The Cultural Dimensions of Environmental Decision-Making

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While many of us live in a socially constructed world of states that divide up the earth's air space, land, water, mineral resources, and oceans, some live in a world regulated by a nation, tribe, ethnic group or some other cultural identity. The first group often rejects cultural claims as undemocratic, irrelevant, and part of an older order that must not be taken too seriously. The latter group often rejects authoritarian, top-down management that separates the bureaucrat from the environmental user and imposes technocentric solutions upon cultural landscapes and environments. Some cultural groups even see the state as an expansionist power in conflict with legitimate rights to resources.

These different perceptions and claims lead to conflicts over environmental outcomes.

By explaining the role of the state and its relationship to culture, one can better understand contemporary cultural conflict and the need to create mechanisms for intercultural cooperation in environmental decision-making. This article will: (1) clarify what is meant by culture and point to some common fallacies associated with the term; (2) enumerate and explain the cultural dimensions of environmental decision-making; (3) explain the most common basis of cultural conflict over the environment; and (4) conclude by explaining how co-management schemes, decentralised decision-making, and a recognition of group rights can both reduce conflict *and* help to achieve a sustainable relationship between societies and the environment.

Culture: The Four Most Common Fallacies

Culture, an evolving and dynamic relationship between a society and an environment, provides a key to both explaining environmental conflicts and resolving them. However, culture is one of those terms that can mean different things to different people. It has also been subjected to some common but fallacious notions that obscure its real meaning. Here is a list of four common fallacies about culture, which by elimination, can help one to see the relationship between culture and the environment more clearly:

Culture is a product of tradition.

Culture does not result from tradition but from the *activity* of sharing, exploiting, utilising, and dividing some area of the earth and its resources. Successful cultures are those that adjust these activities in response to the changing physical, social, and economic constraints of their environment. To achieve this societies do draw upon traditions but draw also upon contemporary needs and aspirations. Tools, skills, laws, forms of

communication and entertainment, are usually more about meeting today's needs than clinging to traditions. Thus, if an Inuit culture ['Eskimos'] adopts a snowmobile rather than a dogsled for transport, it does not mean that the culture is disappearing, but that it is dynamic and evolving.

Culture is environmentally determined.

Certainly the earth's varied environments influence culture (available resources, distance to the sea, climate) but culture is not environmentally determined. People choose a variety of adaptations within environmental constraints. This is strongly affected by non-material factors such as religion, values, a sense of identity, and forms of humour that can persist despite a changing environment. The Shuar Nation, First Peoples of Ecuador and premier rainforest agriculturists until the 1960s witnessed the destruction of their rainforest homeland for cattle ranching. Undeterred as a culture, the Shuar became premier cattle ranchers and also consultants to other indigenous people facing catastrophic environmental change.

Culture is an anachronism and will disappear with modernisation.

Since culture, unlike earth and water, is socially constructed, it is sometimes dismissed as an abstraction that is not 'real'. This can lead policy makers to: underestimate the geopolitical force inherent in culture; to 'engineer' new cultural 'realities' that meet with violent resistance; and to overlook the obvious physical manifestations of culture. To exemplify the first point, by the 1980s many social scientists were so convinced that Western technology, ideology, globalisation, and nation-building had reduced cultural identification to an anachronism that they failed to predict the break-up of major states (eg the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the secession of Eritrea) or the general wave of Post-Cold War nationalism. The second point is illustrated by the general global failure of nation-building exercises in Africa and elsewhere in the aftermath of decolonisation [eg Sudan's failure to Islamicise the South has led to Africa's longest ongoing war]. Third, distinct ways of doing things leads to distinctive housing types, cuisine, smells, languages, sounds, and sights that manifest in a cultural landscape. Thus, one culture can be distinguished from another by using our senses not just our theories.

Culture is equivalent to ethnicity and race.

