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Re-examining culture/conservation conflict: the view of anthropology of conservation through the lens of environmental ethics

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This article examines environmental ethics theories focused on the division between “anthropocentric” and “ecocentric” approaches in regard to three value bases for environmental concern: self-interest, humanistic altruism, and biospheric altruism. The author argues that while applied anthropologists claim to be morally engaged, this engagement rarely supports biospheric altruism. Anthropological advocacy of indigenous rights as well as support for development enterprise on the part of applied anthropologists results in anthropocentric bias in anthropology. While moral engagement may be said to be the mark of applied anthropology, environmental ethics is rarely evoked and moral engagements seem to extend only to humans. On the other hand, constructivist anthropologists often describe environment, nature, or wilderness as social constructions and do not engage with questions of value and rights, resulting in relativism that ignores the urgency of conservation efforts.

Keywords: anthropocentrism; applied anthropology; constructivism; ecocentrism; environmental anthropology; environmental ethics; environmental values; development; conservation/culture conflict

Introduction

It hurt him deeply when someone plucked flowers from a tree. And he totally understood that this feeling was meaningless to anyone else . . . His worst troubles arouse when the grass cutter came to cut the grass, because he had watched countless wonders in the grass; small creepers; nameless violet and yellow flowers, tiny in size; here and there a nightshade, whose flue flowers have a little golden dot at the center; medicinal plants near the fence, a kalmegh here and an anantamul there; neem seeds left by birds, sprouting into plants, spreading beautiful leaves. All those were cleared with a heartless weeding tool. None of them were prized trees of the garden, there was no one to listen to their protests.

“Balai” From Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore (Tagore [1928] 2009, p. 256–257)

In the recent issue of this journal, Thomas Sikor called for the development of a new agenda that is regard to “Forest justice,” referring to the fact that “Many people living in and around forests have not received fair shares in the benefits derived from forests” (Sikor 2010, p. 245). Sikor decries the fact that while some governments have transferred property rights to local people and created conditions for them to

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benefit from the exploitation of forests, indigenous communities normally do not reap the same economic benefits from exploitation of the forest as bigger players. Conservation organizations play a role in limiting indigenous people's access to the forest. A remarkable omission in the article is the rights of the forest itself.

In this article, the author will argue that applied anthropologists involved in development issues, as well as those working within constructivist tradition, often fail to consider and often exclude ecocentric perspective from their considerations. According to the website of Conservation Anthropology of Society for Conservation Biology (<http://www.conbio.org>) and Anthropology and Environment Section of the American Anthropological Association (<http://www.eanth.org/>), anthropology is said to contribute to conservation by

- Critical engagement with conservation initiatives from the perspective of indigenous and human rights;
- Support for human-centered approaches to conservation such as community-based conservation and rights-based conservation.

This advocacy of indigenous rights and support for human-centered approaches, as the author will argue, results in anthropocentric bias in anthropology. While moral engagement may be said to be the mark of applied anthropology, environmental ethics is rarely evoked and moral engagements seem to extend only to humans. The environmental ethics literature poses the question about the extent to which only loss in human life and welfare should be the basis of moral concern, and whether technological progress should also take into account the consequences for nonhuman species and plants. Another issue is how to translate values into the (legal or moral) question of rights since having rights is different from having value. Critical anthropological thinkers have criticized the Western idea of material and technological "progress" at the expense of other underlying human values and environment (Bodley 2008). Ecocentric theorists postulate that the current ecological crisis stems from the "arrogance of humanism" (Ehrenfeld 1978). O'Riordan (1976) reflects that even the weaker forms of anthropocentrism such as conservationism and human welfare ecology are not sustainable since, in the presence of human crisis, anthropocentric interests would be given priority over ecocentric concerns.

When environmental ethics emerged as a new sub-discipline of philosophy in the early 1970s, it did so by posing a challenge to traditional anthropocentrism. In the first place, it questioned the assumed moral superiority of human beings to the members of other species on earth. In the second place, it investigated the possibility of rational arguments for assigning intrinsic value to the natural environment and its nonhuman contents (Brennan and Lo 2002). An English poet, William Wordsworth, and the American transcendentalist writers, David Thoreau and Ralph F. Emerson, may be credited for their inspiration of the early environmental ethics. Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), an American ecologist and environmentalist and one of the founders of environmental ethics, best known for his book *A Sand Country Almanac*, developed the concept of *land ethic*. Leopold stated "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold 1987, p. 224).

