Conservation Refugees
The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples

Mark Dowie

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
The challenge is not to preserve “the wild” but peoples’ relationships with the wild.
—Bill Adams, Cambridge University

What you are about to read is a good guy vs. good guy story. The major contestants, transnational conservation and the worldwide movement of indigenous peoples, share a goal that is vital to all of us—a healthy and diverse biota. Both contestants are communities of integrity led by some of the most admirable, dedicated people in modern civilization. Both care deeply for the planet and together are capable of preserving more biological diversity than any other two institutions. Yet sadly, they have been terribly at odds with one another over the past century or more, violently so at times, due mostly to conflicting views of nature, radically different definitions of “wilderness,” and profound misunderstandings of each other’s perspectives on science and culture. The observed arrogance of transnational conservation is a confounding factor; so is the unfortunate but quite understandable tendency of native people to conflate conservation with other imperial forces. The result of this century-old conflict is thousands of unmanageable protected areas, and an intractable debate over who holds the key to successful conservation in the most biologically rich areas of the world.

Not everyone on either side of this issue will agree with the assertion that this is a good guy/good guy story. One peer reviewer said that it was instead “a story about a hegemonic form of nature protection in a post-colonial context and its effects on formerly colonized peoples . . . [and] about the complex struggles and interactions that take
place in this context.” That is also true. But as imperious as some post-colonial conservation leaders have been, their larger mission has been to protect endangered wildlife and biological diversity. Thus they should not be assigned the same “bad guy” status as “extractive corporados” and others who push native people around and compromise ecosystems in their avaricious quest for resources and profit.

I wrote this book with the hope that as conservationists and native people converge uneasily they can come to agreement that they both own the interdependent causes of biodiversity conservation and cultural survival, that they need each other badly, and that together they can create a new conservation paradigm that honors and respects the lifeways of people who have been living sustainably for generations on what can only be fairly regarded as their native land. And it is my hope that native people will blend their ancient traditional knowledge systems with the comparatively new sciences of ecology and conservation biology, in search of new and better ways to preserve the diversity of species that is not only vital to their own security but also to all life on Earth. At this point, as the entire planet seems poised to tip into ecological chaos, with almost forty thousand plant and animal species facing extinction1 and 60 percent of the ecosystem services that support life on Earth failing,2 there may be no other way.