



Indigenous Alliances for Conservation in Bolivia

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One of the central conservation debates over the last quarter of a century has been the effect of conservation initiatives on local livelihoods. Most recently, numerous negative evaluations have been made of both coercive top-down approaches to management of protected areas, which were dominant before the 1980s and focused on enforcement of protection, and efforts to decentralize governance and increase local participation in resource-management initiatives linked to markets. These critiques are subsets of the general criticism of neoliberal conservation, which is characterized by a lesser role for the public sector, privatization of natural resources, and a greater role for market forces (McCarthy & Prudham 2004; Igoe & Brockington 2007). When natural resources are treated as commodities and state control over them is reduced, local stakeholders in remote rural areas, in particular indigenous peoples, can lose access to critical resources for their livelihoods to economic elites with greater resources to respond to economic opportunities.

In this essay, we discuss what conservation means for the indigenous peoples living next to Madidi and Pilon Lajas protected areas in the Bolivian Amazon, a region of high species diversity and levels of endemism, where the state, local stakeholders, and several non-governmental organizations have implemented numerous projects focused on maintaining biological diversity and improving local livelihoods. These conservation initiatives have strengthened management of protected areas and buffer zones, promoted sustainable natural-resource-use projects, and strengthened mechanisms for local participation in management of natural resources and protected areas. In addition, governance conditions have enabled alliances between conservation organizations and indigenous peoples. Of particular importance, a strong indigenous political movement has established partnerships with conservation practitioners. These partnerships are based on the recognition of rights of indigenous peoples to develop their own representative organizations and secure legal property rights over their ancestral lands.

In 1990, before most of the protected areas in Central and South America were established (UNEP-WCMC 2010), the indigenous peoples in the Bolivian Amazon mobilized to obtain legal recognition of their territorial rights. Hence, the importance of indigenous territories for the cultural survival and livelihoods of Amazonian groups, as well as their entitlement to maintain or develop organizational and representation structures and promote traditional practices of natural resource use, has been recognized since the creation of the national protected-area system in Bolivia. The majority of protected areas in Latin America were established after constitutional reforms recognized the multiple cultural and ethnic characteristics of their countries (Van Cott 2010). The principal focus of these reforms was the design and consolidation of democratic institutions, but indigenous movements capitalized on the reforms to demand political inclusion and minimization of the negative effects of development in their traditional lands. The reforms built on the global indigenous mobilization to obtain recognition of their rights through the International Labor Organization No. 169 Convention on Indigenous and Tribal People in 1989.

Bolivia is in the heart of South America where the Andes, Amazon, and Chaco come together; thus, it is one of the most species-rich countries in the world (Ibisch & Merida 2003). This high species richness is accompanied by a high cultural diversity. The 30 different indigenous groups present in the country represent 66% of the population, the highest percentage in Latin America (Del Popolo & Oyarce 2005). Forty-four indigenous lands are linked to protected areas in Bolivia, 30 are in the buffer zones; 5 are entirely within a protected area, and 9 overlap partially with a protected area (Salinas 2007).

The relation between biological and cultural diversity is exemplified in northwestern Bolivia, a region of exceptional species richness resulting from topographical and climatic diversity and where the Bolivian government established three protected areas: Madidi National Park and Natural Area of Integrated Management (1895750 ha), Apolobamba Natural Area of Integrated Management

(483744 ha), and Pilon Lajas Biosphere Reserve and Indigenous Territory (400000 ha). Seven indigenous lands overlap or border these protected areas: the Lecos Apolo, Lecos Larecaja, San Jose de Uchupiamonas, Mosekene, Takana I, Takana II, and Pilon Lajas (T'simane Mosekene).

The meaning of *conservation*, as used by contemporary conservation practitioners, in relation to these seven indigenous groups has evolved as a result of threats to biological diversity that also threaten indigenous lands and livelihoods, in particular illegal timber extraction, new settlements, and, more recently, large energy and infrastructure projects. These shared threats have brought together conservation and indigenous organizations in efforts to preserve biological diversity and develop sustainable economic activities, based in natural resource extraction and ecotourism, to improve indigenous livelihoods. There has been increasing consensus among Bolivian conservation practitioners that empowering local communities through the consolidation of their territorial rights establishes a strong constituency for maintaining protected areas.