Another position in environmental ethics acknowledges the same objective of sustaining human emancipation but with recognition of the rights of nonhuman species. As noted by Dunlap and Catton (1994), the primary point of departure

between the two views is the position of humans in the biosphere. Within the position that humans are part of the biosphere, and not exempt from ecological constraints, there is an ethical debate of whether nonhuman species should have intrinsic value or only instrumental value (Singer 1975; Regan 1984; Taylor 1986; Ferry 1995; DesJardins 2005).

Anthropocentric versus ecocentric values

The opposition between anthropocentric and ecocentric or biocentric approaches captures much of the contemporary environmental ethics and environmental psychology discourse on the relationships between humans and nature. These approaches are often linked to effective states (emotions), norms, beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and values, associated with human relationship with nature. Nature can promote the satisfaction of human wants in two main ways: in both material (how can we use it) and esthetic (how nice it is to be in it and enjoy it) terms (Mathews 1994; Fox 1995).

The value bases for environmental concern address a number of basic assumptions having to do with intrinsic value assigned to humans only or also to nonhuman entities, as well as belief in human progress and ability to (technologically) solve (environmental) problems. The most widely debated ethical issue is of whether nonhuman entities should have intrinsic value or only instrumental value. The intrinsic value of something is said to be the value that that thing has “in itself,” or “for its own sake,” or “as such,” or “in its own right.” The so-called extrinsic value is the value that is not intrinsic, for example, concern about environment requiring some relation to human interests that are not necessarily instrumental (for the defense of weak anthropocentrism see Norton 1984; for the advocacy of ecocentric position and criticism of Norton see Westra 1997).

In anthropocentric thought, be it self-interest or altruistic humanism, human beings are seen as separated from nature, unique in their ability to reason, use language, etc., and generally more worthy than members of other species. According to Eckersley (2004) not only anthropocentrism entails human moral superiority vis-à-vis other species, but also ethical consideration is exclusively confined to human beings. This can be illustrated by the case of human rights versus animal rights – for the anthropocentric thinkers, animal rights are at best subservient to human rights and can be thought about when human rights are fully addressed, or at worst a non-issue. For anthropocentric thinkers, the values associated with nature can be instrumental as can be illustrated by the use of the term “natural resources.”

The distinction between deep and shallow ecology was pioneered by Næss and his colleagues Sigmund Kvaløy and Nils Faarlund. The “shallow ecology movement,” as Næss (1973) calls it, is the “fight against pollution and resource depletion,” the central objective of which is “the health and affluence of people in the developed countries.” The “deep ecology movement,” in contrast, endorses “biospheric egalitarianism,” the view that all living things are alike in having intrinsic value, independent of their utilitarian usefulness to humans. The deep ecology also endorses the “relational, total-field image,” understanding organisms (including humans) as interrelated “knots” in the biospherical net. The “identification” of the human ego with nature can enlarge the boundaries of the self by extending the person beyond the boundaries of individualism. The ecological self in this view does not only connect humans with the wider environment but also provide the source

of deep contentment and fulfill deeper needs (Brennan and Lo 2002). Within the complex webs of ecological interdependence, “humans and the rest of Nature are *truly and deeply* interconnected and interrelated in terms of their mutual long-term interests and welfare” (Sessions 1992, p. 104).

At least three value bases for environmental concern can be distinguished: self-interest, humanistic altruism, and biospheric altruism (Merchant 1992; Stern and Dietz 1994; Dietz et al. 2005). The self-interest basis of environmental concern originates from the rational actor model of individuals operating in the “risk society” (Giddens 2009). Self-interested individuals care about environmental protection due to their perception of risks to their own welfare posed by environmental destruction (e.g. concerns about their own health associated with water, air, and soil pollution).

The second set of values promoting environmental protection is social or humanistic altruism, which is similar to the first set of concerns but which extends from one’s self to a larger human community. Socially altruistic individuals would care about poor people in their own neighborhood or perhaps about entire developing nations. Their concern for the environment affecting these “disadvantaged” groups or communities is more likely to be concerned with averting immediate environmental threats, and to even larger degree concern with other humans’ welfare, social justice, distribution of wealth, “development” (according to Western standards), etc. The Charity paradox theory postulates that socially altruistic individuals are unlikely to protect environment for its own sake, and that in fact their efforts for expanding the economic pie to the (growing number) of the poor by increasing exploitation of natural resources, increasing industrial and agricultural production at the cost of clearing pristine lands, may in fact be counter-productive to conservationist efforts (Kopnina and Keune 2010).

