

Conservation Across Borders: Biodiversity in an Interdependent World

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Conservation across Borders: Biodiversity in an Interdependent World.—Charles C. Chester. 2006. Island Press, Washington, DC. 272 pp., 3 figures, 2 maps. ISBN 1-55963-611-4. \$29.95 (paper).

Conservation across Borders analyzes the history, machinations, shortcomings, and successes of the International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA) and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y). Despite depicting a globe on the cover, the book does not sample the world's cross-border conservation initiatives. It also does not speak to biodiversity conservation, but rather to the role of biodiversity conservation within these two initiatives. But despite a somewhat misleading cover and subtitle, the twists and turns that these complex initiatives have taken are both fascinating and instructive.

In the rather brief first chapter, Chester points out a distinguishing characteristic of both ISDA and Y2Y that might not otherwise occur to us: both initiatives took on their missions without their respective governments. Both were composed mostly of "civil society actors"—citizens, activists, and nongovernmental organizations. That inevitably changed as the initiatives matured. But in the beginning they focused on getting citizens to understand and work with each other directly across international borders. On a number of occasions I found myself pondering the different courses we take when the federal government is the leader versus when nongovernmental organizations or citizens take the lead. A substantial difference between the two initiatives is that ISDA's primary goal was to build an environmentally sound regional economy. Biodiversity conservation was a secondary goal. In contrast, Y2Y's primary goal was conservation of biodiversity with a particular focus on area-sensitive species such as large carnivores. The author discusses the background for biodiversity conservation and related concepts. Much of this will be familiar to those who follow this literature.

Chapter 2 reviews the history of international agreements and programs involving natural resources. Various statistics on the numbers, types, and benefits of transborder protected areas and their effectiveness are presented. The author argues that transborder protected areas have often been too geographically and conceptually restrictive to be

successful in achieving their primary goals. The larger, more comprehensive arrangements such as transfrontier conservation areas through the Global Environment Facility are now favored. These define regions where human and animal populations have historically migrated across borders. Y2Y and ISDA are two of the largest transfrontier conservation areas on the planet, at 1 200 000 km² and 96 000 km², respectively. Chester then outlines the conceptual development of the Man and the Biosphere Program, one mechanism for establishing a transfrontier conservation area. The concept of including various zones, such as protected core areas, buffer zones, research areas, and human settlement areas, was novel and led to now classic ideas of networks of reserves and movement corridors. Surprisingly, local participation was not part of the original conceptual basis of biosphere reserves. This was causing problems in the creation of new biosphere reserves. ISDA, in particular, took note of this shortcoming because one of its primary goals was to create an international biosphere reserve—a goal that has yet to be realized.

The specific content unique to this volume is found in chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3 Chester goes into a detailed description of the history and development of ISDA. He reveals his historian's streak, by starting with the exploration and development of the area, historic resource interests, and the establishment of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in 1937. On the Mexican side, two biosphere reserves were established, the Pinacate y Gran Desierto de Altar Biosphere Reserve and the Alto Golfo de California y Delta del Rio Colorado Biosphere Reserve.

Chester points out that U.S. biosphere reserves suffer from a lack of recognition by the U.S. public and even by the implementing agencies themselves. He argues that political conservatives in the U.S. have successfully created fear in the minds of some that international biosphere designation will lead to loss of control of lands to international forces, and claims that some in the U.S. National Park Service saw the Organ Pipe Biosphere Reserve designation as an award, not as a concept for solving problems as envisioned by the Man and the Biosphere Program.

Mexican leaders realized that the U.S. national park model, which took lands out of the hands of the local people, would not work in Mexico, where it is simply essential to have a union of conservation and rational land use. The overall success of the biosphere concept in Mexico is difficult to discern. Each of Mexico's 24 biosphere reserves has produced different results.

