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Article *in* Journal of Ecosystem & Ecography · July 2015

DOI: 10.4172/2157-7625.1000167

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Dhandapani, J Ecosys Ecograph 2015, 5:2
http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2157-7625.1000167

Research Article Open Access

Neo-liberal Capitalistic Policies in Modern Conservation and the Ultimate Commodification of Nature

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Abstract

The recent changes in global politics and the advancement of science and technology, have paved way for the modification and commodification of nature. The development of capitalism, and changes in modern conservation ideologies occurred at the same period, which is more than just a co-incidence. The capitalistic policies in conservation are shaping a new perspective of global environmentalism, which is presented as a spectacle. Whether these capitalistic policies stand the purpose is often questionable. In this work, I am going to discuss two main neo liberal practices in modern conservation, namely protected areas with reference to eco-tourism, and the Payment for Ecosystem Services with reference to REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Forest Degradation and Deforestation), which shape modern environmentalism. These policies in modern environmentalism have made it easier to commodify nature, failing to understand that indigenous people living in forests do not have economic conditions, they have livelihood issues. So, The neo-liberal capitalistic policies has led to the loss of intrinsic value of nature, affecting the indigenous lifestyles and serves as an instrument of modern imperialism, acting as a boon to the 'Transnational capital class' and a curse to the indigenous people.

Keywords: Global environmentalism; Capitalism in conservation; Commodification of nature; PES; REDD+; Protected areas; Eco-tourism

Introduction

Commodification of nature

The development in science and biotechnology has enabled humans to modify life to suit the needs of human, which paved way for the commodification of life and nature. As life is modified, so is it commodified [1]. As a result of adaptation of intellectual property laws, which allow ownership of building blocks of life in plants, animals or even humans, life is increasingly seen as a commodity [1]. If that is the case for life, it is not surprising to see the commodification of nature in the modern world. In modern conservation, most of the values attributed to conservation are utilitarian values. When modern conservationists speak about nature, they speak about the value of the services provided by forests and nature to the human society, like regulating water flow, preventing soil degradation, mitigating climate change, containing bio-resources that humans can use, nutrient cycle, etc. [2]. Modern world rarely see that nature has right to exist for itself, not just for humans [2].

The commodification of nature and the capitalism in modern conservation is nothing surprising as the future world is predicted to run by big business firms. The world civilization started with religious leadership [3]. Due to lack of reason in religious leadership, the world turned to monarchy. With the severity of tyranny in monarchy, democratic leadership came to existence. The confusions among present democratic leadership would lead to economic leadership, where everything is run by business deals [3], which has already become part of the democratic world.

Conservation and capitalism

The co-implementation of conservation and capitalism in the present world makes it difficult to determine whether capitalism is growing with conservation as an instrument or conservation with capitalism as an instrument [4]. The global development of modern conservation reserves and protected areas and the development of neoliberalism are in the same period from 1985 to 2000s [5]. It might be more than just a co-incidence. Brockington et al. [4] observes that many protected areas were established in the period of neo-liberal capitalism, to limit the development in forested areas. Then, eventually the protected nature is commodified in different forms like eco-tourism and payment for ecosystem services. This shows how capitalism kick started new policies of conservation and commodification of nature.

Another observation by Steven Yearly [6] shows the role of conservation in capitalistic market and consumerism in the modern world, with the increased awareness and media attention to global environmental problems. His observation is that many products in the market, instead of dedicating space in the container describing about the quality of the product, the space is taken to describe how eco-friendly the product is. In some products, it is advertised that the part of the income goes to conservation of tiger or panda or some other flagship species on the verge of extinction in a different part of the world [6]. This simple example shows how market value of the product is increased by advertising concern over environment and conservation. It also shows the global environmentalism supported by media, how conservation of species in Africa and Asia increases the market value for a product in Europe.