The third basis for environmental concern is biospheric altruism directed toward other species or even the entire ecosystems, independent of the value of “natural resources” for humans. Anthropocentric and social altruism assign only instrumental values to other species or the environment, while biospheric altruism is an extension of concern beyond the human boundary. Biospheric altruism acknowledges intrinsic value, whereas self-interest and humanistic altruism do not (Dietz et al. 2005, p. 344). This third basis of environmental concern can be referred to as ‘The Lorax complex’.

In Rabindranath Tagore’s story of Balai quoted at the beginning of this article, the Indian boy feels pain at seeing the weeds, in all their beauty and diversity being removed from the garden:

Balai had long begun to realize that some of the pains he experienced were his alone. They were not felt by anyone around him. This boy really belonged to the age, millions of years ago, when the earth’s would-be forests cried at birth among the marshlands newly sprung from the ocean’s depth ... The plant, vanguard of all living things on the road of time, had raised its joint hands to the sun and said, ‘I want to stay here, I want to live. I am an eternal traveler. Rain or sun, night or day, I shall keep travelling through death after death, towards the pilgrim’s goal of endless life.’ That ancient chant of the plants reverberates to this day, in the woods and forests, hills and meadows, and the life of the mother earth declares through the leaves and branches, ‘I want to stay, I want to stay.’ The plant, speechless foster mother of life on earth, has drawn nourishment from the heavens since time immemorial to feed her progeny; has gathered the sap, the vigour, the savour of life

for the earth's immortal store; and raised to the sky the message of beleaguered life, 'I want to stay'. Balai could here that eternal message of life in a special way in his bloodstream. We used to laugh at this a good deal (Tagore [1928] 2009:257).

Perhaps the best summery of ecocentric position is given by Paul Watson, the Founder and President of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society:

'Racism and Sexism for example are social issues but they are not issues relevant to the survival of the biosphere . . . I think that speciesism is a far more serious issue. Human discrimination against practically every other species on this planet has resulted, is resulting and will continue to result in mass extinctions, extirpations and diminishment. Whereas racism is acknowledged, speciesism is not even given a moment's thought by most people. It is willfully and arrogantly ignored' (Watson, <http://www.ecospherics.net/pages/wonw.htm> Accessed January 14, 2012).

Environmental values largely correspond to what environmental ethics writers have termed "technocentrism" and "ecocentrism," as well as "shallow" and "deep ecology." Timothy O'Riordan's division of environmentalism into the categories of *technocentrism* and *ecocentrism* somewhat corresponds to the humanistic and biospheric value bases of environmental concern. Technocentrism can be summarized as the human belief in their superiority over other species and their (technological) ingenuity to solve all problems. William Catton and Riley Dunlap wrote a series of articles defining environmental sociology postulating that Western society shares a variety of background assumptions that they termed the Dominant Western Worldview (DWW) or Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) espoused by mainstream sociology (Catton and Dunlap 1978a, 1980; Dunlap and Catton 1979, 1983). The DSP, positing endless progress, growth, abundance, and attitudes contributing to environmental degradation, is then opposed to the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP), which highlights the disruption of ecosystems caused by modern industrial societies exceeding environmental limits. In NEP, nature is seen as a limited resource, delicately balanced, and subject to deleterious human interference. Traditional sociology emerged out of DWW and DSP and, hence, shared a set of related background assumptions that led sociologists to treat modern societies as "exempt" from ecological constraints and to share belief in human (technical) ingenuity and ability to solve environmental or social problems. Anthropocentrism "breathes" optimism, in the sense that humans are largely in control of the surrounding world and that problems arising from modern living can be taken care of, primarily through technological development (Lundmarck 2007, p. 331).

However, the distinction between values within anthropocentric thought is not that clear-cut. On the surface of it, it seems that pure anthropocentrism suggests that things only matter morally insofar as they affect human interests, while nonanthropocentric thought suggests that things can matter morally independent of their effect on human interests. However, some nonanthropocentrists claim that individual plants, animals, or whole species or ecosystems, or biosphere have "intrinsic value" while others would debate in how far these entities have legal or moral rights, as evidenced by debates between Singer 1975, Regan 1984, Taylor 1986, and other environmental protection and animal rights advocates. While some ecocentric thinkers claim that all value is relational that nothing has intrinsic value, others insist on objective – at least in legal terms – "rights" based on "fixed" value of the object or person.

