Conserving cultural and biological diversity

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Globalisation is responsible for the erosion of indigenous communities across the developing world and major donors have been weak and uncertain in both their policies and actual funding. Only when there is opposition to major infrastructure projects is notice taken, although this is a minor element in a broad process of mining natural resources and cultural assimilation. Diversity in indigenous communities tends to correlate with biological diversity and to represent a major resource of traditional knowledge which is still barely exploited. Recent UN initiatives and the policies of individual countries suggest that pressure for change is mounting but a framework of rights for ethnic minorities that recognises issues of both control of natural resources and cultural transmission remains to be developed.

> *The mountains that surround it on every side fortify the land marvellously against the enterprises of foreigners. … Whole forests of timber grow at the foot of these mountains seeming to have been planted intentionally to serve as a rampart against the great falls of rain which would cause great damage if there were not this natural obstacle.*
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- Globalisation is a major cause of the rapid erosion of ethnic diversity. This should be as much a source of concern as the loss of biological diversity.
- Traditional communities are characterised by greater social cohesion and have thus high levels of social capital compared with more socially fragmented populations with greater access to global goods and services.
- Development agencies give low priority to maintenance of traditional cultural values, and these are usually decoupled from conservation of biological resources.
- Ethnic diversity is strongly correlated with biological diversity at present, although this link is being broken wherever indigenous peoples inhabit environments with high resource-values.
- Indigenous communities represent a major repository of indigenous knowledge concerning the environment, which is being lost as rapidly as the particular environments they inhabit.
- Support to national governments to both maintain the habitat of such communities and reinforce cultural values through promotion of educational materials in minority languages, together with controls on multinationals and exploitative tourism can promote the effective adaptation of such communities to the external world.

Globalisation and ethnic diversity

One of the more uncomfortable and thus less discussed consequences of globalisation is the erosion of ethnic diversity. It is somewhat paradoxical that extensive human and economic resources can be mobilised for the conservation of biological diversity but little or none for human cultures. Television screens are dominated by alluring imagery of wild nature while eschewing all but a very few anthropological films. Non-anthropologists find little of concern here; peoples who don't speak the language of the dominant group or subscribe to its values are in many ways a block to the spread of global culture. The presence of satellite dishes or designer sunglasses in remote villages is hardly more than a subject for humorous comment. Globalisation is a polite new formulation of Westernisation and its discourse never really encompasses the disappearance of some minor hill-tribe in SE Asia or the assimilation of a group of hunter-gatherers in the Amazon.

Nonetheless, there are reasons to think we should be concerned at the erosion of ethnic diversity; it is strongly linked to social coherence, and to value systems that make possible effective management of natural resources. Indeed, new communications technologies are making possible a type of eco-activism that is challenging economically driven habitat conversion projects. The range of social and aesthetic values represented by diversity have had a powerful role in the renewal of dominant cultures. Moreover,

there is a strong correlation between the maintenance of ethnic diversity and the conservation of biodiversity as well as a reservoir of indigenous knowledge about the environment which remains largely untapped. Ideas about the rights of ethnic minorities, especially in relation to control over natural resources remain hazy and undeveloped and it is in the interest of powerful majorities that this should be the case. However, both the growth of focussed protests and an increasing awareness of the consequences of erosion argue that this issue should be attracting more of our attention.

Why aren't development agencies more interested?

Development agencies have displayed remarkably little interest in indigenous peoples and usually display the same split mentality as the visual media, giving low priority to the preservation of traditional cultural values compared to the conservation of biological resources. In some ways, this is curious, as there is a strong correlation between the presence of viable minorities and social cohesion. Ethnicity develops as the signature of distinct culture evolves and this is reflected as much in dress as in agriculture and social structure. For a group to cohere it must have powerful internal mechanisms to maintain and develop ethnic boundary markers. However, these also enforce social rules and are usually the channel for collective action, notably in the field of agriculture and public works. It is therefore no surprise that poverty and social fragmentation are at their worst on the periphery of dominant cultures, particularly in cities and their hinterland. People are poor in part because they have no frameworks for collective action and thus no way of articulating their deprivation. The cultural loss implied by migration and assimilation is also part of the same downward economic spiral. If this is so, then presumably the high levels of social capital minority culture implies should be worth preserving.

