Conservation Biology

Diversity

Social Research and Biodiversity Conservation

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Introduction

There is now widespread agreement that social research is relevant to conservation (Mascia et al. 2003). Extensive efforts have been made to improve communication between natural and social scientists interested in conservation (e.g., Büscher & Wolmer 2007; Adams 2008). However, this communication has been described as a "dialog of the deaf" (Agrawal & Ostrom 2006) and is challenging personally and professionally (Campbell 2005; Brosius 2006; Fox et al. 2006). The search for more effective communication continues (Redford 2011) and is aided by—among other things—textbooks of social science methods for conservation (e.g., Newing 2011) and the Society for Conservation Biology's Social Sciences Working Group, established in 2003.

Despite these efforts, we believe that the role and place of social research in conservation remains a major source of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and contention among conservation researchers. There are problems of method (e.g., use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in social research), of epistemology (e.g., positivist versus postpositivist, and problem solving versus critical approaches), of understanding (it takes time to become expert in any discipline), and of language (terminology and writing styles can make publications effectively incomprehensible, or at least deeply unattractive and difficult, for people trained in a different discipline). None of these problems is unique to interdisciplinary engagement between conservation biology and social research (e.g., Lélé & Norgaard 2005; Barry & Born 2013), but they are nonetheless important in this context.

In this article, we seek to contribute to interdisciplinary communication and understanding by describing what we see as different ways in which conservation social science is framed. For heuristic purposes (to enable a clear argument), we have drawn a simple distinction between 2 modes of enquiry, which we term research *for* conservation and research *on* conservation (Table 1). We first describe the characteristics of each form of research. We then draw attention to the ways in which social research *on* conservation, although often challenging, can make a positive contribution to biodiversity conservation.

This short article cannot do justice to the rich literature on interdisciplinarity, but we hope it will stimulate further thinking and reading, particularly among conservation biologists. We are not seeking to label or describe the ideas or work of particular individuals. Our purpose is to help researchers, practitioners, and activists in debates about conservation understand what others do and why they do it. We hope such an understanding will make it easier for them to argue about the right things.

Social Research *for* and *on* Conservation

Conservation biology, as is well known, is an expressly mission-driven discipline (Meine et al. 2006), dedicated to the moral and practical challenge of stopping biodiversity loss. Social research *for* conservation may be thought of as sharing with conservation science the normative mission to contribute to the conservation of biodiversity (Table 1). It seeks to increase understanding of human society in order to understand why, how, and when impacts on nature and biodiversity loss occur and what motivates people to engage in activities that harm or promote the conservation of biodiversity. In many cases, social research for conservation is a response to the

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Table 1. Key characteristics of social research for conservation and social research on conservation.

Attribute	*Research for conservation*	*Research on conservation*
Attitude toward conservation	driven by the mission to conserve biological diversity	may be driven by different agendas; often critical
Starting point	objectives of contemporary organized conservation policy and practice	structure, function, and methods of contemporary organized conservation policy and practice
Typical research questions about society	why societies destroy nature and how to stop them; why people support conservation and how to promote this	how societies (and economies and political systems) work and what affects or drives human–nature relations
Purpose of research with respect to conservation	to influence and improve policy and practice (both in conservation and wider mainstreaming) as a contribution to biodiversity conservation	to understand how conservation as a social, political practice works, to situate conservation with respect to broader social and political economic issues
Typical research questions about conservation	what socioeconomic factors contribute to effective conservation strategies and get support from society, and how to get society to support conservation policies	what conservation reveals about the broader political economic structures and power relations of which it is part, and the way in which these influence human-nature relations
Typical location of fieldwork	at the interface between people and the environment (e.g., farms on the edge of protected areas)	in the institutions that shape conservation practice (e.g., NGOs, donors, conferences, corporations)
Aspects of social science emphasized	primarily methods: how to do surveys and assessments	primarily theory: how to understand interactions within society with respect to nature
Places of publication	science journals (e.g., *Nature*, *Science*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, Proceedings of the Royal Society, Trends in Ecology & Evolution*), conservation journals, environmental science, and management journals	social science and humanities journals (anthropology, geography, sociology, environmental and ecological economics, political economy, political science, development studies, environmental history, area studies)

recognition that the natural science methods of conservation biology are insufficient to find solutions to complex conservation problems that have social dimensions. For example, Snoo et al. (2012) argue that "close involvement of social researchers with their expertise, theories and methods, into conservation biology is a prerequisite for progress in the field" (p. 5) and call for contributions from psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and "other social disciplines specializing in cultural and behavioral change" (p. 5). This is a call for social research for conservation.