As rightly pointed out by the anonymous reviewer of the earlier version of this article, some nonanthropocentrists are animal rights activists (who insist on moral

standing for individual animals); some are biocentrists (who insist on moral standing for all individual living things); some argue for species rights, but not ecosystemic rights or moral standing. To use Næss (1973) terminology, some nonanthropocentrists accept deep ecology but others seem to be more shallow ecologists. Some anthropocentrists claim that nonhuman things can only have instrumental value, but some claim that the kind of extrinsic value they have need not be instrumental. As evidenced by the work of Green (1996) and O'Neill (1992), the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic values is thus not that clear-cut. Green argued that some values are not merely instrumental to human ends. Environmental ethics philosophers have developed positions which are open to a number of meta-ethical and practical objections. The view that there are objective values in nature, which are independent of human interests, is better served by an environmental philosophy which sees most value in nature as objective, extrinsic value (Green 1996, p. 31). Again, as an anonymous reviewer of this article perceptively noted, while some objects may not be valuable in themselves, nor are they valuable as a means to an end either. For example, some things are good because they represent or symbolize some other good things (e.g. souvenirs from holidays); some things are good because they are a part of a good whole (e.g. tree in a forest). Following this, if anthropocentrism considers things to be good only insofar as they serve human interests, then an "instrumental value" anthropocentrist will have to read our interests off of our ends – whatever we seek must be what is good for us. But an "extrinsic value" anthropocentrist can accept a more reasonable view of what our interests are – they may or may not be the things that we think are good for us. It may thus be argued that instrumental value is not the opposite of intrinsic value, extrinsic value is.

The argument that the author wants to develop in the following "cases" is the following: criticism as a contrast – anthropologists assume that nonanthropocentrism is just a kind of Western ideology forced upon indigenous people, but so is the preoccupation with economic and social equality, human rights, etc. The cases presented below reveal some evidence for the claim that there is a double-standard by prioritizing Western anthropocentric ideology over (presumably) Western ecocentrism.

The cases below demonstrate that anthropologists working within "development" and "constructivism" traditions assume the truth of anthropocentrism without critical reflection of its origin (such as Western religious tradition or capitalist neo-liberal ideology) or its implications for conservation.

Case study 1: "applied" or "development" anthropologists

In her book *Loving Nature*, a prominent environmental anthropologist Milton (2002) analyzes the relationship between emotion and learning and identifies sentimental commitment to conservation as "personal understanding" of nature, rooted in direct experiences of the nonhuman world and biophilia (Anderson 1996). Milton pointed out that anthropologists may be very helpful in answering questions like "Why isn't everyone an environmentalist? Why do some people care more about the future of natural world than others do?" as these questions go to the heart of cultural diversity debate (Milton 2002, p. 1).

Traditional anthropological focus on the indigenous, local, and minority groups coupled with support for human rights in the context of "traditional way of life" (such as hunting or slash and burn agriculture) is often pitched against the

conservationist efforts to institute limits to “cultural practices” that negatively effect nonhuman species. Many anthropologists hold the view that conservationist organizations attempt to limit the access of the “dispossessed” to the spoils of modern industrial societies, including the use of natural resources, wage labor, and “development” but denying the indigenous people of the opportunity to use “natural resources.” In some cases, conservationists are viewed as Western ethnocentric imperialists, imposing their dominant ideology upon the politically and economically disadvantaged people.

Many applied and development anthropologists have accused conservationists of eco-imperialism and of the imposition of their own vision of environmental values (see, for example, publications of Alcorn, the President of the Anthropology and Environment Section of the American Association of Anthropology, who equates the work of conservationist agencies in developing countries to “ecofascism”). The work of conservationist agencies is demonized and conservational activists are blamed for extreme atrocities against humanity. According to Alcorn:

Human rights abuse allegations associated with conservation activities include violation of due process, massive forcible resettlements, extrajudicial killings, destruction of property and farms, torture, and other violations of social, cultural, political and economic rights. Indigenous Peoples are particularly vulnerable to having their prior territorial rights violated by conservation programs Conservation agencies and their supporters deny, mask or defend their behavior, trotting out isolated examples. They hijack the discussion from human rights to economics, claiming the “real agenda” of “savages” is to end capitalism. Or they use technospeak to shift the discussion of human rights to one of “conservation trade-offs.”

(Alcorn 2008, p. 2).

Applied anthropologists’ ethnographies often reflect that the empirical reality of conservation or development governance warrants more anthropological advocacy and moral engagement.

Conservation/culture conflict in the work of applied and development anthropologists outlines a number of countercurrents of grassroots efforts to achieve conservation with social justice.