Global environmentalism

The neoliberalism in conservation has introduced a new way of looking at nature globally. Robert Falkner [7] describes global

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Received August 19, 2015; **Accepted** August 24, 2015; **Published** August 26, 2015

Citation: Dhandapani S (2015) Neo-liberal Capitalistic Policies in Modern Conservation and the Ultimate Commodification of Nature. J Ecosys Ecograph 5: 167 doi:10.4172/2157-7625.1000167

environmentalism as the start of new Cultural Revolution displacing nationalism and taking responsibility as one. He calls global environmentalism, a transformative force, which would shape global and local politics combining each other. The awakened environmental consciousness would increase environmental mobilization and paves way for the development of world culture with scientific rationality [7].

Thus capitalistic policies in conservation are presented as a spectacle and future of the modern conservation and solution to the global environmental problems. It started with the establishment of protected areas and the latest development is payment for ecosystem services. In this work, I am going to discuss two main neoliberal practices in modern conservation, namely protected areas with reference to eco-tourism and payment for ecosystem services with reference to REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Forest Degradation and Deforestation), which shape modern environmentalism and the commodification of nature.

Protected Areas: Boon to 'Transnational Capital Class' and a Curse to Indigenous People

The establishment of strong protected areas have been a rallying cry in modern conservation movement for a long time [4]. Some modern conservationists believe that strong protected areas are fundamental for the future of conservation and controlling deforestation [4]. According to Mcneely [8] protected areas help to maintain the diversity of ecosystems, species, genetic varieties and ecological processes (including the regulation of water flow and climate), which are vital for the support of all life on earth and for the improvement of human social and economic conditions. Do the protected areas serve these purposes in modern conservation? The promoters of protected areas and the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes in modern conservation fail to understand that indigenous people do not have economic conditions, they have livelihood issues. The improvement in economic conditions does not make any difference to them, for their lifestyle. The protected areas and PES just affect their freedom and their way of living. Many of the protected areas have been created on ancestral indigenous lands or the regions, which have historically been a source of livelihood for indigenous people [9-11]. In most cases these were created without prior consent from the indigenous people and in some cases native people are forced out of the reserve [11]. The indigenous people cause less deforestation than other social groups [10,12-14] but they are the ones most affected by protected areas. Generally indigenous people depend on wildlife for their livelihood, so, they are aware of their relationship and dependence on the services provided by the forest for their way of life [15].

These reserves are designed and established by 'transnational capital class' people in urban areas [10,11,16]. According to Sklair [17], this class is composed of corporate executives, bureaucrats and politicians, professionals, merchants and the media who collectively act to promote global economic growth based on the 'cultural ideology of consumerism' [4]. Let us see some examples from different parts of the world, how the transnational capital class make use of the reserves and affect indigenous people's live styles. In Kenya, 70% of the reserves are established on pastoral Masai lands, which are used for eco-tourism, affecting the livelihood of Masai tribes. The income from ecotourism goes to the transnational capital class [10]. The protected areas in India are controlled by distant authorities (central government) without any local contact [11]. This is an exclusionary approach in which local people are totally excluded from the conservation plan, which is brought to India by 'urban wildlife enthusiasts' [11]. To make matters worse, community use of forest is banned but highly extractive industrial use is allowed [18-20].

In Brazil, series of dams are constructed in reserves along the Amazon River, threatening the livelihoods of indigenous tribes and also affecting conservation [21]. The politicians designing the reserves are part of the mining companies. They constantly change boundaries of the reserves, depending on their mining interests [16]. In Indonesia, deforestation of the reserves increases during the local election, to generate election fund [22]. The politicians help big companies clear the forest for establishing oil palm estates to secure partnership with the companies [13]. The establishment of the reserves has become a boon to the transnational capital class and turned blind eye on indigenous people, presenting them as a threat to biodiversity.

Eco-tourism: Product of protected areas

The development of eco-tourism and protected areas go hand in hand. As the global number of protected areas increased in last few decades, the eco-tourism increased tremendously [5,23]. The national protected areas have become a brand name for eco-tourism, which helps to make more money. It seems to exist just to help commodify nature [2]. The protected areas in most African countries have colonial roots. They were created by colonial powers as exclusive hunting and recreational zones inaccessible to the natives [10]. Now, they have become important revenue earning ventures with tourist lodges and campsites. Although the eco-tourism sounds comparatively benign, it has become more destructive, because of vigorous commercialization. The 'virgin' forests are marketed as green goods and local native culture and people are viewed as products. The tour drivers degrade forest land by criss-crossing the park areas in search for rare animals [10]. The eco-tourism is just catering the lifestyle of urbanised middleclass, accelerating the pace of environmental and social degradation in host communities.

