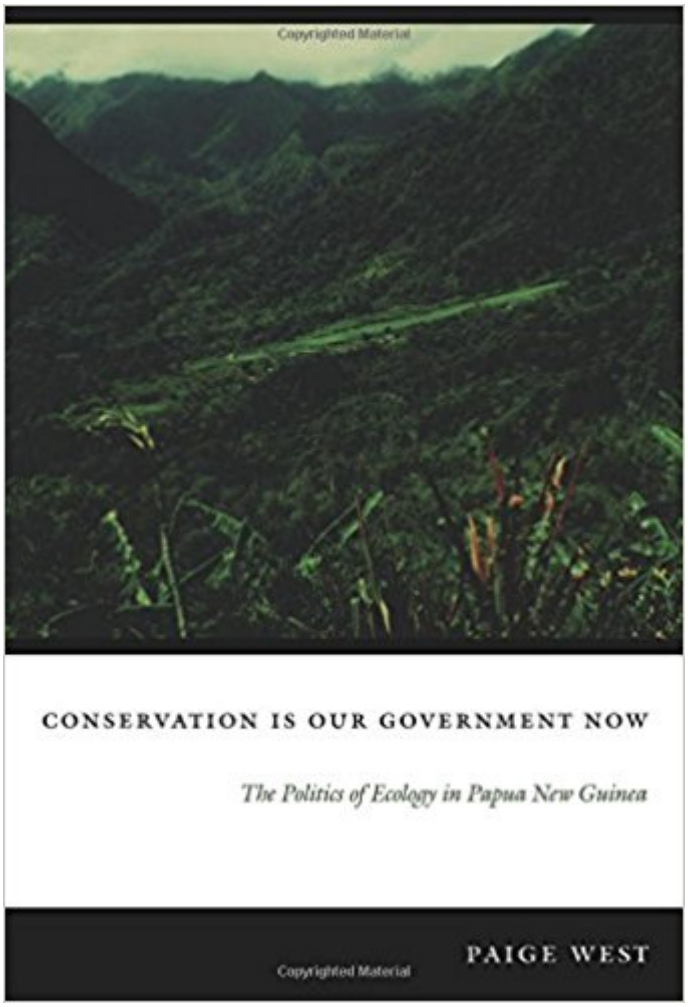
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Conservation Is Our Government Now: The Politics Of Ecology In Papua New Guinea (New Ecologies For The Twenty-First Century)



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Synopsis

A significant contribution to political ecology, Conservation Is Our Government Now is an ethnographic examination of the history and social effects of conservation and development efforts in Papua New Guinea. Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted over a period of seven years, Paige West focuses on the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area, the site of a biodiversity conservation project implemented between 1994 and 1999. She describes the interactions between those who ran the programÃ¢â ¬â •mostly ngo workersÃ¢â ¬â •and the Gimi people who live in the forests surrounding Crater Mountain. West shows that throughout the project there was a profound disconnect between the goals of the two groups. The ngo workers thought that they would encourage conservation and cultivate development by teaching Gimi to value biodiversity as an economic resource. The villagers expected that in exchange for the land, labor, food, and friendship they offered the conservation workers, they would receive benefits, such as medicine and technology. In the end, the divergent nature of each groupÃ¢â ¬â„¢s expectations led to disappointment for both.West reveals how every aspect of the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management AreaÃ¢â ¬â •including ideas of space, place, environment, and societyÃ¢â ¬â •was socially produced, created by changing configurations of ideas, actions, and material relations not only in Papua New Guinea but also in other locations around the world. Complicating many of the assumptions about nature, culture, and development underlying contemporary conservation efforts, Conservation Is Our Government Now demonstrates the unique capacity of ethnography to illuminate the relationship between the global and the local, between transnational processes and individual lives.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ã¢â ¬Å“Conservation Is Our Government Now is a timely and significant contribution to contemporary critical scholarship on conservation. More than any other study of which I am aware, it provides an ethnographically rich, nuanced account of the encounter between conservation practitioners and a local community. It is an exemplar of the power of ethnographic writing to reveal other subjectivities and other ways of being.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â •J. Peter Brosius, coeditor of Communities and Conservation: Histories and Politics of Community-Based Natural Resource ManagementÃ¢â ¬Å“Incisive, moving, and beautifully written, Conservation Is Our Government Now is an absolutely exemplary study and a completely absorbing narrative. It is quite simply one of the most sophisticated political ecology books I have read to date.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â •Neil Smith, author of The Endgame of Globalization

""Conservation Is Our Government Now" is a timely and significant contribution to contemporary critical scholarship on conservation. More than any other study of which I am aware, it provides an ethnographically rich, nuanced account of the encounter between conservation practitioners and a local community. It is an exemplar of the power of ethnographic writing to reveal other subjectivities and other ways of being."--J. Peter Brosius, coeditor of "Communities and Conservation: Histories and Politics of Community-Based Natural Resource Management"

