

Alfredo Ortega-Rubio *Editor*

# Socio-ecological Studies in Natural Protected Areas

Linking Community Development and  
Conservation in Mexico

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Red Nacional Áreas Naturales Protegidas RENANP-CONACYT

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# Contents

## Part I Theoretical Aspects

<b>1 Socioecology</b> . . . . .	3
Elizabeth Olmos-Martínez and Alfredo Ortega-Rubio	
<b>2 Beyond Paradigms: Socio-ecology’s Heritage and Prospective</b> . . . . .	19
Blanca C. Garcia	
<b>3 Effective Ecological Sustainability as a Complex System from a Social Dimension</b> . . . . .	37
Juan Pedro Ibarra-Michel and Elizabeth Olmos-Martínez	
<b>4 In Search of Long-Term Conservation: Objectives, Effectiveness, and Participation Schemes in Protected Areas</b> . . . . .	51
Benito Vázquez-Quesada and Daniel Torres-Orozco Jiménez	
<b>5 Changing the Paradigm for Better Conservation: Conceptual Proposals from the Environmental Humanities</b> . . . . .	71
Micheline Cariño-Olvera, René Moreno-Terrazas-Troyo, and Ananda Monteforte-Cariño	
<b>6 Inclusion of the Human Factor in Protected Natural Areas</b> . . . . .	97
Manuel Jesús Pinkus-Rendón and Cielo María Ávila-López	
<b>7 Uncontrolled Urban Growth: The Crisis of Protected Natural Areas Near Cities in Mexico</b> . . . . .	109
Julio César Errejón-Gómez and Alfredo Ortega-Rubio	
<b>8 Dynamic Simulation Models and Participatory Approaches to Support the Sustainable Management of Social-Ecological Systems in Natural Protected Areas</b> . . . . .	121
Alicia Tenza-Peral, Vianney Beraud-Macías, Julia Martínez-Fernández, Irene Pérez-Ibarra, Aurora Breceda, and Andrés Giménez-Casalduero	

# Chapter 5

## Changing the Paradigm for Better Conservation: Conceptual Proposals from the Environmental Humanities



Micheline Cariño-Olvera, René Moreno-Terrazas-Troyo,  
and Ananda Monteforte-Cariño

**Abstract** The current conservation paradigm emerged at the 1992 Rio Summit at the same time as the institutionalization of global environmental policy. Consequently, national institutions appeared that promoted conservation through various instruments, especially in the signatory countries of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Generally, these processes have been top-down with little or no participation by the population that lives in or uses the ecosystems that the institutions claim to conserve. This occurs in a context of contradictions between governmental institutions and policies, which on the one hand promote extractivism and on the other wish to conserve the environment and end poverty. The results have protected neither biodiversity nor social well-being. It is time for a transformative change that begins with a different paradigm to overcome the obstacles of the current paradigm and that has as its basis the restoration of sustainable relationships between societies and the ecosystems on which all living beings depend. Based on the environmental humanities, this chapter hopes to contribute to this urgent transformation by proposing several concepts, values, and practices for a new paradigm.

**Keywords** Transformative change · Socioecological sustainability · Biocultural diversity · Environmental ethics

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## 5.1 Introduction

On May 6, 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published a Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services<sup>1</sup>. The four points on which the report is structured are:

- A. Nature and its vital contributions to people, which together embody biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are deteriorating worldwide.
- B. Direct and indirect drivers of change have accelerated during the past 50 years.
- C. Goals for conserving and sustainably using nature and achieving sustainability cannot be met by current trajectories, and goals for 2030 and beyond may only be achieved through transformative changes across economic, social, political, and technological factors.
- D. Nature can be conserved, restored, and used sustainably while simultaneously meeting other global societal goals through urgent and concerted efforts fostering transformative change<sup>2</sup> (IPBES 2019:2–7).

The report of the IPBES cited here demonstrates that the most authoritative institutions have recognized and proclaimed the urgent need for changing the paradigms that have sustained international conservation policy since the Rio de Janeiro Summit in 1992. This essay seeks to contribute several concepts to enrich the formation of a new paradigm to reorient the processes of conservation, based on a fundamental criticism of the neoliberal context in which this policy has developed:

The commodification of nature and the idea of its exclusive use by some actors only are among the principal characteristics of neoliberal or hegemonic conservation that are now clearly inoperative. Nature is vast, complex, dynamic in multiple timeframes, subject to diverse representations and infinite uses, and above all sustaining all forms and expressions of life on the Earth. To think that it can be reduced to a profit-oriented value is not only futile, but absurd and unjust. Even worse is to consider certain spaces and ecosystem components as available for extractivism and as sinks for all kinds of waste, under the pretext of economic growth and development; that is to make them zones of sacrifice. (Machado Aráoz 2015:21)