A new wave of tourism has started recently known as conservation tourism, where people pay to work as volunteers or participants on conservation projects [24]. In 2005, approximately 7550 people went as conservation tourists through the UK organisations alone [24]. People take conservation tourism in more emotive way, where they can engage with nature more meaningfully. The conservation tourists pay, promising work for conservation, knowing that their cost of holiday will be used to support conservation [25]. This is a more subtle way of commodification of science and nature. The organizations which are providing these services are capitalists, gaining income from the venture and the conservationists are the customers of the product [25]. Thus, the activity of conservation itself has become a commodity. As stated by Wheeler [26], some "ego-tourists" take up the conservation activity for the status comes with such activities. Though the host countries generate income by eco-tourism [27] the negative environmental and psycho-social impacts of these kinds of tourism on indigenous people far outweigh the economic income.

PES and REDD+: Loss of Intrinsic Value of Nature and Modern Imperialism

Payment for ecosystem (PES) services is the ultimate commodification of nature, giving monetary value to the services provided by nature. PES is the concept originally designed to raise public interest for biodiversity conservation but now, it is moving towards emphasis on economic value of ecosystem services as commodities [28]. Such PES schemes are adopted with great speed, without any conservation intention, developing life of its own, independent of the

original intention [29]. There are successful carbon trading and PES services within Europe such as European Union Emissions Trading System (EU-ETS) and Agro-Environment Schemes (AES) run by the European Union. But the tropical deforestation has the highest impact on global climate change [30,31]. The tropical forests are rich in carbon storage and the local government in the tropics depend on their forests for economic development [13,14,32]. So, the United Nations proposed a global PES scheme called REDD+, commoditizing carbon and proposing payment from rich industrialised countries to the forested countries for their carbon storage.

"Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) is an effort to create a financial value for the carbon stored in forest, offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low carbon paths to sustainable development. REDD+ goes beyond deforestation and forest degradation, and includes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks" [33].

-UN-REDD+

The United Nations and other international organisations are vigorously persuading governments to take up REDD+. Pavan Sukhan, former director of UN Environment programme, Green economy Initiative, suggests that developed countries should invest in REDD+ because it is for their own benefit and also for the development of indigenous people [34]. Dr Rajendra Pachury, Chair of IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2010) says that REDD+ is the policy to ensure that lungs of the earth is not reduced in anyway and claims REDD+ to be extremely effective scheme in mitigating emission of greenhouse gases [34]. The President of World Bank (2010), Robert Zoellick at the United Nations framework convention on climate change, Cancun, Mexico said that, REDD+ offers significant opportunity for multiple growth and it is one of the best or may be the last chance to save the forests [12].

Hayden Washington [2] observes carbon trading as the triumph of market economy. He states that water became a commodity to own and trade, rather than something held in public. A similar thing is happening to carbon because of emission trading schemes such as EU-ETS and REDD+. REDD+ has serious technical difficulties, as it denies the multiplicity of services provided by the forest and narrows down to a single service [35]. It also changes the way, people relate to the forest ethically, leading to the loss of intrinsic value of nature [35]. It is presented to communities implying that PES buyers are at double advantage, enjoying both conservation and development through incentives [36]. It is presented as a win-win discourse, where local people get their role as resource managers or nature stewards helping achieve local development and global conservation goals [37]. When, in fact the validity of such assumptions is increasingly challenged [37], as evidence suggest that local government have land tenure issues and indigenous people are ignored or even forced to relocate to different places [10-14] These policies result in economic enclosures through territorialisation of biodiversity and carbon conservation [38]. It restricts indigenous life ways and subsistence [39]. Nnimmo Bassey, chairperson of 'Friends of earth international' says REDD+ is the process of handing over the forest to highest bidder, which restricts indigenous people to farm, hunt or utilise and live the way they best known [12]. Some communities retreated from PES after realizing that the scheme restricted their local hunting practices, which affected the food security of the communities [40].