Perfect

A multispecies zeitgeist is sweeping anthropology. A central reference point for this lively conversation is a question that was first posed by Donna Haraway: "what counts as nature, for whom, and at what cost?" Paige West speaks to this question - exploring how the idea of nature was torqued during encounters among New Guinea highlanders, biologists, and other foreign ecophiles.West illustrates how a hybrid environmental ethics was forged among competing political, economic, and symbolic systems. She offers us intimate portraits of long-distance, interspecies love. Describing photographer David Gillison’s affair with the Bird of Paradise, she unravels a fetish logic that separates particular species from ecosystems and explores how commodification extracts

nature from social relations. Chronicling ambivalent emotions - desire, mourning, and anxiety - she opens a window into the affective dimensions of trans-cultural and multispecies contact zones.Set in the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area, a place that was formed amidst countervailing institutional agendas and jockeying by diverse agents, this ethnography attends to how conservation was enacted amidst material and social inequalities. Some residents of Maimafu, a village in the Management Area where West conducted her fieldwork, engaged with environmentalists in hopes of chasing after the elusive idea of development. Even as some men from Maimafu reaped modest benefits from these social relations with foreigners, as they gained access to symbolic capital and modest sums of money, this conservation project initially did not directly benefit many women. It reinforced local regimes of patriarchy.At a pivotal moment in the book, West describes a Papuan woman named Nanasuanna - one of her trusted interlocutors - who confronted the conservationists. She stood up at a yearly meeting with visiting foreign and Papuan NGO workers, waiting for the assembled men to recognize her turn to speak. After the director of the conservation organization group asked "Wife of Nelson, do you have something to say?", Nanasuanna began an impassioned speech: "We women are the backbone of the community. We are the backbone of life. You men tell us that we do not know things. You tell us that we know nothing. But we do. We know. We know gardens. We know houses. We know children. We know how to work. We know how to make a net bag... These are the things that make life possible." This speech marked a watershed event in Maimafu village. Following this encounter, women were given the opportunity to have a formal role in the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Nanasuanna was thus able to partially articulate her visions of life and livelihood to an institution of environmental governmentality, using outsiders to gain traction within local regimes of social inequality.The moment of political electricity during Nanasuanna’s speech-in-action at the conservation meeting generated emergent collaborations and novel articulations. Poaching this text - transforming its meaning, turning it to my own ends (Certeau 1998, Matsutake Worlds 2010) - I found Nanasuanna speaking to freedom dreams on the other half of the island of New Guinea, across the border in West Papua. Following an invasion by the Indonesian military in December 1961, indigenous West Papuans have been told that they do not know things - that only outsiders have authoritative knowledge of development, religion, and modernity; that they do not know how to govern themselves. In the face of this symbolic violence, and ongoing state violence, West Papuans are struggling to actualize hybrid ideals about freedom - visions of national independence and dreams of post-national economic justice (Kirksey 2012).At certain historical junctures, West Papua’s political struggle became an arboreal rhizome of sorts, like the banyan tree - the symbol of

a dominant Indonesian political party (Lowe 2011). This movement for justice and rights climbed up and around the architecture of domination - encircling Indonesian institutions, multinational corporations, as well as transnational organizations bent on governmentality and control.Women form the backbone of human life in New Guinea - both in the independent country of Papua New Guinea and the emerging nation of West Papua. As the nationalist movement in West Papua approached a climax in the early 21st century, as this figural banyan seemed ready to choke off the host tree of Indonesian domination, the women of New Guinea were still maneuvering within pervasive male-dominated institutions, making rhizomorphic articulations.The emergent connections enabled by Nanasuanna’s speech at the meeting of conservationists, certainly mirror strategies of political engagement used by indigenous West Papuans. Her words also recall Antonio Gramsci’s ideas about the "war of position," the open-ended struggle that is ever-present in situations of hegemony. Gramsci writes of "molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes."West’s writing about the microprocesses of conservation practice in Maimafu village, in concert with her insights about ecofetishism and the commodification of nature, offers a framework for thinking about human agents who enlist particular species in regimes of biopolitical control. This book places conservation squarely within a matrix of ecological forces and social relations. Rather than point toward a utopic future, an imagined moment of naturalcultural harmony, West gives us thick description of molecular changes in the historical present. Perhaps schemes to protect nature in the global south will always be implicated in post-colonial, and neo-imperial, power dynamics. Perhaps ecosystems will always contain unloved others, creatures that escape regimes of cultivation and care (Rose and van Dooren 2011). Nonetheless, West offers visions of modest biocultural hope - la lucha continua with a multifaceted war of position to make conservation projects more just and equitable. Her work has prompted me to rearticulate the question from Donna Haraway that opened this short essay: Which species are protected, for whom, and at what cost?(Originally printed in Kirksey et al, "Poaching at the Multispecies Salon", Kroeber Anthropological Society. 100(1): 129-153. Available on-line: [...])

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