

Mother Jones

Conservation: Indigenous People's Enemy No. 1?

For centuries we've displaced people to save nature. A huge project in Africa offers a chance to turn that around.

By [Mark Dowie](#) | Wed Nov. 25, 2009 4:00 AM PST

After legendary explorer and ecologist J. Michael Fay completed his remarkable 1,200-mile, 455-day trek across the Congo Basin in 2002, he asked Africa's longest-serving leader, President El Hadj Omar Bongo of Gabon, to sit down for a chat. Bongo agreed to meet the world-famous adventurer, and brought his Cabinet along to listen in. Fay looks like a man who has crossed the heart of Africa more than once, weather-beaten and wiry, handsome and rugged. But it is his message and its trenchant delivery that wins over crowds—and politicians.

In the midst of a PowerPoint presentation that included stunning photos of wildlife in the Basin he believes few humans have ever seen, Fay projected a map of Gabon featuring forest concessions in red that he predicted would soon be clearcut by foreign [logging](#) [1] companies. Huge red blotches covered most of the country that hadn't already been cleared for oil fields and manganese mines. The next slide showed an imaginary, "virtual" Gabon with 13 emerald green patches scattered about the landscape. These, Fay said, could be national parks that would protect hundreds of species of flora and fauna from extinction and create a global magnet for [ecotourism](#) [2], at that moment the fastest-growing sector of the fastest-growing industry in the world. Fay said the parks offered Gabon a golden opportunity to diversify an economy that had become heavily reliant on oil, gas, and other dwindling extractive resources.

When Bongo's Minister of Forest Economy, Emile Doumba, expressed an interest in one of Fay's proposed parks, Bongo shocked both Fay and his Cabinet by saying he wanted all of them gazetted and opened immediately. He ordered Doumba to produce 13 separate decrees, one for each park, which he agreed to sign that very day. An ecstatic Fay promised to find the money to manage the new

parks. He stressed that Gabon was about to become the most ecologically significant nation in Africa, and a world-class experiment in biodiversity preservation. With the stroke of a dictator's pen, 10 percent of the country's landmass was placed under protection. "This is one of the most courageous conservation acts in the last 20 years," declared Dr. Steven Sanderson, president and CEO of the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) [3] and Michael Fay's boss at the time.

But there was another, more historically significant opportunity facing Gabon that day, one that Fay merely hinted at in his presentation and Sanderson didn't mention at all. It was the opportunity their own industry, transnational conservation, had in Gabon: to do right by the thousands of tribal people living inside those emerald patches, by allowing them to remain in their homelands and participate directly in the stewardship and management of the new parks. They would then not be passive "stakeholders" relocated to the margins of the park, the typical fate of indigenous peoples who find themselves in conservation "hot spots," but equal players in the complex and challenging process of defending biological diversity. The goal of such a policy would be the concurrent preservation of nature and culture; Gabon just might come to signify a happy ending of a tense, century-long conflict between global environmentalism and native people, millions of whom have been [displaced](#) [4] from traditional homelands in the interest of conservation.

It's a century-long story of violence and abuse that began in Yosemite Valley in the mid 19th century, when the Ahwahneechee band of Miwoks were chased about, caught on, then forcefully expelled from a landscape they had cultivated for about 200 generations. Militias like the vicious Mariposa Battalion were sent into Yosemite to burn acorn caches and rout native people from remote reaches of the Valley. After the militias came the nature romantics who mythologized the vacated valley as the wilderness it never was, then lobbied state and federal governments to create a national park. They got their wish in 1890, and the remaining Indians were removed from the area, with a few allowed to remain temporarily, as menial laborers in a segregated village of 20-by-20-foot shacks.

Yosemite's Indian policy spread to Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Mesa Verde, Mount Ranier, Zion, Glacier, Everglades, and Olympic National Parks, all of which expelled thousands of tribal people from their homes and hunting grounds so the new parks could remain in an undisturbed "state of nature." Three hundred Shoshone Indians were killed in a single day during the expulsion from

Yellowstone. This was the birth of what would come to be known, worldwide, as the Yosemite model of wildlife conservation. In Africa it would be renamed "fortress conservation," and like so many other products from the North, the model would be exported with vigor to all other continents.

One consequence of creating a few million conservation refugees around the world has been the emergence of a vast and surprisingly powerful movement of communities that have proven themselves stewards of nature (otherwise conservationists would have no interest in their land), but were turned by circumstance into self-described "enemies of conservation."

In early 2004, a United Nations meeting was convened for the ninth year in a row to push for passage of a resolution protecting the territorial and human rights of indigenous peoples. During the meeting, one indigenous delegate rose to state that extractive industries, while still a serious threat to their welfare and cultural integrity, were no longer the main antagonist of native cultures. Their new and biggest enemy, she said, was "conservation." Later that spring, at a meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, of the International Forum on Indigenous Mapping, all 200 delegates signed a declaration stating that "conservation has become the number one threat to indigenous territories."

Then in February 2008, representatives of the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) walked out of a Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) annual meeting, condemning the convention for ignoring their interests. "We found ourselves marginalized and without opportunity to take the floor and express our views," read their statement. "None of our recommendations were included in [the meeting's report]. So we have decided to leave this process..."

These are all rhetorical jabs, of course, and perhaps not entirely accurate or fair. But they are based on fact and driven by experience, and have shaken the international conservation community. So have a spate of critical studies and articles calling international conservationists to task for their historical mistreatment of indigenous peoples.

Some, but not all, conservation leaders are hearing the indictment and seem open to exploring a new model of protected area, a new conservation paradigm that includes native people and local communities as equal players in humanity's quest to protect wildlife in wild places. Gabon is set to become the world's test site for the new paradigm, a global laboratory seeking better ways to do

conservation. And indigenous people on every continent are watching closely.