Anthropologists blame environmental organizations for being neo-imperialist or neo-colonialist in their efforts to protect nonhuman species’ interests and rights. For example, the anthropological discussion group Just Conservation on Facebook serves to “To air grievances, concerns or experiences of conservation-related human rights abuses.” According to Wenzel (1991), environmentalists in general, and animal rights activists in particular, are ethnocentric cultural imperialists. Discussions on Environmental Anthropology Listserv reveal that many participants in the forum feel that environmentalists’ concern with issues such as population growth is motivated by the desire to protect the privileged position of the wealthy white consumers. For example, Milton Takei reflects on the subject of population growth:

Powerful people have preferred to shift the blame for population growth onto poor people, and many people concerned about overpopulation are content to not study the subject . . . Concerns about overpopulation are racist because people tend to associate the poor in the Global South, and poverty in general, with people of color.

(Takei 2011)

In the article on environmental anthropology in *American Anthropologist* Kottak reflects

Analysis of social forms should not be subordinated to approaches that emphasize the environment at the expense of society and culture, and ecology over anthropology. People must come first. Cultural anthropologists need to remember the primacy of society and culture in their analysis and not be dazzled by ecological data. Funding sources that give priority to the hard sciences, fund expensive equipment, and support sophisticated technology should not lead us away from a focus on cultural specificity and social and cultural variables. Ecological anthropologists must put anthropology ahead of ecology. Anthropology's contribution is to place people ahead of plants, animals, and soil.

(Kottak 1999, p. 33)

In an ethnography of Icelandic minke whalers, Niels Einarsson describes their struggle to earn their living in the face of environmentalists, reflects that and argues that there is a "serious need to show respect for the values and interests of local people relating to natural resources" (Einarsson 1993, p. 82). The reference to "natural resources," even if they refer to endangered species, is worth noting. Einarsson also acknowledges the fact that:

Most anthropologists will protest if "their" people are subjected to ethnocentric treatment attacking their culture or even threatening their subsistence. Many anthropologists are suffering from "species compassion fatigue" when they see this as threatening to the way of life of people whom they have lived among and learned to appreciate.

(Einarsson 1993, p. 80)

Preoccupation with environmental justice and socioeconomic fairness, which is typical of "development" discourse, is often much more pronounced in anthropological work than concern for environment. There are many instances of anthropologists taking sides against conservationists in animal-human rights conflicts in the cause of "guaranteeing local people their rights." Western aid and development workers, as well as groups that profit from these "rights" the most (such as Japanese pro-whaling protagonists who "consciously attempt to hook up with discourses on "Western" eco-imperialism, as the unjust universalizing of a particular nature-culture"; Blok 2010, p. 21) often find sympathetic anthropological audience. The view that portrays environmentalists as imposing neo-imperialist ideology is ironic considering the fact that the very notion of "human rights" and "development" (with accompanying non-traditional practices of, for example, wage labor and consumerism) is also very much Western concepts and impositions.

Anthropologists have noted the idea that the ecologically important economic activities are those which put people and the environment in immediate proximity, and that this idea is also salient to conservation research – especially development projects that attempt to change the way people interact with their surroundings (Haenn 2011). It must be noted that most of conservation/culture conflicts do not include famishing humans, but people who struggle for economic or social advantage. In other words, the issue of nonhuman survival is normally not equally balanced with the issue of human welfare. Despite the efforts of many anthropologists to reconcile conservation/culture conflict, as it is often termed, many anthropologists seem still very much inclined to favor "culture" over conservation.

Einarsson adds that to most anthropologists the choice of the human side may seem self-evident, as they live with and learn from the local communities and internalize their values and viewpoints, "which may be the reason why

anthropologists sometimes have difficulty communicating with environmentalists, compared with the relative success they have with the development community” (1993, p. 82). As anthropologists seem generally predisposed to cultural relativism, the idea of “going native” and accepting the indigenous populations’ values seems logical.

There are many examples of how anthropologists demonstrated this moral engagement, particularly by accusing environmentalists in using indigenous populations to achieve their conservationist ends and then “abandoning the people” when their goals have been achieved. However, there is also evidence that environmentalists tried to manipulate the indigenous group but in the end felt that they themselves had been manipulated, both by local governments and by local communities (Brosius 2006). Leah Horowitz’s ethnography describes the indigenous group in New Caledonia that fought alongside the environmentalists for 6 years against a multinational mining project that will pollute the lagoon where they fish (as well as do lots of other environmental damage). The environmentalists needed the group’s “indigenous legitimacy.” But in the end – behind the environmentalists’ backs – the indigenous group signed a “pact” with the mining company (Horowitz Forthcoming 2011).

Case study 2: anthropocentrism in constructivist view

On the other hand, the anthropologists who espouse constructivism see “nature,” and “wilderness” as social constructions, a view which implies that environmental problems are only salient in as far as they are interpreted as such by human actors.

