

# Communities, Conservation and Development

Ashish Kothari

Say 'protected areas' and the first thing that will likely cross the minds of readers is Yellowstone, or Kruger, or Kanha, or Great Barrier Reef, or whatever other iconic government designated site you may be familiar with in your region. Chances are, you won't think of Coron Island, or Khonoma, or Mandingalbay Yidinji. What, you might say, are these? Some of the world's oldest 'protected areas' are those set up and managed by communities: sacred sites protected from all or most human uses other than once a year rituals, watershed forests conserved with minimal subsistence use, landscapes and seascapes with strict rules of management, wildlife concentrations left strictly alone for ethical reasons. Coron in the Philippines, Khonoma in India and Mandingalbay Yidinji in Australia are examples of such sites. Unfortunately, formal conservation has for most of its history since Yellowstone ignored this phenomenon, often even when incorporating such sites into government-designated protected areas.

Indigenous peoples and local communities have governed, managed and conserved land and marine territories for millennia. Societies based on hunting – gathering, agriculture, fishing, pastoralism, crafts and other ecosystem-based economies and cultures have husbanded, used and taken care of nature in every region of the earth. While such practices are as old as human history itself, and while the relevant peoples and communities have always valued their territories, it is only very recently that the 'modern' conservation movement has recognised their enormous contribution to the protection and maintenance of biodiversity (and associated cultural diversity). Even newer is the realisation that such territories and areas need recognition and support if they are to survive the various forces that are threatening and eroding them. And finally, it is only just emerging that these sites could be powerful arenas of working out strategies and frameworks for a sustainable and equitable future for the planet as a whole.

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*Khumbu biocultural landscape, Nepal*

## The diversity of community conservation

Community conservation initiatives are extremely diverse, covering a variety of ecosystems, set up and managed for a range of objectives, and achieving different ecological and social results. They can be a tiny patch of forest or sea of less than an acre or hectare, or cover several million hectares of rainforest or savannah or mixed land uses. They include:

- indigenous peoples' territories managed for sustainable use, cultural values, or protection objectives (e.g. many indigenous or traditional reserves, First Nations territories and Indigenous Protected Areas in the Amazon, Canada and Australia);
- territories over which mobile or nomadic communities have traditionally roamed, managing the resources through customary regulations and practices (e.g. the territories of tribal confederacies in central Asia and pastoral landscapes in Kenya and Ethiopia, containing substantial wetland and wildlife values);
- sacred natural sites, ranging from tiny forest groves and wetlands to entire landscapes and seascapes, sometimes left completely or largely free of human use (e.g. sacred groves and landscapes of South Asia, sacred lakes and marine burial sites in the Philippines, and sacred forests of Kenya);
- resource use areas from which communities derive their livelihoods or key ecosystem benefits in a sustained manner over time (e.g. Locally Managed Marine Areas in the South Pacific, autonomous marine protected areas and Satoumi seascapes in Japan, responsible fishery reserves

in Costa Rica, or community forests in many African, South Asian, or North American countries);

- nesting or roosting sites, or other critical habitats of wild animals, conserved for ethical or other reasons explicitly oriented towards protecting these animals (e.g. heronries in India, sacred crocodile ponds of Gambia and Mali, tree species like arawone (*Tabebuia serratifolia*) in Suriname and marine turtle nesting sites in Chile, Costa Rica and Suriname);

- species populations sustainably managed for commercial benefits (e.g. sites managed for ecotourism in Suriname and Kenya, and for sustainable hunting and ecotourism like Namibia's Communal Conservancies);

- landscapes with mosaics of natural and agricultural ecosystems managed for biocultural diversity by rural or mixed rural-urban communities (e.g. the Potato Park in the Andean highlands of Peru, the rice terrace regions of the Philippines and protected landscapes of Spain and many other European countries);

- small to large urban and rural spaces, conserved for aesthetic and ecological reasons (e.g. many greens, community woodlands and nature reserves in England, UK).

It would be futile to try to club this enormous diversity of initiatives into one category, but they do display some crucial common characteristics:

- the people or communities are the predominant decision-makers, with or without participation of other actors;

- the people or community has a crucial relationship to the area (cultural, spiritual, ecological, economic and/or political); and

- regardless of the objectives of management, conservation is being achieved albeit in varying degrees.

Sites that display these features therefore have been clubbed into one concept now well known in conservation circles: indigenous peoples and local community conserved territories and areas (ICCAs).

### Why are ICCAs important for biodiversity and people?

While there is no global estimate of the number and extent of ICCAs (partly a function of their neglect by formal conservation circles), available studies from several countries suggest that sites coming under this broad concept may number far more than the current officially

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*Village & civil society consultation on CFRs, Odisha*

designated protected areas (which are about 130,000, mostly managed by government agencies) and cover as much if not more than the area covered by them (nearly 13% of the earth's land surface).<sup>2</sup> This guesstimate is further strengthened by the following: Indigenous peoples' territories encompass up to 22% of the world's land surface and, according to one estimate, coincide with areas that hold 80% of the planet's biodiversity; forest area under indigenous peoples' or local communities' ownership or management is estimated at about 500 million ha. (about 15% of the world's forests).