In the first section of this essay, we present a brief historical and critical review of the neoliberal context in which the current conservation paradigm arose, in order to explain its limited scope and consequently its necessary transformation. But as the authors of the 2019 IPBES report maintain in the fourth point mentioned above, *transformative change*:

by its very nature, could expect opposition from those with interests vested in the status quo, but such opposition can be overcome for the broader public good. If obstacles are overcome, commitment to mutually supportive international goals and targets, supporting actions by indigenous peoples and local communities at the local level, new frameworks for

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ipbes.net/sites/default/files/downloads/spm\\_unedited\\_advance\\_for\\_posting\\_htn.pdf](https://www.ipbes.net/sites/default/files/downloads/spm_unedited_advance_for_posting_htn.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “A fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.”

be used beyond their capacity for regeneration. The strategy tried to give conservation a practical and concrete dimension since the purpose of conservation was for the Earth to maintain its capacity to achieve economic development to support life.

These efforts would continue in the proclamation of the United Nations World Charter for Nature (1982) and the creation in 1983 of the World Commission for Environment and Development, better known as the Brundtland Commission. Its mission was to study the interrelations between development and conservation, as well as to provide solutions to achieve their compatibility. The work of the Commission's experts resulted in the report entitled *Our Common Future*. It is a political instrument that recognizes the threats we face as a species and proposes steps to assure the continuity of human progress. Its key concept is *sustainable development*, which it defines as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”<sup>7</sup>. Starting with the Rio de Janeiro Conference in 1992, the idea of “sustainable development” was disseminated to the point where it was accepted – and generated controversy – more than its predecessor: simply “development” with no adjective.

In this chapter we do not address the debates about this highly polysemic concept, lest we distract ourselves from our object of study and because many articles and books have been written on the subject<sup>8</sup>. What interests us is the impact that the concept of sustainable development and the 1992 Rio Conference had on world conservation policy and its realization in diverse strategies. In the first place, it is useful to emphasize that international environmental policy was consolidated; concern for the environment became institutionalized as a binding mandate for the states that make up the United Nations.

This policy deals principally with two problems that pose a severe risk for the continuity of life on the planet: the struggles against the loss of biodiversity and climate change. The first was institutionalized through the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which was signed on June 5, 1992, and came into effect in December of 1993. Its goal is to conserve biological diversity, promote the sustainable use of its components, and distribute fairly and equitably the benefits derived from the use of genetic resources. The second gave rise to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), signed on May 9, 1992, and entering into effect on March 21, 1994. It is the principal international juridical instrument for facing the challenge of climate change and seeks to stabilize the concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

From the beginning of these policies in the first decade of this century, climate change has gotten as much attention as the loss of biological diversity. This is reflected in the number of Conferences of the Parties (COPs). The COP is the supreme body of these two Conventions and represents of all the signatory countries, called “parties.” In the case of the Convention on Climate Change, it meets

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.un.org/es/ga/president/65/issues/sustdev.shtml>

<sup>8</sup>Gudynas, E. (2011a, b), Escobar, A (2007), Pierri, N (2005), and Reichmann, J. (1995), among others



- sociocultural and environmental implications, 332, 333
  - species, 327
  - traditional knowledge, 334
  - varieties, 328–330
  - wild pepper, 331
  - wild plum, 331
  - Wild pepper (*Capsicum annuum* var. *glabriusculum*), 331
  - Wild plum (*Cyrtocarpa edulis*), 331
  - Wildlife and Environmental Management Units, 463
  - Wildlife component, 369
  - Wildlife Conservation Management Unit (WCMU) programme, 151
  - Wildlife management, 376
  - Willing to pay (WTP), 491
  - Workshops, 370
  - World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), 60
  - World Conservation Strategy, 77
  - World Database on Protected Areas, 587
  - World System, 81, 82, 86
  - World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 512
  - World Wildlife Foundation (WWF)., 77
  - World Wildlife Fund (WWF), 154
  - WWF-Fundación Carlos Slim Alliance, 667
- X**
- Ximba Ts'on/opportunistic hunting, 344, 345
- Y**
- Yaqui community
    - analysis, 717–720
    - aquaculture, 717
    - cultural aspects, 712
    - demography and social welfare, 713–715
    - farming, 716
    - fishing, 716
    - productive activities, 714
  - Yucatan Peninsula, 514
- Z**
- Zapata community, 386
  - Zip, 346, 347
  - Zipché plant, 346