

Conservation Across Borders: Biodiversity in an Interdependent World

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Conservation Across Borders: Biodiversity in an Interdependent World

By Charles Chester. Washington, Covelo, London, Island Press, 2006. xv + 262 pp. US\$ 35.00. ISBN 1-55963-611-4.

There has been wide enthusiasm in the past 15 years for localized transboundary initiatives in nature conservation. On an international level, many international conservation organizations, such as The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), as well as a myriad of nongovernmental organizations and activist groups on all continents, have hopped enthusiastically onto the transboundary bandwagon, each promoting locally relevant initiatives following different agendas. In line with bioregional ideas and the ecosystem approach promoted by the Convention on Biological Diversity, such initiatives have captured the imagination. They have been seen as one basis for applying all the seemingly contradictory ideals of conservation, development, sustainable development, regional identity construction, political devolution, and tourism promotion within one site, defined primarily along biophysical criteria. Transboundary conservation was seized upon as the geographical equivalent of the Theory of Everything by a variety of actors.

Four main arguments are usually presented in the literature to argue for the necessity of transboundary protected areas: three are ecological and one is political. The first relates to scale; the second, in direct consequence of the first, to the increasing importance of the network approach, physically and administratively linking protected areas across the land-

scape. As such, a protected area spanning a boundary is seen to effectively create a key node in any continent-wide network. The third is that the ecologically valuable sites that most repay conserving often cross land boundaries, for various historical and topographic reasons. The fourth argument concerns the opportunity of using the field of environmental management for fostering good neighborly relations, cementing and reinforcing confidence between states.

It has taken several years of overwhelming enthusiasm before critical voices have emerged, questioning the near-universal endorsement of transboundary protected areas and the assumptions about cooperation that have prevailed. Chester's well-researched book offers an interesting alternative: he is refreshingly open about his enthusiasm for transboundary initiatives, yet offers enough detail for useful caveats to emerge. His book, a well-reworked version of his PhD thesis, offers an in-depth perspective of two transborder projects spanning North America, in areas stretching from the Yukon, in the Yellowstone to Yukon "Y2Y" Conservation Initiative, all the way South to the Sonoran Desert, in the Sonoran Desert Alliance. These projects are so wide and so ambitious that people living in these areas are rarely aware of them: in a sense, Chester shows how this need not matter, as one of the main effects of this rescaling is the rethinking of planning and social identification for a wide coalition of actors working on models of transboundary environmental governance.

The explicit ambition of these two projects is overwhelming: putting landscape-scale protection into place over vast areas, across a huge variety of different management authorities and instruments, including protected areas, biosphere reserves, private lands, and wilderness areas. As Chester notes, this is a question of complicating matters ever further, adding a further transnational di-

mension, in order to solve a problem. Actors in these areas are trying to overcome what are seen as the "unnatural divisions" in their regions by making some kind of sense out of the living landscapes they inhabit, rising above what he calls rather nicely the existing "Territories of chance." While one might take issue with his unproblematic position that political borders are "unnatural," despite this having been the subject of huge debates within political geography and political science, his position is—on the whole—well argued and documented. The issues he raises have been much debated in the social sciences in recent years, in a variety of disciplines. Geographers, for instance, have developed renewed regional approaches that focus more than ever on actor strategies and collective identities in a global world, as well as new types of referents (heritage, culture, natural features, etc) as a basis for regionalization. Likewise, recent international relations (IR) studies have focused on the coproduction of environmental knowledge and environmental policy, demonstrating how regional environmental assessment practices have contributed to the construction of regions and shaped policy options accordingly. Chester fits into this IR literature by focusing on local and regional responses to transborder initiatives, noting amusingly that "international relations constitutes a far more complex beast than the stereotypical image of worldly diplomats staring each other down across a mahogany table" (p 13)!

A book made up of two substantial and successive case studies, written up in great depth, might sound rather dry or daunting, or of interest only to those directly involved. Chester does seek, after all, to write *the* story of these two sites, with a healthy dose of trepidation and fear of such a responsibility. He also usefully provides an extensive history of transboundary protected areas, biosphere reserves, and other transborder ini-

tiatives in the first 50 pages, of interest to many outside the region. That this book does not come across as dry is largely due to Chester's light writing and way with words. What might have been nothing more than a rather stark analytical history ends up being perfectly readable due to the various wonderful asides he slips in—tales of bears attacking Lewis and Clark, cheeky comments on tensions between human alpha males, or his comparison of himself, as researcher, to a dazed Dorothy in the Kansas fields.

This is a mature, interesting book that represents some sort of ideal of a reworked PhD dissertation, rich on detail and case study material, yet

sympathetic to theory. The last section on “conservation effectiveness” is perhaps the least convincing, though well argued and referenced, and despite Chester noting that no question “is more important than that of effectiveness” (p 219), applying to both means and ends. But this is, of course, something extremely difficult to measure, notwithstanding rather rough attempts to create equations of multiple variables. In a sense, effectiveness is an inevitable topic since people will invariably ask whether such huge initiatives actually make a difference on the ground. In a sense, the question is largely answered in the case studies themselves: the

simple fact of rescaling conservation, of offering the ability to dream and strategize beyond the local and feel somehow connected to others facing similar, or different, struggles, is in itself a huge step. That, perhaps more than anything, is a valuable lesson learned from conservation across borders.

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