



SHORT COMMUNICATION

ARE 'CONSERVED AREAS' CONSERVATION'S MOST COMPELLING STORY?

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ABSTRACT

State and non-state actors are negotiating a new area-based target for the Convention on Biological Diversity's post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Some terms likely to be referenced are well known ('protected areas') and others newly agreed ('other effective area-based conservation measures', abbreviated to 'OECMs'). Yet one potentially relevant concept in circulation remains undefined, namely: 'conserved areas'. While creative ambiguity has its merits, there may be benefits to reaching agreement on its meaning. Of a range of possible meanings, one in particular inspires us to review how we think about conservation. 'Conserved areas', as a non-legal term for "areas sustaining ecological integrity and/or effective in situ conservation of nature", enables us to focus afresh on the diversity of approaches that contribute to living landscapes and seascapes, including but not limited to effectively managed protected areas and OECMs. Inclusive dialogue about this question may help define area-based targets for 2021-2030 as well as develop a compelling story for the future of conservation.

Key words: Conserved areas, OECM, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, post-2020

CONFUSION OR CREATIVE AMBIGUITY?

The term 'conserved areas' is being used with increasing frequency within international policy circles, often without clear indication of the intended meaning. For example, both the Promise of Sydney and IUCN Resolution 6.033 "Recognising cultural and spiritual significance of nature in protected and conserved areas" reference 'conserved areas' multiple times without defining the term (IUCN, 2014, 2016). The recent Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) decision on "Protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures" refers to 'conserved areas' nineteen times, also without defining it (CBD, 2018). Similar usage is reflected in a number of submissions to the CBD about the proposed new area-based target in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework (CBD, 2019).

In other instances, the term is defined to mean different things. The Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas (IUCN, 2019) defines 'conserved areas' as including but not being limited to 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs). Some commentators use it in the context of conservation by

Indigenous Peoples and local communities, often in reference to areas outside or overlapped by state-recognised protected areas (Stevens et al., 2016; Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018). Others have proposed that 'conserved areas' might refer to "area-based measures that, regardless of recognition and dedication, and at times even regardless of explicit and conscious management practices, achieve de facto conservation and/or are in a positive conservation trend and likely to maintain it in the long term" (Borrini-Feyerabend & Hill, 2015).¹

An undefined term is not inherently problematic. Creative ambiguity is credited for providing a "delicately -balanced conceptual space in which the existence of ambiguity leads to creative outputs" (Belshaw, 2010). Conversely, the crystallisation of concepts and agreed ways of expressing shared phenomena has merit, especially if the term is used in legal and policy contexts. The process of developing a common understanding of a concept can spur advancements in thinking and – notwithstanding inherent challenges in translation across languages – contribute to an enabling environment for dynamic collaboration. This has been

evident in the work of the Task Force on OECMs (Jonas et al., 2018) and the increased interest in conservation beyond protected areas by state and non-state actors in response to the newly agreed definition and criteria of an OECM (CBD, 2018).²

OPTIONS

‘Conserved areas’ is an undefined, simple and evocative term that has the potential to foster collective clarity about our overall conservation goals and means to achieve them. What are some of the options for the meaning and use of this term?

1. We can continue to use ‘conserved areas’ without defining it or use it with a diversity of meanings.
2. The term can be used to describe effective conservation by Indigenous Peoples and local communities occurring outside of or overlapped by protected areas. This approach would raise the question of whether other governance types could also govern conserved areas (‘privately conserved areas’, for example).

3. ‘Conserved areas’ could be used as shorthand for ‘OECMs’. One potential issue with this approach is that it limits the term’s application to areas that are recognised as OECMs, simultaneously excluding areas of equal or higher conservation value outside both protected areas and OECMs.

4. This issue could be addressed by using ‘conserved areas’ to refer to areas of effective conservation outside of protected areas – i.e., we would understand landscapes and seascapes as including, among other kinds of areas, mutually exclusive protected areas and other areas delivering conservation outcomes (‘protected and conserved areas’). This provides a neat dichotomy between the designation of protected areas, which is a well-defined area of law, policy and practice, and the newer concept of conserved areas. This usage may give the impression, however, that protected areas (as a designation) are not also ‘conserved’.

5. We could use the term to refer to areas sustaining ecological integrity³ and/or effective in situ conservation of biodiversity (adapted from Borrini-Feyerabend &



Pygmy elephant near Abai village in a community-governed area of the Lower Kinabatangan-Segama Wetlands Ramsar Site, Sabah, Malaysia.
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Hill, 2015). This approach would include, at least, protected areas that effectively conserve biodiversity (inviting less effective protected areas to improve their management and conservation effectiveness), OECMs, and other kinds of areas delivering conservation outcomes – such as territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities that are not recognised as protected areas or OECMs.

OPPORTUNITIES

The above, non-exhaustive list of options suggests that there is no immediate need to define the term; let a thousand flowers bloom. But might agreement on one or other definition of the term help people and communities interested in nature conservation better collaborate and communicate our broadly shared vision to others? In this context, the fifth approach – “areas sustaining ecological integrity and/or effective in situ conservation of nature” – is perhaps the most promising.

It may at first appear confusing due to the issue of overlapping protected and conserved areas. This conceptual barrier can be overcome by differentiating between (a) ‘conserved areas’ as a descriptor of the persistence of the ecological and biological state of an area and (b) ‘protected areas’ and ‘OECMs’ as legally defined designations of area-based conservation measures. This paradigm shift enables us to envisage, articulate and communicate the conditions required by all life on Earth, namely: a planet characterised by ever more areas sustaining ecological integrity and/or effective in situ conservation of nature (conserved areas). Such ‘conserved areas’ can be achieved, maintained and/or secured through a range of mechanisms, including by designating, equitably governing and effectively managing protected areas, recognising, reporting and supporting OECMs and respecting other areas sustaining ecological integrity and/or conservation effectiveness.

