

BRIEFING

Tribes vs Conservation

Protecting nature, many agree, is a good thing. But what if this comes at the cost of people's lives? All too often, conservation clashes with the interests of tribes. What is the solution?



Baka to the wall: The Baka tribe have been abused by conservationists. © Edmond Dounias

Q: What are tribes?

A: **Tribes** are close-knit groups of people living outside mainstream society, according to their own traditions. They are by and large self-sufficient: they live off their land and are not too dependent on the national economy.

They comprise around 150m people worldwide, and can be found everywhere from Canada to Cameroon, Indonesia to India.

Q: What's conservation got to do with them?

A: The aim of the conservation movement is to protect natural environments, which is where tribes live. Conservationists consider some tribal practices, primarily hunting, to be incompatible with their work.

As such, when protected areas are established, tribes living in them are often forced to move. Their communities are broken up, they lose their livelihoods, and many end up begging or dependent on state handouts.

Q: Is this legal?

A: The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples establishes the right of tribes to 'free, prior and informed consent' (FPIC). This means that tribes must be informed of the ways a proposed project will affect their land – and are allowed to say no to it.

While not enshrined in international law, FPIC is used as a guiding principle for companies and charities working on tribal lands. Some countries recognise it in their own

law.

Q: That sounds reasonable.

A: In theory. But in practice, there are problems. Conservation charities, experienced in negotiating, can manipulate tribes into giving consent – with bribery or blackmail, or by rushing them. Sometimes, there is dishonesty within the tribe: one person gives consent on behalf of everyone, hoping for reward from the charity.

In any case, there is evidence that even when their FPIC is not given, charities simply ignore the fact.

Q: Any examples?

A: Take Cameroon, whose rainforest is home to the **Baka** tribe. Since 2000, some 760,000 hectares of their land have been turned into conservation zones; many Baka have been evicted, or had their movement confined, without their FPIC. The zones are patrolled by 'eco-guards', who **stand accused** of beating and torturing the Baka. They are employed by the government and partly funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Q: The panda people?!

A: The very same. The WWF is the world's largest conservation charity, and it works closely with governments and companies to preserve wildlife and ecosystems. Yet it is regularly accused of ignoring the rights of tribes in the areas where it is active.

Earlier this month, human rights organisation Survival International filed a complaint about the WWF to the **OECD**, reporting the abuse in Cameroon and arguing that the charity has done too little to stop it.

Q: What will happen next?

A: Hard to say. This is the first time a conservation charity has been the subject of an OECD complaint (the process is normally used for companies); if it is upheld, it will set a clear precedent for charities dealing with tribes.

The WWF has yet to respond, but in the past it has reacted to complaints variously with **anger**, with denial, by promising inquiries, and by asserting that it respects the rights of tribes. Critics lament that little has changed on the ground.

Q: Is there hope?

A: Conservation and tribal rights do not have to be incompatible. In cases where tribes hunt endangered animals, curbs on their practices may be justified.

But tribes, dependent as they are on their habitat, know best how to conserve it – the data backs this up. Illegal poachers pose a greater threat; in fact, tribes can be employed to defend against them. It is time, say campaigners, we adopted an enlightened model of conservation that respects their rights.

YOU DECIDE

Is interference in the lifestyles of tribes ever justified?

ACTIVITY

Pick a tribe and research its way of life. Give a speech to the class in which you list three ways in which your society could learn from the tribe, and three vice-versa. Explain your choices.

WORD WATCH

Tribes – This term, though widely used, is considered problematic by some. The Oxford English Dictionary argues that ‘it is strongly associated with past attitudes of white colonialists’, and suggests ‘community’ or ‘people’ instead. In keeping with usage by the WWF and Survival International, we have opted for ‘tribe’.

Baka –

One of many forest-dwelling tribes of the Central African rainforest. They are hunter-gatherers, and their communities are ‘acephalous’ – meaning they have no clear leader. This complicated negotiations with charities.

Stand accused – These accusations have been made by organisations like Survival and the Forest Peoples Programme on the basis of extensive interviews with the Baka.

OECD –

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Its main role is to promote global trade, as part of which it mediates disputes between communities and companies.

Anger – In 2014, for example, Survival criticised the WWF over its Cameroon operations. In reply, the WWF’s Italian office accused Survival of failing to carry out any fieldwork and using the media ‘in a misleading way’.

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 Notes

