



**LAND FOR  
WHAT?  
LAND FOR  
WHOM?**

Senses of Place  
and Conflict in the  
Scottish Highlands

**BONNIE  
VANDESTEEG**

# People vs Conservation

- Anthropologists have played a useful role in defending indigenous peoples against top-down conservation approaches
- Many examples of serious problems with some conservation models, excluding indigenous people (see [www.wtfwwf.org](http://www.wtfwwf.org))



# New Approaches Needed

- People vs Conservation is too simplistic
- Serious planetary ecological crisis: climate change and loss of biodiversity
- Conservation is key but strategies often ineffective or misguided
- Strategy needs to involve both ecological and social justice
- Don't forget the role of global capitalism and colonialism in creating the conflict!

# Conflict in the Cairngorms

Livelihood



Conservation



# Key areas of Conflict

- Funicular
- Housing Development
- Setting up of the National Park



# National Parks in Scotland

- To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area
- To promote understanding and enjoyment (recreation) by the public
- To promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area
- To promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities



## Unfolding of conflict: 1999-2000

- The local people can never be trusted to run a National Park. Anyone who would build a railway up a mountain can't care very much about the environment. They're just greedy.
- We don't want all those conservationists parachuting in from down south and telling us what we can do and can't do. They don't realise that we have to make a living.

- Why is a piece of moss worth more than thousands of people's enjoyment?
- The locals don't value what they have. They never go out in the hills to see what's there.



# The obstacles to overcoming conflict

- The conservation organisations themselves have managed to gain a negative image amongst the local community.
- The process of decision-making is constructed in such a way that many voices are not heard.
- Only some people are considered to be stakeholders.
- Incomer vs local discourse

# Negative Images of Conservation Organisations



'A' told me about the conflict between conservationists and locals. The RSPB, out of a million members, has only 70,000 in Scotland and the management of their estates has caused problems. They're seen as outsiders. Friends of hers refused jobs because they didn't want to be associated with the RSPB. She felt the same way.

Local with zoology degree and great interest in the nature and the outdoors

# Stakeholder Model Polarises

- Recreation (different sports represented)
- Farmers and landowners
- Conservation- wasn't first included
- Communities
- Business

# Many voices are not heard



# Not a stakeholder

- He is third generation born in Aviemore. His grandfather was a timber man, his father worked for a hotel and he now works for the railway. He once worked for the Chairlift Company. He thinks the ski area is very badly run and is totally opposed to the funicular. He says a lot of people who work for the Chairlift company are against it. It is a real disaster.
- Aviemore was brilliant when he was a kid. They made their own entertainment but there were also swimming clubs at the pool and he played ice hockey. Now these things are gone. Developers are just interested in making money. They build stuff and don't maintain it.

- Local people have become lethargic and apathetic. He berates them for not getting involved, but at the same time he understands because their voice has not been listened to for so long that they have given up.
- But he loves it here and would not want to live anywhere else. He went down to London and couldn't orientate himself; there were no hills, no natural points of reference. It was difficult to tell which way the sun is going.

*Excerpt from research diary*

# Local vs Incomer/Outsiders

- People interested in conservation or recreation were labelled as incomers or outsiders and their voices were silenced.
- One Glenmore Lodge instructor spoke out against the funicular at a meeting and was told he had no right to speak because he was an incomer.



# False Dichotomy

Many locals are not actually anti-conservationist or anti-recreation, but in fact identify strongly with these sensibilities. The difference is that many integrate their interest in nature with an overall commitment to community.

# **Overcoming conflicts: Moving beyond Livelihood vs Conservation**

## **Meeting of Newtonmore Business Association- NP consultation**

- The man who owned a local tourist attraction had launched into a torrent of abuse against those who would parachute in from the South to dominate the Park Board. The main enemy were conservationists from organisations like the RSPB and the WWF. When the meeting was over I asked for clarification of his views.

# Caring about the Community

We chatted a while and then he pointed out someone well-known for his interest in conservation sitting in a corner of the room. He spoke very favourably about him, saying how much he had done for the area. I pointed out what I saw was a contradiction in his views. I thought you didn't like conservationists. He had a ready explanation: this man was OK. He was different from other conservationists. He cared about the local community.

## **Interview with leading conservationist in local area**

I think what you are picking up on as well is that a lot of it is nothing to do with nature conservation; it's to do with power. In the recent debate about beaver in Scotland, if you were able to really check it through, you would find that a lot of people who are against it or for it know very little about the beaver.

# Power

Some of the views as to why they want it or don't want it are not based on the ecology of the animal, they're thinking if Scottish Natural Heritage want it then I don't. If this group don't want it, then I'm for it. So I think any of these discussions, whether in Strathspey or the rest of the world are based on these relationships and power and who thinks they should be in charge.



# Who has the power?: The Aviemore Mafia?

Landowners: eg Alvie Estate

Property Developers



# Conservation: The Green Mafia?

**RSPB**



**Nature Scotland**





# Signs of Change

- Education
- Green tourism
- Local conservation initiatives
- Wearing many hats



# Way forward

- Change power structures: political and economic, eg land reform and social justice.
- Increased participation in decision-making of all who live in the area, as well as those who may live elsewhere but have a commitment to both the nature and people.
- Conservation organisations should make the most of the genuine interest found through-out the local community- bottom up rather than top-down strategy.

# **‘Green’ Landowners: New Land Grab**

- **Carbon Offsetting**
- **Carbon Credits**



# Conservation Organisations

- RSPB
- John Muir Trust
- Scottish Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust
- National Trust for Scotland



# Corporations: Brewdog Buys Kinrara



# Philanthropists: Andres Povlsen

<https://wildland.scot>





# Environmentalists: Jeremy Leggett

<https://www.highlandsrewilding.co.uk/>





# Community Ownership Langholm Initiative:

[www.langholminitiative.org.uk](http://www.langholminitiative.org.uk)

## Great outdoor dream as community tries to

A Dumfriesshire community has put the environment at the heart of its regeneration fightback and is pinning its hopes on one of Scotland's largest land owners, Buccleuch.

A once-thriving textile centre, Langholm has been dogged in recent years by industry decline and hefty job losses.

Now the Muckle Toon community wants to harness the panoramic and beautiful landscape

around it to kick-start a new era. And it is banking on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Community group Langholm Initiative are in "advanced" talks with Buccleuch in a rare chance to buy almost 10,500 acres of Langholm Moor.

If successful in raising the cash, community land ownership could create the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve.

They believe it will deliver community

regeneration, climate change action, ecological restoration, wildlife conservation and develop outdoor tourism, bringing new jobs and visitors to the area.

But it comes with a £6 million price tag.

Today we take a closer look at the Langholm Moor community buy-out plans and vision for the future.

**Action-packed days**  
Young people get a taste of outdoor activities they could enjoy as part of the Langholm Moor buy-out plans.



- Does it matter who owns the land?
- What forms of land ownership facilitate both social and ecological justice?

# Resources

- B VandeSteege (2021) Land for Whom? Land for What? Senses of Place and Conflict in the Scottish Highlands [www.landforwhatlandforwhom.org](http://www.landforwhatlandforwhom.org)
- People's Land Policy: [www.peopleslandpolicy.org](http://www.peopleslandpolicy.org)
- John Muir Trust: <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/>
- Sam Staddon: "Conservation is all about having a blether and getting people on board"  
(<https://www.conservationandsociety.org>)
- K Rettie (2006): At home in national parks: a study of power, knowledge and discourse in Banff National Park and Cairngorms National Park  
(<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/8764204.pdf>)
- Langholm Initiative  
(<https://www.langholminitiative.org.uk/>)