Reviewing the CBD’s current Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, it is notable that Target 11 is oftentimes referred to as the ‘protected areas target’, missing the importance of the term ‘other effective area-based conservation measures’ as well as the living, breathing, geographically defined areas the term describes. Our actions are influenced by the way we define, use and acknowledge the deeper meanings of words. A closing question therefore, as we negotiate the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, is whether we should think about a conserved areas target that can be



View from Melangkap village towards Kinabalu Park, Sabah, Malaysia. Might a focus on ‘conserved areas’ promote greater connectivity between community- and state-governed areas that sustain ecological integrity? © Harry Jonas

achieved through a range of area-based measures, including protected areas and OECMs.

The activist poet Drew Dellinger has said: “The future belongs to the most compelling story.”⁴ Is a collective understanding of ‘conserved areas’ a vital part of the vocabulary required at this juncture to co-develop and tell the story of area-based conservation’s emerging future? If so, the implications for nature conservation of an inclusive debate about this issue may be profound.

ENDNOTES

¹Elsewhere Borrini-Feyerabend provides the following definition of a ‘conserved area’: “natural and modified ecosystems, including significant biodiversity, ecological functions and cultural values that—regardless of



Kelabit community lands in Bario, Sarawak, Malaysia. © Harry Jonas

recognition, dedication and management—are de facto conserved and/or in a positive conservation trend and likely to maintain it in the long term”. Borrini-Feyerabend, G. (2016). ‘Mothers or lesser sisters: the strange case of conserved areas’. Square Brackets, p. 20. CBD Secretariat and CBD Alliance: Montreal. <https://www.cbd.int/ngo/square-brackets/square-brackets-2016-04-en.pdf>. Last accessed 20 August 2019.

²An ‘other effective area-based conservation measure’ is defined as: “A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in situ conservation of biodiversity with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values” (CBD, 2018).

³Ecological integrity is an appealing concept, increasing in usage, but challenging to measure (Timko & Satterfield, 2008; Woodley, 2010; Brown & Williams, 2016; Wurtzebach & Schultz, 2016; Théau et al., 2018). There are a number of definitions of ecological integrity. For example the Canadian National Parks Act (2000) defines ‘ecological integrity’ as: “a condition that is

determined to be characteristic of its natural region and likely to persist, including abiotic components and the composition and abundance of native species and biological communities, rates of change and supporting processes”. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/n-14.01/page-1.html#h-360230>. Last accessed 20 August 2019.

⁴“The ecological crisis is deepening our love. It’s deepening our love for the planet. We are called to love more fully, and to express our love in more powerful, visionary and effective ways. Lightning is continuously striking in 100 places every moment. The universe spills through our dreams. The future belongs to the most compelling story.” www.drewdellinger.org Last accessed 20 August 2019.

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RESUMEN

Los actores estatales y no estatales están negociando nuevos objetivos basados en áreas para la adopción del marco mundial de la diversidad biológica posterior a 2020. Algunos términos susceptibles de referencia son bien conocidos ("áreas protegidas") y otros han sido recientemente acordados ("otras medidas eficaces de conservación basadas en áreas", abreviadas como OECS, por sus siglas en inglés). Sin embargo, un concepto potencialmente pertinente que se utiliza actualmente permanece indefinido, a saber: "áreas conservadas". Si bien la ambigüedad creativa tiene sus méritos, podría resultar beneficioso concertar un acuerdo con respecto a su significado. De una gama de posibles significados, uno en particular nos motiva a reflexionar sobre todos los aspectos de la conservación. "Áreas conservadas", como un término no jurídico para "áreas que mantienen la integridad ecológica y/o la conservación eficaz de la naturaleza in situ", nos permite centrarnos de manera renovada en la diversidad de enfoques que contribuyen a la gestión de los paisajes terrestres y marinos vivos, incluyendo pero sin limitarse a la gestión eficaz de las áreas protegidas y las OECS. El diálogo inclusivo en torno a esta cuestión puede ayudar a definir objetivos basados en áreas para el período 2021-2030, así como a desarrollar un argumento de peso para el futuro de la conservación.

RÉSUMÉ

Des acteurs étatiques et non étatiques ont engagé des négociations autour d'un nouvel objectif de conservation par zone dans le cadre globale de la biodiversité pour l'après-2020 de la Convention sur la diversité biologique. Certains termes susceptibles d'être référencés sont bien connus («aires protégées») et d'autres sont nouvellement convenus («autres mesures de conservation efficaces par zone»). Pourtant, un concept potentiellement pertinent en circulation reste indéfini, à savoir les «zones conservées». Bien que l'ambiguïté créatrice ait ses mérites, il serait avantageux de parvenir à un accord sur sa signification. Parmi toute une gamme de significations possibles, une en particulier nous incite à revoir notre façon de penser la conservation. En effet, la signification non-légale du terme «zones conservées» en tant que «zones géographiquement délimitées préservant l'intégrité écologique et/ou la conservation efficace in situ de la nature», nous permet de nous recentrer sur la diversité des approches de la conservation des paysages vivants terrestres et marins, comprenant aussi bien la gestion efficace des aires protégées que les autres mesures de conservation efficaces par zone. Un dialogue inclusif sur cette question peut aider à définir des objectifs régionaux pour 2021-2030 et à élaborer un avenir convaincant pour la conservation.