Yet another source of anthropocentric bias in anthropology is presented by the constructivist stream, within the theory of postmodernism. Many postmodern writers, especially those following a constructionist view, consider the concept of nature as a socially constructed entity, created by the “actors” themselves, and largely a product of language, a dependent construct wholly connected to the human perception of it. “Ecology” is mostly discussed in symbolic, historical, and political terms, overriding the dichotomies that informed and enlivened the debates of the past – nature/culture, idealism/materialism – and is informed by the literature on transnationalist flows and local–global articulations (Biersack 1999), with the physical aspect of ecology conspicuously absent.

From this perspective, nature is not only *represented* by language but also *created* by it and ultimately becomes little more than an offshoot of social reality (Kidner 2000, p. 264). This makes it impossible to judge one attitude toward nature as better or worse; more beneficial or more harmful than any other, for, according to this logic, there is no nature outside the human perception of it (ibid). Nature as “an artifact, understood and interacted with by people via culturally specific symbolic systems” (Kang 2003, p. 335) implies that there is no “nature” outside of human perception of it. Thus from the constructionist viewpoint, to paraphrase David Hume’s famous dictum, “if the tree falls in the forest but nobody hears the sound,” the tree has not actually fallen.

Ethnographies of human–animal “interactions,” such as those with dingoes (Healy 2007), crocodiles (McGregor 2005), elephants (Thompson 2002; Barua 2010), whales (Einarsson 1993; Blok 2010) to name just a few, tend to emphasize the sociocultural and political complexity and interdependency of (human) actors’ networks, a systems approach, action network theories, etc., rather than the

unequal and often extractive nature of this “interaction” (hunting, fishing, etc.). Particularly in the case of endangered species, a constructivist view of “the other” implies that the very concept of “danger” or “risk” is manufactured or socially produced.

Obviously, conservationist work or work of any human–animal conflict mediators cannot be understood without realization of the complexity of human agency and power, yet the remarkable omission in these discussions is the implication for the existence and welfare of nonhuman actors (Zerner 2000). However, the author calls for a radical departure from the mainstream postmodern preoccupation with the social construction of “nature” (among other things; Escobar 1996) or “wilderness” (Cronon 1996; Neumann 1998; Whatmore and Thorne 1998) and, by implication, “environmental problems.” Conservationist anthropology calls toward the conscious realization that extinction of species is not just socially constructed but needs to be ethically addressed; much in the same way the more traditional anthropological subjects – the local, the indigenous, the minority, and the poor – have been addressed. Conservationist anthropology is a conscious, ethical, political, and practical call to include the rights of nonhuman actors in the discussion of environmental justice.

It may be argued that stripped of ideological and ethical underpinnings, the argument of anti-environmental academics in favor of defending human rather than environmental rights is just as subjective, whether or not the “native” people themselves are “traditionally” pro-environmental. The author acknowledges the fact that she is far from scientifically detached, nor is she morally neutral in this position, a perspective necessitated by what she perceives as the urgent need to address the issues associated with unprecedented environmental degradation and biodiversity loss over the last century. As many other applied or engaged anthropologists who want their work to matter in the world outside of academy, the author argues for the need of anthropological arbitration of biospheric perspective in order to address far-from-theoretical issues associated with conservation/culture conflict.

The fact that both development and constructivist anthropological positions are essentially anthropocentric is perhaps not surprising since the discipline of anthropology is per definition anthropocentric. While anthropologists are also people and while the nature of their very own discipline centers around the people and things related to people, it is not necessarily “logical” that only human interests should matter morally. What is more worrying is that anthropologists seem to adapt the very dominant view of the industrial elites that they profess to criticize in the quest for “their people’s” “development.”

What is equally worrying is that anthropological work on indigenous communities shows that this anthropocentrism is inherent not only in the discipline of anthropology but also in indigenous communities that anthropologists study.

Case study 3: indigenous communities

One school of thought in anthropology views the “natives” within “traditional” and increasingly “transitional” societies as the kind of “noble savages” living “in harmony with nature.” In this view, it is (Western) political and economic elites who are largely responsible for the environmental problems. Caldwell (1990) and Chokor (1993), for example, suggest that indigenous, non-industrialized societies tend to

believe in the profound connection between humanity and nature. They find compatibility between natural balance and the needs of humans in using natural resources. Environmental knowledge or “education” in such societies would imply transmission of the deeply embedded ecological values, in spite of the encroachment of materialistic, capitalist, and external (often Western) “colonizers,” popularized in the Western imagination through films such as *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Avatar* (2009).

