal and necessary feature of human cultural behaviour, and is absent only among members of a cultural system already far along the road to disintegration. The notion of the universal brotherhood of man is therefore totally incompatible with the systemic approach to human cultural systems. It is as absurd as the notion that the cells, making up a vast number of different biological organisms, can be shuffled and still give rise to viable biological systems.

“Industrial countries tend to develop labour shortages and to import labour from elsewhere. In this way quite large ethnic minorities are being built up in many countries. In addition, economic development is tending towards the development of ever-larger political units, which often embrace ethnic groups with little in common with each other. All this is creating a very unstable situation, one which can only lead to civil wars and to the massacre of minorities singled out as scapegoats when inevitable economic and social crises occur.”

Given the potential of such sentiments to shore up anti-immigrant, racist and far right thinking, it's small wonder that organizations ranging from the BNP in Britain, GRECE and le Front National in France, Vlams Blok and TeKos in Belgium, and the BJP in India are making increasing attempts to assimilate environmentalist views and flatter and cultivate environmentalists. In the US, meanwhile, links between the anti-immigration far right and certain environmentalist movements appear to be mediated by a somewhat different set of ideologies, including that of “population control” and distrust of the federal government.

5. Alston Chase, *Playing God in Yellowstone: The Destruction of America's First National Park*, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, New York, 1987; Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon*, HarperCollins, New York, 1990.

6. Pamela McElwee, “Ecology as Ideology: The Logic of Biodiversity in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam”, paper presented at the conference on Displacement, Forced Settlement and Conservation, Oxford, 9-11 September 1999.

7. Nancy J. Peluso, "Coercing Conservation: The Politics of State Resource Control" in Ken Conca, ed., *The State in Environmental Politics*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, pp. 46-70.

8. T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993 [1798].

9. See, for example, "Fire Planet: The Politics and Culture of Combustion", Corner House Briefing No. 18, Dorset, February 2000.

10. Writing of US traditions of environmentalism, the historian Ramachandra Guha notes usefully, if formulaically, that "if Progressive Conservation places society above ecology (nature must follow the dictates of man), in Wilderness Thinking ecology is placed over society (man must follow the dictates of nature). Peasant culture, by embedding ecology in society, transcends both these perspectives." "Two Phases of American Environmentalism", in Frederique Apffel-Marglin and Stephen A. Marglin, *Decolonizing Knowledge: From Development to Dialogue*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 134.

11. For a related discussion see "Missing the Point of Development Talk: Reflections for Activists", Corner House Briefing Paper No. 9, Dorset, August 1998.

12. Melissa Leach and James Fairhead, *Misreading the African Landscape*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

13. Jane Caruthers, "Creating a National Park, 1910 to 1926", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 15 (2), 188-216.

14. Ben Anderson calls such ideas "quotidian universals", Ivan Illich, "keywords". Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, Verso, London, 1998; Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon, New York, 1983.

15. Christopher R. Duncan, "Resettlement and Natural Resources in Indonesia: A Case Study", paper presented at the conference on Displacement, Forced Settlement and Conservation, Oxford, 9-11 September 1999.

16. "Forest Cleansing: Racial Oppression in Scientific Nature Conservation", Corner House Briefing No. 13, Dorset, January 1999.

17. Trevor Phillips remarked to a journalist this week that the "UK has absolutely no sense at all for the reality of racism. It has no sense for the way that its schools, its police produce a biased outcome. Most people in this country think the issue of race is entirely about whether individual people like each other" (Guardian, 20 February 2000).

18. Nina Eliasoph, “‘Everyday Racism’ in a Culture of Political Avoidance: Civil Society, Speech and Taboo”, *Social Problems* 46 (4), November 1999, pp. 479-502 has helped me articulate these issues.