

Mobile Indigenous Peoples and Biodiversity

DAWN CHATTY
U OXFORD

Throughout most of the 20th century, highly mobile and adaptable nomadic peoples of the world have faced enormous pressure to change their way of life and adapt to a more "modern" and settled existence. As we enter the 21st century, these mobile peoples are increasingly threatened by international biodiversity and conservation movements, which do not recognize their rights to use land traditionally inhabited by them.

Most conservation efforts in the 20th century were based on romantic notions of pristine wilderness, meaning people found on land identified for protection were regularly removed, the assumption being that people destroy nature. In Africa, 14 countries have more land set aside for conservation than agriculture and seven countries claim "protected status" for more than 10% of their land base. Indirect measures—such as multiplying the area under protection by a low range of possible human densities—yield estimates of 900,000 to 14,400,000 people forcibly displaced from their traditional territories for conservation.

It became recognized, however, by the end of the 20th century, that many of these conventional conservation approaches failed, leading to a re-examination of the forces that cause environmental damage, including questions about underlying assumptions concerning people's exclusion from protected areas, and their impact on the natural environment.

Humans and the Environment

The 1992 Earth Summit provided a prominent place for indigenous and traditional peoples and recognized the vital role they play in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. For example, Article 22 of the Rio Declaration, explicitly notes this, and adds: "States should recognize and duly support [these peoples'] identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development" (International Alliance, 1997).

Provisions to respect and preserve indigenous knowledge and practices relevant for conservation, and to protect their traditional uses of biological resources that are compatible with conservation were provided for in the Convention on Biological Diversity, also finalized at the Earth Summit. More recently, in 1996 the World Wide Fund for Nature International adopted a Statement of Principles on Indigenous Peoples and Conservation. In the same year the World Conservation Union (IUCN) adopted seven different resolutions on Indigenous Peoples.

However, in this enlightened focus, mobile people, inhabiting extensive and seasonal tracts of semi-arid land savannah or tropical forests, largely continue to be ignored or find their tradition-



Harasiis tribesmen preparing ceremonial meal with camels in background being reared for racing. The nearly 25% of the Jiddat il-Harasiis has been declared an Arabian Oryx sanctuary by the government and the Harasiis are actively discouraged from setting up their households in this important part of their traditional territory. Photo by Dawn Chatty

al hunting, grazing or farming lands are still being confiscated, cordoned off and marked out as "nature reserves" without consultation. It is the very fact of their mobility and requirement to move that acts against them on the national and international stage, in part, because they aren't as accessible for advocacy and media attention.

Moreover, in a world where land law is written by those of fixed abode and is defined by private property, not common property, it is difficult to make a case of land-loss when the aggrieved party is not permanently situated on the contested site. Mobile peoples' wide-spread distribution over vast tracts of land, their extremely low land-people ratios, and the distrust with which governments treat such groups have rendered them largely marginalized, if not invisible, muted, if not disfranchised and disempowered

Recognizing Mobile Peoples

One step in the direction of specifically recognizing the rights and contributions of mobile peoples in conservation and biodiversity was set in motion in Jordan in 2002. A group of concerned professionals, including social and natural scientists from all regions of the world, met in the Wadi Dana Nature Reserve to consider a comprehensive approach to mobile peoples and conservation.

The term "mobile peoples" was clarified to mean a subset of indigenous and traditional peoples whose livelihoods depend on extensive common property use of natural resources over an area, who use mobility as a management strategy for dealing with sustainable use and conservation, and who possess a distinctive cultural identity and natural resource management system.

At the end of this meeting, they agreed that the world is currently facing threats both to its biodiversity, and its cultural and linguistic diversity. They declared: "The linked pressures of human population dynamics, unsustainable consumption patterns, climate change and global and national economic forces threaten both the conservation of biological resources and the livelihoods of many indigenous and traditional peoples"; in particular, mobile peoples, who while are being discriminated against are also, unrecognized, making contributions to the maintenance of the world's biodiversity. Thus, they found an urgent "need to create a mutually reinforcing partnership between mobile peoples and those involved with conservation."

In light of this understanding, the participants at the Wadi Dana conference committed themselves to promoting conservation practices for mobile peoples based on a set of principles now known as the Dana Declaration (see www.danadeclaration.org). The Dana Declaration states that protecting the full cultural diversity of our planet, in its continuous adaptation to its environment, is also part of the broader biodiversity that we all seek to preserve. The Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation is being widely disseminated to indigenous people's organizations, NGOs, academics, professional bodies and practitioners.

It was promoted at the 5th IUCN World Parks Congress (WPC) held in Durban South Africa, September 2003. There a unique forum of representatives of mobile peoples met to voice their concerns among the 2500 environmental experts and scientists in attendance. In Pre-congress meetings and Congress workshops the groups representing mobile peoples made their concerns known. They endorsed the principles of the Dana Declaration and joined with the Ad Hoc Working Group of Indigenous Peoples. They expressed their recognition that they were a sub-set of indigenous peoples and agreed to integrate the term "indigenous" into their official name rather than leave it as a footnote definition, thus expressing their solidarity with the large and more established indigenous and tribal peoples movement. The mobile indigenous peoples highlighted, nevertheless, the unique needs and perspectives their mobility had on their way of life and cultural identity.

Based largely on the Dana declaration, they succeeded in getting their recommendations on Mobile Indigenous Peoples and Conservation (5.27) for the Durban Accord and Plan of Action adopted by the Congress by consensus. The next step is to take the Dana Declaration and the IUCN workshop recommendations to International Conservation Fora and to continue to raise awareness of the special needs of mobile indigenous peoples in the context of conservation and also within the general indigenous peoples movement. ☐

Dawn Chatty is Deputy Director of the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.