However, most ethnographic studies challenge this “noble savage” depiction of tribal peoples who live in harmony with nature and are the true “natural men.” Instead critics of such idealized indigenous peoples assert that indigenous peoples have “human vices just as we do” (Wagley 1976, p. 302), view animals and plants as something not worth protecting (Allendorf et al. 2006; Infield 1988), and are capable of overuse and poor decision-making (Netting 1993). They consider that the majority of traits that perhaps once enabled traditional societies to live in greater harmony with the environment than more industrialized groups are slowly diminishing (Brosius 1999). As Turner (1993, p. 526) argued:

The strong claims that all indigenous people are by nature conservationists can easily be attacked by counterexamples—species extinctions due to human hunting in the prehistoric past and indigenous peoples who grant large timber cutting or mining concessions on their lands.

Utilitarian approach to plants and animals can be illustrated by Grundy’s account of Lesotho boy’s approach to ecology:

Once when I expressed to a student my delight at having located a nest of an endangered bird, the bald ibis, on the mountain where we lived, I found myself having to explain the concept of an “endangered species” to him. When Tsepo understood that this particular species of bird might no longer exist in a few years, his first question was, “Are they useful?” If no one needs bald ibises for anything, Tsepo reasoned, why bother to preserve them?

(Grundy 1995, p. 7)

In her paper on factors influencing local attitudes toward protected areas Trusty (2011) notes that in Asia and Africa, local people frequently view wildlife from protected areas as pests (Infield 1988; Newmark et al. 1993; Infield and Namara 2001; Allendorf et al. 2006), something to be feared (Infield 1988; Allendorf 2007), or as valued by the government more than they value the local people that the government values over themselves (Brockington 2002; Igoe 2004). Kottak (1999) reflects that in Madagascar, many intellectuals and officials are bothered that foreigners seem more concerned about lemurs and other endangered species than about Madagascar’s people. As one of his colleague there remarked, “The next time you come to Madagascar, there’ll be no more Malagasy. All the people will have starved to death, and a lemur will have to meet you at the airport” (Kottak 1999, p. 33).

A group of anthropologists adhering to the Actor Network Theory (ANT) derived from the studies of the social construction of science and technology by Callon (1986), Latour (1988), and Law (1986) postulate that society and nature are not divisible into easily identifiable compartments, but rather to different kinds of material forms (material heterogeneity), such as humans, machines, devices, and other living organisms. Co-constitutive relationships between people and

nonhumans, including dingoes embody the form, character, and content of human activities and the world which are intimately interdependent – resonating with Latour’s “experimental metaphysics,” which is intended to achieve the “progressive composition” of people and their worlds (Healy 2007). In drawing on ANT, the ethnography of kangaroo products trade by Lorraine Thorne reveals the connections between spaces of calculation and spaces of killing often overlooked and dismissed as unconnected with human lives. A number of noteworthy nonanthropocentric ethnographies emerged out ANT tradition.

The contemporary international trade in kangaroo products is an historically specific, complex set of (attenuated) relationships between hidden spaces, sites, and actors. Spatial metaphors help legitimate the kangaroo industry; in particular, deployment of spatial imaginaries has tangible, material impact upon the animals’ lives. The taxonomy of abundance fuels public acceptance of kangaroo slaughter, underpinned by widespread popular images of “virtual” kangaroo hordes bounding across a flat, virtual landscape. Ultimately, by casting kangaroos as large, abundant “pests” now repackaged to serve the lucrative caused célèbre of biodiversity, the kangaroo trading network profoundly delimits the options for agency of the commercially targeted species. Kangaroo slaughter is thus rendered justifiable – a non-issue.

(Thorne 1998, p. 168)

In their ethnography of otter preservation efforts, Goedeke and Rikoon (2008) use scientific controversy emerging from a river otter restoration project in Missouri to explore the role of nonhuman actors in the dynamism of networks forming to establish the ideals and outcomes of ecological restoration. The authors demonstrated how an epistemic controversy, sparked by the failure of authoritative spokespersons (such as scientists) to address the “rights” of river otters, fish, and waterways, opened the door for a more diverse group of spokespersons who, in turn, enrolled more actors to settle the controversy and emphasize the need to recognize the role of nonhumans as catalysts and actors because of their potential to challenge and change networks.

