

Conservation stories

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Corporate Nature: An Insider's Ethnography of Global Conservation

The University of Arizona Press: 2022

In 2003, Sarah Milne found herself travelling along a remote road in southwest Cambodia en route to the Cardamom Mountains and a new job with Conservation International (CI). She could not have envisaged where this journey would take her. Down the line, she would come to document a conservation program as it unravelled in the very mountains she was headed to. *Corporate Nature: An Insider's Ethnography of Global Conservation* is her account of what came to pass.

The story is intriguing, especially for anyone with a passing knowledge of conservation in Cambodia at the start of the new millennium. Back then, the Kingdom was the 'wild east' of conservation, with a cabal of international organisations—World Wildlife Fund, Wildlife Conservation Society and Wild Aid, among others—jostling for territory, funds and credos. The decisions they made affected both the Cambodian landscape and the homes of millions. This was the era of 'Big Conservation', foreign non-profits operating as proxy state agents, fusing conservation and development across the country's wild realms.

On the ground, it was a world of white Toyota Hiluxes, donor reports and trips into the field, young men (mainly men) disappearing into the forest to count trees, scat and thatched roofs. On Fridays, back in Phnom Penh, the conservation tribe would descend on a few select bars (or the legendary bacchanal 'First Friday' parties at Elsewhere), trading 'war stories' of adventures in the field—who had been charged by an elephant, who had photo-trapped a tiger, who had been felled by dengue. This work was not entirely a noble pursuit; careers and reputations—and the funding bestowed—relied on selling 'success' to bosses and sponsors.

In 2002, CI entered the fray. The US-based organisation partnered with the Cambodian government to manage the newly created Central Cardamoms Protected Forest, a 400,000-square-kilometre expanse of rainforest, valleys and mountains inhabited by unique wildlife and plants and a robust indigenous people, the Khmer Daeum. It was a fertile sphere for CI, one of the biggest conservation organisations in the world—one skilled at selling conservation stories.

Diving into *Corporate Nature*, it is essential to understand how the author came to write the book. In 2005, Milne left CI to commence a PhD at Cambridge. There, in the university's libraries, she was exposed to critical ideas—political ecology, Foucauldian theory and others—which encouraged her to explore how issues of power bisect conservation policy. Later, armed with these theoretical tools, Milne returned to Cambodia with the intention to research a new policy approach, which her former employer was unfurling across the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest.

CI's new instrument was based on a novel idea that had grown to dominate its Washington offices at the dawn of the millennia: payments for environmental services (PES). Grounded in neoliberal economic theory, the approach centred on negotiating contracts with local communities to protect the environment, including endangered animals and forest pockets. Under these agreements, villagers would be incentivised to accomplish conservation goals through direct payments or in-kind resources. "The idea behind PES is to bring ecosystem services into the wider economy and address market failures to recognize the value

of services provided," the organisation said in a 2016 explanation of the approach. With excessive speed, the incentive approach became the organisation's policy mantra; devotees of past methods marched out the door (literally) as the gurus of the new way descended on Cambodia, intent on 'making it work'.

To explain the forces at work, Milne starts with the argument that large conservation organisations—what I term Big Conservation—have evolved to mirror private corporations. One way in which they do this is through storytelling, an inherently political process wherein Big Conservation attempts to impose its notion of reality on to the physical environment and people. Milne shows how this process is intrinsically paternalistic and neocolonial, in the way that CI prioritises ideas from its Washington office—home of its 'policy kings'—over the knowledge and experience of its Cambodian staff and the inhabitants of the Cardamom Mountains. This applies explicitly to the PES approach itself, which is imposed from 'outside' without sufficient understanding of the struggle for power and resources at the Cambodian level.

Corporate Nature also shows how Big Conservation constructs stories to champion and confirm success. Not all of these efforts are sophisticated. In Phnom Penh, for example, Milne reveals how CI's managers used photographs of smiling villagers taken at incentive events to demonstrate its accomplishments. More revealing, however, is how CI sought to manage narratives to reconfigure instances of policy failure.

