



INSTITUTE FOR
**ECOLOGICAL
CIVILIZATION**

CONSERVATION ECONOMIES BRIEF:

REFRAMING THE CONSERVATION CONVERSATION



The following is a collection of ideas and themes from experts in community conservation during the summer of 2021.

The Institute for Ecological Civilization (EcoCiv) would like to extend a special thanks to Grant Fowlds, Emmanuel Sulle, Shannon Biggs, Casey Camp Horinek, James Arnott, Neema Pathak Broome, Lisa Ferguson, and Sheherazade for sharing their valuable insights. In sharing these ideas, EcoCiv hopes to inform stakeholders in conservation and prompt more effective community conservation projects for just, equitable, and effective conservation globally, ultimately catalyzing a transition away from fortress conservation models.

CHANGING THE DISCOURSE

For centuries, the dominant conservation model has been “fortress conservation”, in which natural spaces are protected by excluding humans who are blamed for ecological degradation. However, over the last ten years, scientific discourse has countered this. Research has shown that **involving communities in conservation results in far better ecological outcomes** – and leaders on the ground agree. Disrupting fortress conservation narratives in support of community-based conservation is now seen as vital to the survival of the planet’s ecosystems – the vital organs to sustain life on earth. Unfortunately, a global consensus on the definition and the core principles of community conservation or “conservation economies” is yet to be achieved. This lack of consensus makes it difficult for key stakeholders, including foundations and large NGOs to support community conservation projects over traditional fortress conservation models.

A PRELIMINARY DEFINITION

A Conservation Economy focuses equally on local community leadership, ecological wellbeing, and economic functionality. These “economies” -- or systems -- operate by linking the intrinsic value of nature to the understanding that sustainable management of resources can provide economic opportunity for Indigenous and rural communities through restorative, conservation-based revenue streams for stakeholders. Indigenous and rural communities are the leaders of Conservation Economies, centering their voices and knowledge for the best ecological and economic outcomes in their local context.

SETTING THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE

- Inclusionary conservation economies with Indigenous and rural communities are the most critical conservation initiatives the world has ever seen.
- Indigenous peoples need support and recognition of their role as custodians of nature.
- Conversations and engagement between stakeholders must be adequately facilitated so all participants have the opportunity to make their voices heard.
 - ▶ Gender balance is needed.
 - ▶ A neutral, unbiased facilitator is vital.
- Both external conservationists and local community members need to be educated; external conservationists need to center communities' voices while communities need to unlearn their negative view of conservation. Trust building work needs to occur on both sides.
 - ▶ Big conservation organizations need to ensure staff have the tools, training, and knowledge to apply an integrated model that engages communities from the beginning.

CREATING SUSTAINABLE FINANCIAL MODELS

- Financial sustainability is vital to the success of a conservation economy project.
- There is no single model for financial success; customizing financial frameworks to each community's context is necessary.
- Ensuring equitable revenue sharing agreements is necessary for just Conservation Economies. Indigenous and rural communities must receive fair revenue sharing with all partners.
 - ▶ Particularly in tourism, foreign businesses often profit far more than local communities.
- Local community groups must be strategic in seeking funding and have a plan for growth. Philanthropists often fund early-stage projects, while impact investors hesitate because often these projects are high risk and low return, but they are an important source of funding in later stages.
- Big conservation NGOs are the gatekeepers of funding; they need to shift their priorities towards community conservation.
 - ▶ Funding priorities need to shift from species-specific to ecosystem/community centered.
- Tourism is an inevitable component of financial sustainability in many regions, e.g. South and East Africa.
 - ▶ Tourism must emphasize genuine cross-cultural connections over cultural exploitation.
 - ▶ Indigenous and rural communities must diversify revenue streams to avoid overdependence on tourism.
- Indigenous and rural communities need to be informed about the threats and benefits of any financial agreement.

COLLABORATION DRIVING COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

- Empowering Indigenous and rural communities is critical, but also where most projects fail.
 - ▶ Indigenous and rural communities must not be treated as an “added component” to conservation but as leaders. Other stakeholders should be present to support the community or act as facilitators.
- Indigenous and rural community engagement and leadership from the beginning is essential for financial sustainability.
- Collaboration must center what Indigenous and rural communities need, not what outsiders think they need.
- Indigenous and rural communities should feel and retain their sense of ownership of the land and have cultural dignity for effective conservation.
- Community capacity building is key. Communities need many stakeholders/partners supporting their vision. In a “Portfolio” approach, you need many partners with different skills for ongoing mentorship and support.
- Governments provide an important enabling environment via technical support, financing, legal structures, regulations, and infrastructure.

TOWARDS EQUITABLE POLICY

- Conservation Economy principles need to be incorporated from the beginning of the policy process to avoid exploitation of people or resources but it is also where most projects fail.
- Conservation economies need a supportive governance, policy, and legal framework.
- Indigenous sovereignty is crucial.
- Inclusive governance systems are difficult to implement because of colonial legacies in many places; existing power structures often exploit Indigenous and local communities to benefit the elites.
- The Rights of Nature need to be recognized. This is part of undoing the colonial legacies that separate humans from nature.

The background is a photograph of a misty forest with tall evergreen trees and a field of dry, brown grass in the foreground. Overlaid on the left side of the image are several large, semi-transparent circles in various colors: light blue, yellow, green, and brown. These circles overlap each other and the background image.

Interested in getting involved with EcoCiv's Conservation Economies work?
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