The biggest myth about culture is that it is equivalent to ethnicity and race. Ethnicity refers to physical ancestry and for that reason is so narrow in scope that it omits many cultural actors and conflates the variety of overlapping geographical scales that produce them. A culture may or may not include ethnicity as an identifier but culture itself is much broader (eg nations, tribes, regional cultures) and includes many interactions across space. One could be Ndebele, Nguni, Zimbabwean, Southern African, and African all at once and interact across all these scale in the construction of identity. Race is not tantamount to culture for four reasons: (1) there are only five 'races' and thousands of self-identifying cultures; (2) 'race' as a classification is a social construction rather than a 'fact' since DNA analysis can only identify a spectrum of genetic traits that differ more between individuals than between races; (3) culture, unlike race, is not dependent upon an external system of classification but is a form of self-identification about which we must carefully enquire; and (4) one may be adopted into a culture, regardless of 'race', if one is accepted by that society and chooses to share a certain way of life.

Thus freed of certain myths we are left with a better idea of what culture is: a dynamic and evolving relationship between a society and its environment. This corresponds with the its Latin word origin, *cultura,* meaning a reverent relationship (cult) with the earth (Ur).

Seven Cultural Dimensions of Environmental Decision-Making

There are seven major reasons why we should be concerned about the cultural dimensions of environmental decision-making. First, empowering culture could easily become the organising paradigm for achieving the global conservation strategy agreed to by United Nations bodies and state governments in numerous

proclamations since the 1980s: sustainable development. The very purpose of culture is to harmonise the activities of a population with the particular opportunities and constraints presented by an environment. The 'war on culture' that began in the Colonial Era and that has persisted through present-day Neo-Colonialism may soon be dismissed as one of our more self-destructive periods that left in its wake many sterile, damaged, and homogenous environments. A period of rebuilding culture may be our best hope for proper stewardship.

Second, any policy of sustainablilty must be maintained by local people. Local culture is more significant to environmental sustainability than written laws and distant bureaucrats. Empowering local people to develop cultures appropriate to where they live and co-management schemes between local and national actors could both improve environments and reduce conflict.

The global geography of mismatched cultural and political boundaries foments enormous conflicts over environments and resources. The chief tragedy of Africa is the outcome of the 1884 Berlin Conference which either placed international boundaries across cultural boundaries or combined many cultures into one state. Most African governments are now dominated by one ethnic group or another leading to resentment and conflict over the distribution of resources including territory. Statistically cultural conflict accounts for 80% of Africa's genocides and wars and thus it is vital to include culture in most analyses of environmental conflict.

Fourth, cultures produce *local knowledge.* The earth is not a uniform ball of wax and it imperils life and creates conflict to treat it as such. Local knowledge of soil, climate, and resources is critical to maintaining a distinct cultural landscape is transmitted in various ways between generations. Local knowledge should be included in environmental decision-making because in many cases Western 'science' is neither superior nor more 'objective.' 'Science' is in many ways a European cultural product that has sought to impose laboratory conditions on distant environments with many ill effects and through an inconsidered technocentrism (e.g., the Green Revolution).

Fifth, colonialism and neocolonialism have contributed heavily to environmental degradation. For example, clearing tropical rainforests for European husbandry and row-crops has not been appropriate and has resulted in soil loss, excess sediment loads in rivers, the choking or coral reefs and the invasion of alien species ('biological imperialism'). Reconstructing damaged environments requires cultural reconstruction and therefore intercultural cooperation.

Sixth, any fully integrated environmental management system must take cultural impacts into account. Past failure to account for differences in culture has led to failed projects, cultural genocide, violent competition for scarce resources and instability between various cultural groups. Large scale water projects have been notorious for this oversight [e.g., damming the Narmada River Valley in India, or conflict over the Lesotho Highlands Water Project].

Seventh, cultural diversity is part of a country's basic wealth and resources since it provides for diverse cultural landscapes that stimulate, educate and entertain people while providing for environmental conditions that support biological diversity. Culture might be better perceived in policy as a 'national treasure' that warrants consideration in all decisions affecting its territorial basis.