But seeking support to prevent encroachment on the land of a minority group, to translate textbooks or subsidise radio programmes can be intensely dispiriting. Donors have few frameworks to fund these activities and the funds available are small and often discretionary, in marked contrast to the large sums available for the infrastructure projects that act to erode ethnic minority culture. There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that most donor countries have limited experience of managing ethnic diversity, or in the case of Australia and the United States, have such a blighted record in this area that they may prefer to forget it. It took until 1997 for Japan to recognise the Ainu as the indigenous people of the Japanese islands, already too late for the Ainu language, last spoken some time in the 1960s. Europe is a region of strikingly low ethnic diversity, and nation states may have only one or two groups whose size, articulacy and access to resources puts them in a far different category from minorities in developing countries. The United Nations, perhaps because of its own internal diversity, is definitely more advanced in this area; it initiated the *International Decade of the World's Indigenous People* in 1995 is about to create a permanent forum on indigenous rights.

However, there may be another reason for the uncertainties of major agencies. Donors are often uncomfortable with the picturesque because it challenges the abstractions of economics. Reducing populations to household income levels, nutritional status or infant mortality allows administrators to make resource allocations along neat and defensible lines. Minority populations have an inconvenient variety of marital patterns and social structures that make uniform solutions difficult to apply. Planning to encompass diversity requires much more extensive background information and a willingness to essay more risky strategies. At another level this attitude derives from an old philosophical favourite, the distinction between culture and nature. Culture is religion, architecture, dress and although worthy, set apart from forests, fish and the day-to-day business of getting a living. But it hardly takes lengthy investigation among indigenous peoples to see that such a distinction makes no sense. It is precisely those features of ethnic identity that make possible the accumulation of social capital which in turn allow communities to manage resources coherently. If we act to reduce the impact of global culture and support local institutions of any type, we also support the structures that reduce dependency on outside assistance.

Indigenous peoples and the challenge to the state

If concerns about indigenous peoples have been more visible in recent times, it is principally in relation to their opposition to infrastructure projects. Famously, the Uwa of Colombia have threatened to commit

mass suicide if Occidental Petroleum goes ahead with a plan to extract oil from their land. Less melodramatic are the drawn-out struggles of the Pehuenche (a Mapuche subgroup) against a series of dams on the Bio-Bio river in Chile. The dams, supposedly to both provide electricity and expand irrigation, will also flood large areas of Pehuenche land, destroy unique ecosystems and accelerate immigration into the region. The Chilean state is lacking in traditions of concern for the interests of minorities and simply over-rode their protests in the case of the first dam. But the ability to mobilise international NGOs and carry their concerns to the World Bank has meant that the overall development of the river has been almost halted.

This example illuminates all the main issues of this type of natural resource conflict. The state arrogates the right to make natural resource management decisions against the wishes of a minority population. Unable to fund a project it must then apply to international sources of finance. This then makes it then vulnerable to an organised opposition which uses contacts with international NGOs to put pressure on the external institutions. Structurally, the local group is accessing global morality directly rather than addressing the state in the national arena, correctly perceiving that they will almost inevitably lose.

Box 1. Technology and the rebuilding of ethnicity: the Huron

Just as the internet builds communities of special interest groups which could rarely evolve in the context of face-to-face communication, so it has acted to reconstruct minorities which were near extinction through assimilation. The Huron people of present-day Quebec declined to less than 1000 acknowledged members with a corresponding loss of articulacy in defending their rights. However, active electronic networks have allowed them to contact dispersed members of the group and there are now some 10,000 Huron forming a confederacy and taking part in collective decisions. This type of deassimilation is of course not entirely disinterested. In the United States, where the legal status of reservations has allowed Indian groups to open casinos within the boundaries of states that do not allow gambling, individuals who Amerindian connections could be charitably described as 'slight' have suddenly begun to re-affirm their ancestry in large numbers in order to take advantage of the gambling tables.

Dam projects, with their over-optimistic economic projections and dishonest environmental appraisals, represent an ideal target. However, successful opposition depends on a critical level of articulacy at the local level connecting to international civil society. Where the local group is fragmented or under violent attack, this is sometimes not the case, especially where their lands are being slowly eroded by individual seizures, the mining of natural resources or by habitat conversion. But minority rights should clearly not depend on relative articulacy or even the nature of the project that undermines their access to resources and a more comprehensive framework of rights for such groups should provide support in all contexts.