The Amazonian Bolivian indigenous movement worked for land reforms to establish indigenous lands as collective property which cannot be sold or divided. This has prevented land titling from opening up these areas to private markets and has led to strengthening access by indigenous communities to their traditional indigenous lands, including those overlapping protected areas. Under this approach the Bolivian Protected Area Service (SERNAP) and Wildlife Conservation Society have worked to support effective participation of the indigenous communities and their representative organizations in the land-titling process by developing their capacity to use spatial analyses to guide internal consensus and negotiations with nonindigenous neighbors. As a result, legal titles have been obtained for over 672941 ha of Takana, Lecos Apolo, and Lecos Larecaja indigenous lands. The Bolivian government has also recognized the San Jose de Uchupiamonas and T'simane Mosekene indigenous lands, which completely overlap with Madidi and Pilon Lajas protected areas.

Parallel to the process of land titling, the indigenous organizations have received support from the Bolivian government and international and Bolivian nongovernmental organizations to develop and implement indigenous territorial plans (CIPTA 2002; CRTM-SERNAP 2007; CIPLA 2010; PILCOL 2010). Indigenous communities have received support to control illegal timber extraction, wildlife hunting, and forest clearance by outside settlers. As a result, deforestation rates within the indigenous lands are similar to those in neighboring protected areas and are much lower than in unprotected areas in the region (Forrest et al. 2008). Monitoring of wild animals has shown that current hunting levels are sustainable, connectivity for movements of these animals between the protected areas and surrounding indigenous land is

being maintained, and illegal hunting is being prevented (Chumacero et al. 2010; R. Wallace, private communication).

Several community-based tourism, cacao, handicraft, coffee, and palm-management initiatives have been established with support from the protected-area service and nongovernmental organizations, and these provide increased family incomes and greater control of the land by indigenous peoples. For example, in 1992, no indigenous forestry-management organizations existed in this region and indigenous peoples were engaged in forestry as contract laborers under unfair terms. Today, there are over 20 indigenous, community-level forestry associations.

Hence, conservation programs have favored devolution of natural resource management to the indigenous organizations and promoted both social justice and conservation. Democratization of decision making has replaced a system in which decisions were made by local nonindigenous elites. Indigenous communities have established internal consensus, developed their technical capacity, and then engaged other organizations from a position of strength. The last 25 years have marked a transition period for the valuation of indigenous culture and for indigenous peoples' leadership in the establishment of protected areas that are integrated with indigenous lands in landscapes managed for both improved indigenous livelihoods and conservation.

The support of conservation organizations has been critical to the development of indigenous capacity to manage their land and resources and has avoided the problems associated with devolution of regulatory responsibility to local organizations without the necessary skills (McCarthy & Prudham 2004). The Bolivian experience supports the hypothesis that when indigenous peoples have recognized land rights, autonomy, and establish clear regulations about access to and use of natural resources, relatively large forest areas are less likely to be intensively exploited (Chhatre & Agrawal 2009).

Indigenous organizations in Bolivia have exclusive land rights, and consolidating their organizational and technical capacity is critical to ensure they continue to protect the ecological integrity of their territories from expanding extraction of natural resources. In the next quarter century, indigenous organizations need to monitor the effectiveness of their territorial management plans and develop sustainable finance strategies to implement the plans that include the contributions of community natural resource management to the collective costs of territorial defense. They also need to develop incentives for maintaining vulnerable areas without human extractive uses (e.g., valuing environmental services).

The external challenge to meeting indigenous demands for greater political and administrative autonomy is state development of road, mining, and energy projects throughout the Amazon. Conflicts with gold

miners, loggers, and large development projects are intensifying and conservation professionals and indigenous peoples are allied to improve practices and governance of these projects. Traditionally, Amazonian indigenous institutions base decisions on consensus and encourage widespread participation. Accordingly, strengthening their capacity for conflict resolution could also help increase transparency and broaden citizen participation during the consultation processes associated with these projects.

Two aspects have facilitated the alliance between conservation organizations and indigenous organizations in Bolivia. First, the political strength of indigenous organizations established a favorable legal framework for recognition of their territorial rights. Second, human population densities within Amazonian indigenous territories are relatively low, so there is still opportunity to achieve goals for improved livelihoods through natural resource use and conservation and to reconcile these two purposes. Indigenous peoples in Amazonia use a wide range of forest products that require sustainable management of large areas. Their capacity to articulate and defend their traditional rights on the basis of these requirements will determine the future of much of the Amazon. Conservation professionals have important roles to play in identifying critical connectivity requirements between strict protection cores and the surrounding matrix; identifying the area of indirect effect of development projects by modeling land use resulting from changes in economic drivers, political and regulatory conditions, and local topography; guiding implementation of actions to achieve no net loss of biological diversity and local livelihoods, as represented in indigenous territorial plans; and documenting the importance of territorial rights over natural areas for indigenous livelihoods and cultural survival.

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