The Bases of Cultural Conflict Over The Environment

The basis of most cultural conflict over the environment is rooted in the structural differences between the state bureaucracy which seeks centralised forms of environmental management and any local population that seeks a territorial basis for cultural maintenance. The state as a powerful legal entity maintained by a combined military and civilian bureaucracy often takes a dim view of local cultures that interfere with its smooth functioning. These main functions are:

Economic Expansion (internal or external to secure wealth and resources)

Sociopolitical Assimilation (consolidating various groups into a single cooperative populace)

Maintenance (maintain internal security and infrastructure, repel external threats)

Cultural maintenance is very often dependent on resisting these processes by:

Protecting local wealth

Resisting assimilation

Maintaining control of cultural resources and territory

In South Africa, for instance, the perception that forest resources are the cultural heritage of local Zulu tribes recently led to the burning of forests in KwaZulu Natal as an act of defiance against government attempts to centrally manage forestry resources (economic expansion and maintenance). Many of these forests such as Ongoye, Nkandla and Hlatikulu are seen as cultural artifacts of tribal management and have a close connection with Zulu history. The battle over forest management is just one in a long series of environmental battles involving some 300 Zulu chiefs who see the new government as a huge threat to their way of life.

By suspending prejudices and considering each vantage point, one can see that this is not a problem of badly behaved actors but a structural situation in which there are two very different geopolitical positions from which to view the world. The state is tasked with maintenance of the forests but the groups affected are concerned with cultural survival, hence their drastic response. The accompanying perceptions can be tabled [Figure 1]:

Central Government Perception	***Zulu Chief's Perception***
Assimilation through the creation of democratically elected local government	Resisting Assimilation: local government structures eliminate the authority and power of the Zulu Kingdom
Assimilation by encouraging local participation in RDP Councils	Resisting assimilation by maintaining existing cultural institutions
Expanding available resources through centralised control of forests	Protecting local wealth and territorial integrity: the government aims to steal tribal land
Maintaining government structures through local rates	Protecting local wealth and resisting assimilation: local rates destroy the barter economy and subsistence agriculture

The Five Strategies for Imposing Environmental Policy Upon Existing Cultures

Resolving environmental conflicts that include a cultural component requires the identification of each set of actors and the structural factors and perceptions upon which they operate. This cognisance can than be used to encourage a collaborative decision-making process. A clearer understanding of why this must be so can be gained from looking at the alternatives. By what methods can the state *impose* its policies and perceptions on a culture and by what methods can such an imposition be resisted?

Imposing development policies on culturally resistant populations requires a deliberate intervention into the people-territory relationship that we have described as culture. Figure Two illustrates the five basic ways in which forceful state intervention can attempt to change that relationship. Culture, a relationship between people (P) and territory (T) is displayed in Figure 2 as a formula that is subject to five forms of forceful intervention: (1) genocide; (2) forced removal; (3) occupation; (4) ethnocide, and (5) ecocide.

Genocide simply refers to nation killing. One of the best-known attempts at 'ethnic cleansing' in Africa is the ongoing struggle between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda where at least a million people have been killed in an effort to reduce the cultural force of the opposing ethnic group. Environmental problems including severe land

shortages underlay the conflict and further environmental devastation has taken place in and around the large Hutu refugee camps in Western Zaire. Resistance to genocide continues on both sides but most often takes the form of military combat and organised incursions from the refugee camps, a factor which threatens to destabilise the entire area of Central and East Africa.

Forcefully removing a population is another strategy for which South Africa is perhaps the most infamous. The removal of the majority Black population to isolated homelands on thirteen percent of the land area created large areas of white privilege resembling many First World countries while creating degraded environments within the densely populated homelands. Resistance organised at both a local and international level was eventually successful but cost thousands of lives and led to the large urban 'squatter settlements' and degraded rural areas that the new government is tasked with upgrading.

Colonisation is a policy pursued by Morocco in its occupation of the Western Sahara. The original population forced out in 1975 by King Hassan's infamous 'Green March' is now living in Tindouf, a giant tent city of close to a million people just over the border in Algeria. The Sahrawi people resist assimilation and occupation through armed incursions but their Polisario Cavalry is no match for the giant manned walls, landmines, and other electronic devices that have been erected by the more sophisticated Moroccan Army.