The central strategy of modern transnational conservation relies largely on the creation of so-called protected areas (PAs) like Gabon's new parks. There are several categories, ranging from rigid exclusionary "wilderness" zones, off-limits to all but a few park guards and an occasional scientist, to community-conserved areas (CCAs) initiated and managed by a local population. While the categories vary widely in style and purpose, the essential goal is the same: protect and preserve biological diversity.

From 1900 to 1950, about 600 official protected areas were created worldwide. By 1960 there were almost a thousand. Today there are at least 110,000, and more are added every month. The size and number of protected areas is a common benchmark for measuring the success of global conservation.

The total area of land now under protection worldwide has doubled since 1990, when the World Parks Commission set a goal of protecting 10 percent of the planet's surface: Today more than 12 percent of all land, a total area of 11.75 million square miles (18.8 million square kilometers), is set aside. That's an area greater than the entire landmass of Africa and equal to half the planet's endowment of cultivated land. At first glance, such a degree of land conservation seems undeniably good, an enormous achievement in doing the right thing for our planet. But the record is less impressive when you consider the social, economic, and cultural impact of the system.

About half the land selected for protection by the global conservation establishment over the past century was either occupied or regularly used by indigenous peoples. In the Americas that number is more than 80 percent. In Guyana, of the 10 new areas gazetted for protection, native people currently occupy 8. And in Chad, which during the 1990s increased protected areas from 1 to 9.1 percent of its national land, all of that newly protected land was previously occupied by what are now an estimated 600,000 displaced people.

No country I could find besides Chad and India, which officially admits to about 100,000 people displaced for conservation (a number that is almost certainly deflated), is counting this growing new class of refugee. Worldwide estimates range from 5 million to tens of millions of refugees created since Yosemite Valley was first gazetted for protection. Charles Geisler, a rural sociologist at Cornell

University who has been studying the problem for decades, believes that since the beginning of the colonial era in Africa there could have been as many as 14 million on that continent alone. The true figure, if it were ever known, would depend on the semantics of words like *displacement* and *refugee*, over which parties on all sides of the issue argue endlessly.

However, the point is not the exact number of people who have lost their homeland to conservation. It is that these refugees, however defined, exist in large numbers on every continent but Antarctica, banished from lands they thrived on, often for thousands of years, in ways that even some of the conservationists who looked aside while evictions took place have since admitted were sustainable.

Which leads to another complaint heard at one international meeting after another: Relocation often occurs with the tacit approval of one or more of the five largest conservation organizations—The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the [African Wildlife Foundation](#) [5](AWF), and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)—which collectively have been nicknamed the BINGOs (Big International NGOs) by indigenous leaders. All except the Nature Conservancy have offices in Gabon, and they are to divide up management responsibilities for the country's new parks.

Keeping his promise to President Bongo, Michael Fay returned to the US and began the arduous process of raising the millions that would be needed to turn "paper parks" into real parks and keep them safe from poachers and prospectors—about \$50 million was his guess. As an inveterate and well-known conservation lobbyist, with connections to powerful fixers like Gabon's registered foreign agent, David Barron, and top officials in the State Department, Fay managed to get the attention of key congressmen, most notably Ed Royce, the chairman of the House International Relations Subcommittee on Africa. In 2003, Royce scheduled Fay to testify about his amazing voyage and seek support for protected areas in the Congo Basin, which, Fay would emphasize, hosts a tropical forest second only in size to the Amazon Basin.

"We have an historic opportunity here," Fay told the legislators, "to create what will be one of the world's most important national park systems covering over 25 million acres in one of the richest areas for biodiversity on the planet. But we have an opportunity to do much more, really. We have an opportunity to shift how entire landscapes are developed and to assure that future generations can

sustain and enhance their lives."

Those were encouraging words to Gabon's tribal citizens, the Bakas, Babongo, Akula, Bakoya, and Fang, all of whom are painfully aware of how their counterparts have been treated by conservation projects elsewhere in Africa. Fay went on to speak of "maximizing benefits for local people."

But then Fay made a revealing observation about American history. "I believe that Teddy Roosevelt had it right," he said. "In 1907, when the United States was at the stage in its development not dissimilar to the Congo Basin today...President Roosevelt made the creation of 230 million acres of protected areas the cornerstone of [his domestic policy]...My work in the Congo Basin has been basically to try to bring this US model to Africa."

While he was singing the praises of "wise use" Teddy Roosevelt also proclaimed that "the rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under a debt to him... It is of incalculable importance that America, Australia, and Siberia should pass out of the hands of their red, black, and yellow aboriginal owners and become the heritage of the dominant world races."

Is this really the legacy American conservationists wish to be spreading about the world? And is the Northern method of protecting biological diversity, with its paternalistic view of nature and condescending view of traditional knowledge, appropriate to the rest of the planet? Does it even work? A planet tipping into ecological chaos, with more than 40,000 plant and animal species facing extinction and 60 percent of the ecosystem services that support us failing, suggests that what we've been doing may not have been working so well after all. Perhaps a new strategy is called for.

Omar Bongo died in June of this year, leaving uncertain the leadership of his country and the fate of the parks he created. The entire Gabonese Parks system has recently been placed under the leadership of Lee White, the British head of the Wildlife Conservation Society. White is currently supporting Omar Bongo's son Ali as the "green presidential candidate." White also makes no secret of his intention "to establish and sustain Gabon as a new unique global destination for African rainforest tourism." What role the parks' natives will play in that industry has yet to be determined.

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