Kohn (2007) considers the challenges involved in knowing and interacting with other species and the implications this has for the practice of anthropology. He argues for the development of an anthropology that is not just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our “entanglements” (Raffles 2002) with other kinds of living selves. In Tim Ingold’s words, “despite human attempts to hard surface this world, and to block the intermingling of substance and medium that is essential to growth and habitation, the creeping entanglements of life will always and eventually gain the upper hand” (Ingold 2008, p. 1796). Ethnographies exploring emotional connection with nature (Sobel 1996; Milton 2002) and continuing the work in human geography that has been termed “more-than-human,” “posthuman,” and “relational” (Whatmore 2002; Castree 2003; Braun 2008) may provide way forward from the anthropocentric paradigm in which many anthropologists are caught. Furthermore, there is a need for developing an environmentally conscious, nonanthropocentric anthropology – a distinct anthropology of ecology and conservation.

There are also many examples of successful cooperation between local communities and conservation agents, including successful efforts of both conservationist organizations and indigenous peoples to protect natural habitat as well as cultural traditions (which in pre-industrial age used to manifest themselves in successful stewardship of the land and indeed symbiotic relationship

between human and nonhuman species). The extensive body of nonanthropocentric approaches in environmental anthropology includes understanding and building on the social organization of communities in larger social systems for use in identifying and solving environmental problems; understanding local environmental knowledge for use in the preservation of local and global environments; recognizing and addressing differences in cultural perceptions, categories, linguistic terms, values, and behaviors related to the environment in order to confront differences and improve communication among specific cultural/ethnic groups with respect to addressing environmental concerns; as well as identifying and utilizing culturally specific styles of communication and rhetoric typical of designated groups to enhance communication and mutual understanding among groups (Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouimet 2011). Conservation agencies such as World Wide Fund for Nature or WWF are known to have worked together with anthropologists to enhance mutual benefit for local communities and nonhuman species in preserving natural habitat and traditional lifestyle. Examples of such win-win situations are instructive in how biospheric and social altruists can work together toward achieving common goals.

Reflection

The above cases demonstrate that applied development anthropologists as well as those anthropologists working within the constructivist position ignore the welfare of nonhuman species and assume that anthropocentrism is “true.” There are a few objections that the author has to these positions, namely arguing that to assume the truth of anthropocentrism, given that nonanthropocentrism is a viable alternative, is to express an objectionable bias. Anthropologists seem to espouse social altruism and shun away from biospheric altruism. While particularly applied anthropologists assert the importance of (moral) engagement with their subjects, and many mainstream anthropologists adhere to the general code of ethics (which is derived from Western conception of human rights and anti-discrimination ideologies), anthropologists appear to have an objectionable anthropocentric bias. While ethnographies demonstrating racist or anti-feminist bias are normally widely condemned by the mainstream anthropologists, anti-ecocentric or overtly anthropocentric ethnographies seem to easily pass the ethics review.

It may be argued that ecocentrism is a Western ideology forced upon indigenous people (despite mixed evidence that indigenous peoples may have been more ecocentric before Western “development”). However, the other concepts and ethical standpoints that anthropologists embrace are equally Western. The question remains: do we actually want to change that bias in anthropology and if we do, how do we want to do that? Critical examination of hidden biases and ethical assumption within own discipline are not new in anthropology. The author would like to suggest that critical self-examination in the view of environmental ethics theories may be very helpful in bringing the field forward, the way environmental sociologists such as Dunlap have done for their own discipline.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed the differences between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives. Anthropocentrism only grants intrinsic value and, in

prolongation, rights and interests to human beings, while biocentrism's proponents believe in intrinsic value of each individual living organism, including humans, plant and animal species, and ecosystems. This extended view on who is the holder of intrinsic value is used to justify respect across species boundaries, in the sense that consideration for humans and nonhumans encompasses both present and future generations (Eckersley 2004).

As the fictional characters of the Lorax (who speaks for the trees, "for the trees have no tongues") or Balai (who was deeply hurt "when someone plucked flowers from a tree") conservationists are often met with hostility of the communities, governments, and anthropologists. As long as "their" subjects have no voice of their own, those who speak for them may be hailed as traitors to their own species.

The author has argued in the case of "development," it is not always possible to satisfy the interests of both the economically disadvantaged and those who are being "distributed" or "consumed" as part of the expanding economic pie. If interests of the structurally weak and underrepresented – those of other species – are to be taken into consideration, one will need to make hard moral choices, and anthropological arbitration can help. Anthropological engagement and arbitration in the case of nonhuman species would mean working together and not against conservationists. If successful, conservationist anthropologists' contribution to the survival – and well-being – of all creatures on this planet can be great.

As long as ecocentrics' political representation is limited to few large and active environmental non-governmental organizations, ecocentrism is still subordinate to the interests of the immensely more powerful anthropocentrically oriented government and corporate elites. Anthropologists could do more to help conservationist efforts rather than working against them as some cases presented in this article testify, and work toward a viable future of the biosphere of which we are all apart.

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