Ethics and minority culture

Two significant arguments are usually produced against this approach; that we have no right to prevent people from gaining access to global goods and services and that some aspects of traditional society are so repugnant to the 'modern' world we have to act to modify them. The first argument is wholly specious; human beings are not normally equipped with the 'right' to Coca-Cola or internet access and it would be curious to suggest they are thereby deprived when these are not available. As the recent tobacco wars have shown, multinational companies are absolutely ruthless in promoting their product to vulnerable populations and will develop powerful propaganda tools to reach the remotest communities. There is no reason to think that we should countenance any but the severest restrictions on the operations of such corporations when they serve only the interests of the over-consuming societies.

The second argument, that some practices offend global morality, surely has some merit, but should not become an all-encompassing justification for interference in other cultures. The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a significant growth in what may be called disapproval ratings. The North continued to discover practices and behaviour deemed unacceptable, whether it was polygamy, circumcision, child labour, standards of bodily exposure or traditional medical structures. We were invited to be appalled, thereby justifying intervention. By present-day standards these practices are

indeed morally unacceptable. But a rapid backwards look at changing Northern ethical standards should make us wary of confusing morals with our uneasiness in the face of cultures that challenge our own. Medical systems are a good example of this; when the North first confronted non-Western medical systems they were treated as objects of ridicule and an attempt was made to supplant them. As we have learnt the value of these formerly exotic systems they are gradually being adopted as significant parallel structures. In this case there are few easy answers; presumably it *was* acceptable to try and convince other societies not to practise cannibalism. Nonetheless, a more sceptical view of Northern motives and a more subtle appreciation of the cultures in which unusual practices are embedded would ensure .

Ethnic and biological diversity

Until recently, there has been a fairly strong correlation between ethnic and biological diversity. In other words, where many distinct human groups live, there is also likely to be considerable habitat diversity with corresponding conservation of fauna and flora. The reasons for this are debated but it is likely that;

a) High levels of ethnic diversity imply an absence of a dominant ethnic group
b) Dominant ethnic groups become so because economic or technical structures permit them to dominate their neighbours demographically
c) Numerical dominance is historically followed by habitat conversion on a large scale.

An example of this process is the expansion of rice-growing peoples into the wetlands of Southeast Asia. As the Thai, Khmer, Việt and Han moved into the low-lying swampy areas of East Asia they gradually assimilated the resident low-density populations and converted what must have been highly biodiverse habitats into rice-paddies. Minorities either adopted an occupational specialisation or were pushed into mountainous areas to hunt and gather or practise swidden agriculture. High dependency on wild resources stimulates an awareness of their limited availability and usually some sort of conservationist ethic. Regions of the world with high ethnic diversity such as the Amazon rainforest, New Guinea and the Congo Basin also show rich biological diversity.

Box 2. Peoples and forests in Laos
The Lao PDR probably has the highest ethnic diversity of the countries within the Eurasian landmass. A recent survey (Chazée 1999) estimates some 149 ethnic groups in a population of 4.7 million or a mean group size of ca. 30,000. For comparison, Việt Nam has a population of 80 million and 54 ethnic groups, a mean of 1.5 million. Unmanaged vegetation cover in Laos may be as high as 85% and forest cover was estimated at 70% in 1940, although it has now fallen to 40% of the land area. Forest cover is estimated to be declining at 0-5-7% per year (TRP 2000). The recent discovery of a large land mammal, the *nyang* (*Pseudoryx nghethingensis*) suggests how inaccessible some of the woodlands remain.

However, where an environment contains resources valuable to world trade and is sufficiently accessible for those resources to be extracted, all bets are off. In recent years, timber, wildlife, fish and minerals have become effectively defined as the property of the nation state and not of the people who inhabit the region where they occur. The reality appears to be that no matter what conventions national governments sign and ratify and whatever promises they may make to donors or MLAs, resource extraction continues relentlessly. The value of tropical hardwoods, tiger-bones or gold is such that powerful individuals within government or the military are unlikely to ignore such an accessible source of personal and collective wealth whatever formularies they present to the outside world. Comparative satellite imagery, now available for nearly a quarter of a century, makes all too plain the worldwide scale of deforestation.