Although both ISDA and Y2Y include Native American groups, the inclusion of the O'odham, the predominant indigenous group in ISDA, was critically important. The O'odham's highest priority issues—loss of culture, access to water, disagreements over the boundary of their nation—were fundamental components of ISDA's mission. Successes within ISDA were often due to opening lines of communication with groups such as the O'odham that had felt isolated and self-contained. This can be contrasted with the role of First Nations peoples in Y2Y that, while eventually critical to the achievement of key

successes at the Yukon end of the initiative, were not a fundamental part of the initiative from the beginning.

Despite the inclusiveness of ISDA and its mission of developing a sustainable regional economy, an international Sonoran Desert Biosphere Reserve was never formed. That may have been due simply to logistical problems, such as geographic isolation of partners, the necessity of translating all documents into at least three languages, a lack of modern communication technologies, and even a poor system for traditional mail. But there were also shortcomings among U.S. federal agencies, including staff turnover, cultural insensitivity, lack of agreement among agencies, and fear of losing jurisdiction over the lands. The author concludes that in many ways the area is actually functioning as a biosphere reserve, which is one very substantial benefit of years of discussions and the building of relationships among the people and groups in the region.

In Chapter 4, Chester covers the history, successes, and shortcomings of Y2Y. This chapter is especially thought-provoking because the similarities and contrasts to ISDA become evident at every turn. Y2Y was the first major attempt to apply the then-recent principles of conservation biology. Patch size, connectivity, and umbrella species concepts were set on a landscape perfectly suited for such an enterprise. There was even some debate early on over whether to restrict Y2Y to conservation biologists and scientists. Y2Y has maintained a strong core of science, but did become more inclusive. A substantial tourist infrastructure was already in place that helped move certain activities forward. Also in contrast to ISDA, Y2Y succeeded in obtaining significant foundation funding to hire staff and develop the initiative. This helped produce good media coverage and many publications.

Opposition to the Y2Y initiative came from a familiar direction. Private land activists feared government land grabs and a loss of control to mysterious international forces. More legitimate concerns were raised over ambiguity in Y2Y goals and particularly in how extractive industries would be viewed. However, the author argues that Y2Y has succeeded very well on several fronts. The vision has been truly inspirational to its partners. Y2Y has established a durable network among groups, many of whom did not know that others even existed. Y2Y also opened up true cross-border communications and learning through many capacity-building workshops.

The problem of evaluating the effectiveness of large programs is addressed in Chapter 5. This chapter was a bit disappointing, because rather than attempting to evaluate effectiveness, the author chose to discuss how one might evaluate effectiveness. I suspect that Chester did want to make the evaluation, but realized that none of the methods were going to work very well. Nonetheless, this review of evaluation methods will be useful to those facing evaluation of a large, complex project. I will be revisiting this myself. But perhaps this avoidance of actually doing the evaluation is telling. The author obtained much of the material for this book by interviewing

individuals involved in the initiatives. He asked them whether or not their respective initiative had succeeded. The answers varied greatly. Some respondents would attribute a success entirely to the initiative while the next would say that achievement would have happened anyway. The conclusion is that these are complex, multifaceted phenomena with a variety of small and large objectives, small and large successes, and small and large failures. There is nothing linear, nothing simple, and no very good way to assign a summary grade.

The author concludes with a comparison of the initiatives with each other. He addresses seven issues: mission breadth, constituency inclusion, communications systems, scientific participation and support, leadership dynamics, political backlash, and landscape vision. This analysis is very instructive and gives the readers many good points to consider. I would add one more factor to this comparison, and that is the degree to which imitators have emerged—success breeds copycats.

Although the subtitle in particular is misleading, this book has some very valuable content. I think the careful and insightful histories of ISDA and Y2Y will be of interest to anyone working in a large conservation initiative. There are both familiar and novel issues, strategies, and ideas. The background on international conservation initiatives and the possible ways of evaluating effectiveness of complex programs should also prove as valuable references, especially for those who are new to this very large and complicated arena.

Near the end of chapter 3 (p. 118) on ISDA, Chester writes, “In contemplating whether to engage in ‘transborder conservation,’ do not be intimidated by the threat of failure or fact of ominous societal forces working against the prospect of success.” This book will increase your prospects of success.—
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