Milne focuses particularly on the steps taken to manage cases of non-compliance with village incentive agreements. In the Phnom Penh office, this included a concerted effort to deny, and then gloss over, cases where agreements were violated, including one notable incident where a swathe of protected forest was destroyed. The same staff also sought to control the flow of information to Washington, ensuring that details of negative cases did not get through or were painted in a more positive light. Staff in Washington were complicit in this neutralising process, employing what Milne terms "strategic ignorance" to overlook events that did not comply with expectations.

Given these events, the fact the incentive program began to unravel should come as little surprise. *Corporate Nature* describes how, by 2009, the Potemkin facade of the program was cracking. Large-scale timber extraction, overseen by Cambodian elites, was making a mockery of the agreements with villagers. Chut Wutty, a national forest campaigner, started reporting on the industrial-scale timber extraction occurring in the Cardamoms. Wutty's efforts amplified other people's stories and testimonies, making the situation awkward for CI and its partners. CI's policy dream was looking increasingly threadbare beneath the Cardamom sun.

This embarrassing situation leads us to *Corporate Nature's* final chapters. It makes for a heady read: Milne steps outside the typical bounds of academic literature—this volume will sit comfortably on any university shelf—to document an assassination,

whistleblowing and a cover-up. The consequence is a penultimate chapter that reads more John le Carre than dry university text.

At the centre of this drama are efforts by CI to deal with the shortcomings in its incentive scheme. In response, Milne reveals, Big Conservation sought to "circle the wagons": the organisation employed various methods to limit and sideline narratives that contradicted their preferred story. The author uses the term "institutional violence" to describe these efforts.

This violence, previously metaphoric, turns real in the book's nadir moment: the assassination of Wutty, murdered while documenting forest crime in the Cardamoms. This event, a cause célèbre for all that was wrong with the Cardamoms and the incentive program, should have been the moment when CI came clean on its policy shortcomings. Yet even then, Milne describes how CI sought to arrogate the situation, using an 'independent' report to greenwash its actions and boost its questionable accomplishments. The document remained silent on Wutty's death; the forest protector's story was erased from the ecosystems he strove to protect.

At this moment, one might ask if Milne is overstating her arguments. Here, as a past employee of CI—working in the early days of the incentive program—I am in a position to comment. Like Milne, I experienced firsthand many of the machinations she describes. And when I voiced my own reservations about the program, I found the agents of "institutional violence" aligned against me—the fever dream of incentives, and its evangelical miasma, tolerated no dissent.

This amounted to career suicide in terms of my employment with CI. Labelled an incentive pariah, I was sidelined into other projects beyond their orbit. Working in a forgotten corner, conscious that no one was reading my reports, I began slipping fictitious creatures into my work, the desk-spun bestiary a symbolic act of resistance (Milne would sympathise). Today, I still take solace in the knowledge that, deep in the bowels of Washington, the critically endangered "beady-eyed mongoose" lives—on paper, at least. My contract in CI ended, and was not renewed, in 2008.

What do the events in *Corporate Nature* ultimately tell us? Lifting the stone on Big Conservation, Milne highlights how conservation actions are never neutral. The author demonstrates how conservation is inherently political—an effort to impose meaning on to landscape and people. This is a process of exercising power: Big Conservation constructs 'reality' through storytelling, creating 'winners' and 'losers' while legitimising its role and vision for the environment. Moreover, the book reveals how Big Conservation uses this power to marginalise dissenting voices, with consequences, good and bad, for natural systems and their inhabitants.

After all this, the most concerning insight is how Big Conservation can, despite purporting to protect the environment, become complicit in its destruction—in CI's case, by explaining away illegal logging. For the reader, the message is clear: we must question the intent behind the words of Big Conservation, for when failure is anathema, and controlling the narrative is power, we need to be wary of those telling the story. □

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