The victims of this are of course the flora and fauna of biodiverse regions and the human populations that depend on that diversity. The Brazilian Amazon exemplifies how ethnic diversity decreases as biodiversity is reduced. At the turn of the century there are thought to have been some 200 distinct peoples in the forest region; now there are ca. 50. At the same time, the overall area of the rainforest has fallen by some 35% (Groombridge & Jenkins 2000). Although the history of violence against indigenous peoples in Brazil is particularly grim, the forces underlying assimilation and deculturation remain equally powerful. Costa Rica, where policies have been considerably more sympathetic to Amerindians has suffered a similar decline (Coates 1997).

Ethnic diversity and indigenous knowledge

Enthusiasm for indigenous knowledge has grown so rapidly in recent years, particularly among non-anthropologists, that it is hard sometimes to remember that this is not reflected in an increased understanding of indigenous cultures. Like multi-culturalism, indigenous knowledge is about picking and choosing local aspects of understanding of the external world that fit with passing fashions. Nonetheless, precisely because ethnic diversity corresponds to habitat diversity, each different group of people will have developed an individual understanding of the natural world. If we consider the habitat itself worth conserving then it seems perverse not to value equally the accumulation of knowledge concerning it. The task is to record, sort and synthesise this vast body of knowledge. Although scientific knowledge of biodiversity has increased considerably since the 1980s, practical field guides and detailed expositions of the environmental knowledge of minority cultures have yet to experience the same growth, largely because donors consider this an academic exercise with no immediate development payback.

Loved to death

It is of course not true that ethnic diversity is ignored; in the developed world it has been reinvented as multi-culturalism. If children of approximately West Indian origin can tootle Bach on steel drums this can serve as an example of the maintenance of cultural heritage. Shops selling mass-produced handicrafts and restaurants offering unusual cuisine seem to testify to a new appreciation of diversity. But this is a lie; we only want a picture-postcard of culture. Migrants who come with inappropriate ideas about gender or bodily mutilation are rapidly educated in the limits of multi-culturalism.

The other side of the coin is tourism in regions of high ethnic diversity and easy accessibility. Tourists used to be satisfied with museums and folk-dancing, but they increasingly demand reality television. So peoples caught in the wrong place at the wrong time begin to be visited by curious and bored emissaries from the outside world. Some visitors are serious and respectful, some tactless and stupid, but no minority cultures can survive such an onslaught for long. In the world of nature conservation, tourists are urged to 'take only photos' –but then animals have nothing to sell. Tourists soon start wanting to buy up the material possessions of minorities in the same way they were once content with bullfight posters. People with embroidered skirts and portable wooden statuettes have really only two responses, to sell their possessions and replace them with the cast-off junk of industrial society or to manufacture more possessions while retaining their picturesque lifestyles to validate what they sell. Thailand's hill-tribes represent one of the more unhappy examples of this type of tourism, as their villages become heritage versions of themselves, populated by blank-faced villagers intent on extracting as much as possible from the ever-increasing caravans of trekkers, caught in the occult treadmill of international travel and the powerful admonitions of a flood of guide-books.

National policies and international rights

Unlike biodiversity, where there is powerful international pressure to sign international conventions and produce action plans, policy on cultural diversity is very much left to the whim of particular ideological systems. South and Central American governments have been notorious for unacceptable policies towards indigenous peoples, policies often resulting from greed to control resources and enforced with brutal paramilitary action. The draining of the marshes of southern Iraq was an intentional destruction of a habitat to scatter the Marsh Arabs, whose society depended on access to the waterways. Indonesia's ill-famed transmigration programmes were only part of a much longer-term attempt to assimilate its minority cultures. In contrast, the last few years have seen some surprising turnarounds in government attitudes. Morocco, from a situation where its Berber populations were heavily repressed, has now begun to support Berber cultural renovation. Laos and Việt Nam have recently published ethnic minority inventories accompanied by positive glosses (Chazée 1999; Vạn, Sơn, & Hùng 2000). Colombia also has extremely forward-looking policies in relation to self-determination by its Amerindian peoples (Arango, Raúl & Sánchez 1997).

This is not to say that minority cultures can or should be kept in a museum or under glass. They need the

tools to adapt to the external world on equal terms. Support to national governments to both maintain the habitat of such communities and reinforce cultural values through promotion of educational materials in minority languages, together with controls on exploitative tourism can promote the effective adaptation of such communities to the external world. A framework that recognises the obligation of citizens within a nation-state must be mediated by a broader global system of rights of minority communities to both control natural resources and have access to the means of cultural promotion and reproduction.

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