Social research *on* conservation (Table 1) does not necessarily share the underlying mission to contribute to biodiversity conservation; rather, it studies the conservation movement itself as a social phenomenon. Those working within conservation may not think of themselves as interesting to study, but for many social scientists the motivations, practices, and partnerships of conservation are legitimate and urgent topics of research, as are the wider structural contexts that shape and constrain conservation practice. Social research on conservation seeks to increase understanding of the practice of conservation in the context of all forms of human engagement with nature. Research on conservation is as likely to take place in the offices of a nongovernmental organization or the corridors of an international meeting as it is on the edge of a national park.

Three things need to be said about our argument. First, we recognize that the description of social research for and on conservation provides a crude model of a complex world of enquiry. The term *research for conservation* is a descriptor of the motivation behind research, whereas the term *research on conservation* is a descriptor of the subject matter of research. These are therefore not truly distinct categories, and they cannot be considered ends of a continuum. Indeed, social research can be simultaneously on and for conservation, such as an analysis of internal decision making structures within conservation organizations that is explicitly intended to improve organizational effectiveness, and hence conservation outcomes.

Second, we do not wish to imply that social research on conservation has no normative agenda or that social research for conservation is limited to a singular agenda. Social research on conservation is commonly motivated by explicit values (e.g., promoting justice or ending poverty), and social research for conservation may reflect a range of different values (e.g., a concern for environment, poverty, and justice in the context of sustainable development). We are certainly not criticizing conservation biology because of its stated mission or implying social research is in some way more impartial. Although it might be unusual for a whole scientific discipline to state its value-laden roots so explicitly, researchers from

diverse disciplines often seek to deliver understanding that makes a difference to a specific goal, for example, human welfare, health, or freedom.

Third, the distinctions we draw here with respect to social science research could also be applied to natural science research. Although most conservation biology (by definition and purpose) is for conservation, there is much natural science research on conservation, for example, long-term ecological studies that challenge ideas of nativeness and demonstrate the socially constructed nature of restoration targets and conservation baselines. We are not trying to rule out such distinctions and indeed encourage further discussion of these issues within the natural sciences.

Why Social Research on Conservation Matters for Conservation

Why do we suggest conservation social science can usefully be thought of as containing different intellectual strands, which we characterize as for or on conservation? In our experience, there are many researchers working for conservation in both the social and natural sciences who find it difficult to see value in research on conservation and may even dismiss it as somehow *against* conservation. Social research for conservation serves an obvious conservation purpose—it aims to understand conservation problems and identify solutions that can be applied. Social research on conservation may appear to offer less that is directly useful to conservation, and at times it can be highly critical of its aims, methods, and effects or even opposed to it in principle. However, we believe conservationists might usefully recognize that social research on conservation can make a vital contribution to their work, in at least 2 ways.

First, conservation professionals—although a diverse group—need to understand themselves as a community with particular interests, habits, and characteristics. Alongside conservation professionals engaging in self-reflection, social research can and should contribute to such an understanding (e.g., Redford 2011). It is often easier for outsiders to see what is dysfunctional or has negative effects in the way organizations work or to provide a broader context to conservation efforts that may not seem obvious to those deeply engaged in those efforts. In such contexts, we see it as vitally important that communities that engage in research on and for conservation find ways to improve relations and communication. This would enhance the uptake and quality of research on conservation and would ultimately benefit conservation.

Second, conservation professionals also need to understand the social, political, and economic conditions in which they operate and especially the effects of their actions and the actions of the organizations they work for and support, both in general and at particular points in time and place. Research on conservation offers insights into the political and economic processes that not only affect the state of the natural world, but also frame and constitute the work of conservation organizations themselves. For example, there is now a large literature on the link between neoliberal capitalism and conservation that examines in particular the engagement of conservation organizations with corporations and the development of market-based conservation strategies (e.g., Sullivan 2006; Brockington & Duffy 2010; Büscher et al. 2012). We believe that conservation scientists urgently need to understand this debate because its implications for conservation practice are profound; some argue there are fundamental contradictions between the logic of capitalism and "the very idea of reaching ecological resiliency and sustainability" (Peet et al. 2011:41). This critique may or may not be right, but given its serious implications for contemporary conservation practice, it surely should not be ignored (e.g., Sullivan 2012).

Our conclusion is simple. Not all conservation social research is motivated by the desire to conserve biodiversity. Some of it is done because conservation and its effects are seen as interesting things to study in their own right. This social research on conservation can (to some) be challenging, and sometimes threatening, but it is also essential if conservation professionals are to understand the social and political context in which they live, work, and follow their mission.

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