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## The Danger of Cooptation

### Contribution to GTI Forum Conservation at the Crossroads

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Participants in the discussion have raised several points with which I wholeheartedly agree, particularly about the need for a more forceful acknowledgment within such narratives of existing convivial approaches of indigenous peoples and others. I would like to add a point about the flexibility of language in conservation policy and dangers of co-option in relation to the model Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher [proposed](#).

It is important to acknowledge that the two critiqued models of neoprotectionism and new conservation, while presented as polar opposites, in reality may tend to coincide and co-exist on the same landscape and be implemented by the same body. The following examples show not only the striking lack of a consistent set of ethos in driving policy and implementation but also how it has become possible to stick almost any label to any model.

For instance, in the “strictly” protected areas (especially Tiger Reserves) of India, while local communities are evicted or slated for relocation, landscape management and human interference by powerful players for ecotourism intensively continue. These “new conservation” activities may be even justified as offering a source of livelihood for neighboring human populations. Another example is how “new conservation” ideas of market mechanisms and rambunctious gardens get incorporated into neoprotectionist ideas like “Nature Needs half.” In India, Sanctuary Nature Foundation is implementing a model where farmers are made to leave their “unprofitable” farmland wild and instead secure a livelihood by running homestays. These are named Community Owned Community Operated Nature (COCOON) Conservancies and at the same time pushed as a model for helping India achieve its “Nature Needs Half” goals. In

both these examples, it is the existing patterns of local use for subsistence by forest-dependent communities that are attacked and vilified.

In proposing a “conservation revolution,” there is thus a danger in insufficiently outlining the ethos. While such detail is obviously beyond the scope of a short essay, even Büscher and Fletcher’s [book](#) does not delve sufficiently into values, worldviews, and approaches behind the existing marginalized alternative models of conservation, models that are often spearheaded by local and indigenous peoples. The convivial conservation model proposed does acknowledge (though perhaps not sufficiently or emphatically) the existence and importance of “local, indigenous movements” and calls for an ethic of “decolonization and redistribution.” Yet, the framing and the phrasing of a top-down prescriptive “We must. . .” confuses the matter. For example, speaking in the same breath of transferring ownership to local people, co-ownership, and co-management, without acknowledging the extremely different pathways and environmental justice implications of the three, leads to the possibility of taking a path that is less revolution and more continuation of status quo or greenwashing. Similarly, the concept of Conservation Basic Income, while well-intended, could be a double-edged sword without clearly specifying where exactly the power should lie for identifying and disbursing. This is not meant to be a critique of the authors' work, but merely a caution about the possibilities of co-option it presents and the danger of future policy changes paying lip service to this model with continued tokenism in terms of local participation.

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## About the Author



Shiba Desor is a researcher and activist working with NGOs and grassroots collectives in India on community forest rights, protected area governance, and food systems. As a member of Kalpavriksh's Conservation and Livelihoods team, she helped coordinate the Community Forest Rights Learning and Advocacy Process and the Future of Conservation Network.

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