The attempt to use laws to bring a culture into conformity with the majority state population or the philosophy and ideals of those in power (ethnocide) is a common tactic but it often meets substantial resistance. The attempts of the Sudanese in the North to Islamicise the people of the Black peoples of the South by outlawing their languages, dictating their form of dress, and changing their educational, religious, and agricultural practices failed massively and resulted in a war that has been ongoing since 1983 and has claimed more than a million lives.

The last tactic for altering culture is to change the territory itself. Resistant cultures since the 1950s have often found themselves driven out by large scale hydroelectric schemes that flood their land and destroy their way of life. Disbanded cultures often end up as internal refugees that create squalid environments in the cities. One culture threatened with such an outcome are the semi-nomadic Himba who range over the border zone between Namibia and Angola and find their land under threat from a proposed Hydroelectric Dam at Epupa on the Cunene River. The state perspective is that the dam will make Namibia self-sufficient in electricity, free from dependence on neighboring countries, and accelerate development. The perspective of the affected ten-thousand Himba is that the land is their life and without it, their culture is destroyed. Major breeding grounds for fish, turtles, elephants, black rhinos, and rare birds that are other 'partners' in the Himba way of life would also be destroyed.

The Alternatives: Co-Management, Autonomy, and Group Rights

Alternative methods for integrating state plans with cultural maintenence exist and on the whole are imminently more successful at achieving harmonious development than force. The methods are:

1. Involving local cultures in environmental management
2. Autonomy and decentralised political structures
3. Recognition of cultural or 'group' rights

Perhaps the best known African example of co-management is Operation Campfire referring to the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources. This programme was a response to cultural conflict in Zimbabwe whereby rich, white tourists and the state were perceived to be the only beneficiaries of game reserves. The authorities and the more prosperous elements of the population wanted to save elephants but local indigenous groups could not even meet their basic needs. All the local villagers could see was that elephants and other wildlife raided their meager crops, trampled their huts, and destroyed sheep. These two perspectives and the structural factors underlying them [e.g., economic disparities, social injustice, colonial legacy] led to conflict, resentment, and a high level of poaching. Conflict Resolution was effected in this case

because rash judgments were set aside and creative ways of meeting the two conflicting needs were worked out through a co-management strategy: wildlife management and its profits would be shared with local people. Once conservation was for the people and by the people there was a significant reduction in poaching. Since national parks are now a part of the local income [e.g., local CAMPFIRE groups run safaris], many villagers see poaching as a threat to their livelihood and have acted vigorously to end it.

Another approach to cultural issues is to decentralise environments and environmental competencies through some kind of autonomous or federal arrangement. This is being attempted in Ethiopia where ethnic provinces have been devised after thirty years of armed struggle between major cultural groups. Previously, under various regimes of the more dominant Amhara people all five methods for imposing development policy had been tried and failed. Today there are nine federal states each based on a cultural affiliations. Each state has significant local powers including the right to secede.

Lastly one can consider the new discourse of cultural rights. Only recently the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations completed ten years of compiling testimony on cultural ethnocide and genocide to draft forty-five articles that the General Assembly must consider for adoption. Among those many ideas is the concept of *land rights* because culture 'takes place' *in a place* and cannot survive without it. Globally this principal is being affected worldwide as indigenous cultures are reclaiming lands across every continent. One example among many is that the Kalahari San or 'Bushmen' have reclaimed half of the 960 00-hectare Gemsbok National Park in 1996 after a 25-year land claims struggle.

Comparing the two types of strategies, one based on imposing an order and the other on participatory social constructions, one can see that the latter is more productive at both resolving conflict and achieving a sustainable relationship between cultures and the environment. This does not mean that there are not 'teething' problems in participatory decision-making, co-management, and the recognition of group rights but by contrast one can see that the alternatives are draconian, simplistic, and ineffectual. The five strategies of imposing a solution were generated by the major myths about culture that we had discussed. Culture represented as an anachronistic way of life determined by environmental conditions that no longer obtain and now exhibiting itself in 'ethnic violence' breeds strategies based on forcing culture to meet state objectives. Recognising culture as an active force with the task of creating a harmonious balance between people and the environment moves our strategies in a more cooperative, compassionate, and peaceful direction.

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