REDD+ seems to be a system designed to allow industries in the global north to pollute and continue polluting, while compensating the pollution by saving carbon in tropical forests. The industrialised countries, instead of reducing carbon emissions, they are buying the right to store it through these schemes [12]. REDD+ works as a business deal in which, countries in the global south take responsibility to absorb the carbon emitted from the countries in the global north. Scientists suggest that, it would not work as there are 6 greenhouse gases emitted from industries, and forests can absorb only one of them [12]. Other gases are destructive to the forests. Many scientists and sociologists suggest that PES schemes would turn counter-productive, increasing environmental degradation and poverty [41,42].

There are many local REDD policies adopted in different parts of the world. One of the most criticized policies is the carbon trading agreement signed by California governor in 2010. According to the agreement, the California industries can reduce emissions globally by trading carbon with Chiapas in Mexico and Acra in Brazil [12,43]. Chiapas State has the highest number and the most diverse of tribes in Mexico [44]. It is also the most forested and one of the poorest states of Mexico [44]. The local government want take indigenous people's land and generate income through carbon trading [43]. The local governor is forcing the people out of the forests by cutting medical supplies and various other supplies from the government for the livelihood of the indigenous people [44]. The government is vigorously encouraging the indigenous people to start oil palm or rubber agriculture outside the forests and leave the forest for carbon trading with industries in California [12,43]. Oil palm and rubber plantations give double income to the government covering both carbon and forestry markets. REDD+ is affecting the livelihoods of indigenous people, who have much more romanticized relationship with the forests. This would lead to the loss of traditional knowledge and values, which would make forests nothing more than a carbon sink. A member of a tribe in Acra said that they cannot trade their hunting, fishing and their lives for pollution, but the local government is threatening the indigenous people for the income they get from the carbon trading [43]. As a result, REDD+ amounts nothing more than a plan to grab the lands from indigenous people, which they have always cared for, in exchange for permits that let industries continue to pollute. REDD+ policies remain nothing less than modern imperialism.

Conclusion

Conservation as a weapon of modern imperialism

The establishment of protected areas, eco-tourism and payment for ecosystem services made the biodiversity conservation more politically problematic. The global institutes following capitalism in conservation are bringing false solutions rather than getting into the fundamentals of the broken system [37]. Modern conservation and environmental policies like protected areas, conservation tourism, carbon trading and payment for ecosystem services are focussed on maintaining continued economic growth. These schemes also contribute to framing conservation in utilitarian rather than ethical way, which may result in the undermining of intrinsic conservation motive [37].

"This whole thing is bringing on a terrible cultural transformation: putting forests, a common good, into the market has the effect of tearing the social fabric and generating economic interests that go directly against the interests and values of the indigenous peoples. And it's causing death: not only physical death, but the death of a culture, and of a Cosmo vision, It's an ethnocide."

-Miguel angel garcia about REDD

Eco-tourism threatens the 'nature' in which it claims to preserve. Eco-tourism also causes adverse sociological effects on the indigenous communities. The eco-tourism lobby, predominantly based in developed countries exert tremendous financial and political influence on the forested countries [10] like establishment of game reserves and protected areas for eco-tourism in Africa, causing political conflicts between the government and the indigenous people. The global PES services like REDD+ help the countries in the global north to take control over the forests in developing countries and use them as carbon sinks. This makes one to wonder, whether the world is in colonial hands again.

In most cases, commodification of nature resulted in counterproductive manner, increasing environmental degradation [35,41] and PES schemes may result in "no pay, no care" attitude in some communities [37]. Without changing the capitalistic worldviews, we will never reach a truly ecologically sustainable future [2]. The evidences suggest that capitalism in modern conservation does not help in ecological sustainability, but helps in the exertion of power over forested nations, causing complicated political problems and affecting the lives of indigenous people. The present conservation practices show the continuity of imperialism in the modern era and how conservation is used as a weapon for modern imperialism.

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Citation: Dhandapani S (2015) Neo-liberal Capitalistic Policies in Modern Conservation and the Ultimate Commodification of Nature. J Ecosys Ecograph 5: 167 doi:10.4172/2157-7625.1000167