Indigenous peoples' territories cover a fifth of the closed-canopy forests of the Brazilian Amazon; in the Philippines, 60–65% of the forests are estimated to be within indigenous lands registered or claimed as Ancestral Domains; in Namibia, Communal Conservancies cover over 16% of the country's total land area; and so on.

Documentation of the biodiversity value of ICCAs is very partial, but again, available studies indicate significant contributions. In Kenya, 65% of large mammals are on private and communal lands, outside of official protected areas. Namibia's Communal Conservancies harbour endangered species such as black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) and the endemic Hartmann's mountain zebra (*Equus zebra hartmannae*). In Mexico, most forests of Oaxaca are conserved by communities, and are crucial for jaguar (*Panthera onca*), puma (*Puma concolor*), toucan species and others. In Iran, rangelands managed by mobile pastoral peoples contain some of the country's most important wetlands (including Ramsar sites). In Ethiopia, a stable population of the world's most endangered canid, the Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*), is protected in the Guassa-Menz Community Conserved Area. In India, threatened species including the Blyth's tragopan (*Tragopan blythii*), Spotbilled pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*), Greater adjutant stork (*Leptoptilos dubius*), Olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), and many more, are protected by communities. Amazonian indigenous reserves are the most important barrier to Amazon deforestation, partly due to active indigenous resistance to logging, agricultural expansion and other threats. In Suriname, the West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), the Guiana dolphin (*Sotalia guianensis*) and several sea turtle species benefit from community protection.

Apart from the wildlife value, ICCAs provide ecological connectivity across large landscapes and seascapes, secure substantial environmental benefits, such as water and nutrition flows, soil protection, and others, and provide survival and livelihood benefits to hundreds of millions of people. They are quintessentially biocultural sites where nature and culture are integrated; very many are sites of spiritual significance. Several ICCAs are seamless

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Nayakheda village CFR youth, Melghat

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In many ways, ICCAs can become a crucial component of our response to climate change. They are effective ways of avoiding or mitigating climate impacts, by ensuring the continued protection of ecosystems. Equally valuable is their potential for adaptation, by providing corridors for ecosystem and species migration that will inevitably occur due to changing climatic conditions, and because their biological and cultural diversity contains the bases of resilience that communities everywhere will need.

Finally, ICCAs are crucial components of the search for an alternative future for humanity, one which strives towards meaningful human well-being (food, water, shelter, learning, health, and other basic needs) within the earth's ecological limits, ensures equity amongst people, respects the rest of nature, and promotes peace. There are many old and newly emerging visions of this kind such as the indigenous notions of *buen vivir* (in many forms) from peoples in South America (<http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v54/n4/full/dev201186a.html>), radical ecological democracy with resonance in many regions (<http://radicalecologicaldemocracy.wordpress.com>), some variants of solidarity economy in northern America and Europe ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity\\_economy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity_economy)), degrowth in Europe ([www.degrowth.org](http://www.degrowth.org)), and so on. ICCAs have a lot to contribute to the making of such futures.

The need for recognition and support of ICCAs has been increasingly acknowledged in global circles. IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) has included them as one of the four ‘governance types’ in its new guidance on protected area categories, and the CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity) has mandated countries to recognise and support them under the Programme of Work on Protected Areas.



Coron Island, Tagbanwa Ancestral Domain, the Philippines

### ICCAs need recognition and support!

Despite being around for generations and in many cases centuries, ICCAs in the modern world face serious threats and challenges. Amongst the most widespread is the lack of recognition by the state and/or by civil society, which exposes them to many other threats, such as the imposition of adverse land uses by external agencies. Unclear or absence of tenurial security over lands/waters and resources, adds to this vulnerability. Many ICCAs are threatened by externally imposed development and resource exploitation processes, including extractive industries, logging, industrial fishing, dredging, conversion to large-scale agro-fuel plantations, dams, urbanisation and major infrastructure. Then there is the state-led or corporate expropriation of/superimposition over peoples’ territories or community land, through nationalisation or privatisation, even within formally protected areas. Increasing pressure on resources, especially demands generated by the external market economy, are another threat. There are also challenges arising from within the peoples or communities themselves, such as severe gender, class, or ethnic inequities and conflicts, or changes in cultural and demographic patterns disrupting the traditional arrangements.

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### The future of ICCAs

ICCAs are not panaceas for all the problems of biodiversity conservation, but they are a very powerful part of the solution, with great potential for becoming stronger and more widespread. For this, they need the respectful support of governments, academic institutions, funding organisations, and others. A global forum of indigenous peoples, local communities, civil society organisations, researchers and activists has been formed to facilitate various processes that could bring ICCAs such recognition and support; this forum, called the ICCA Consortium, has been active in a number of the reports mentioned above, and other documentation, advocacy, and networking ([www.iccaconsortium.org](http://www.iccaconsortium.org)).

It is crucial that we respect ICCAs for what they are, the epitome of the interface between ecological and cultural diversity, with their very essence being site-specific, constantly evolving responses to the challenges and opportunities that communities find amidst nature. This means innovative policy and legal mechanisms, technical and funding support as found appropriate by communities, and sometimes even deliberate neglect since the most culturally sensitive communities may find even a bit of public exposure detrimental to their interests. Governments and NGOs alike will need to go on a steep learning curve, if they are to imbibe such lessons...but imbibe they must, for the very future of the earth and its species is at stake.



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