



Biosphere reserves and the “Yucatán” syndrome: another look at the role of NGOs[☆]

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Abstract

After centuries of cultural and economic conquest of the Americas by European and Euro-American conquistadors, contemporary rhetoric in ex-colonial powers heralds the decline of material and ideological imperialism. Instead, it is purported that today's world is peopled by a great brotherhood, with the more affluent striving to relieve their less fortunate, underdeveloped kith. This conviction is inherent in organizations which dispense money, information, training, and other resources in the name of community development and endangered species and environmental conservation. What is rarely perceived – and practically never said – is that these “benevolent” foreign aid activities typically result in the concentration of resources and power in the hands of a few, the building of empires, and the compounding of already difficult situations, counter-productive to stated objectives. The Yucatán Peninsula is a classic case of persistent imperialism: the geographic name is a corruption of the Mayan “*matan cub a than*” (“I do not understand you”), while contemporary development and conservation programs habitually exhibit cultural ignorance and dominance. This paper explores a diverse literature on non-governmental organizations, reflects on likely consequences of cultural dominance, and implores professional anthropologists to be adventurous in propagating anthropological knowledge relevant to environmental protection.

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Resumen

Después de siglos de conquista cultural y económica de América por parte de los europeos y mestizos (personas con antepasados europeos e indígenas) la retórica contemporánea en los ex-poderes coloniales manifiesta que hay una declinación en el imperialismo materialista e ideológico. En su lugar, se supone que el mundo de hoy está habitado por una gran fraternidad, con los más afortunados esforzándose para ayudar a los menos afortunados y subdesarrollados. Esta convicción es inherente a las organizaciones que proveen dinero, información, capacitación y otros recursos bajo el nombre de desarrollo comunitario y conservación del

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ambiente y de especies en peligro de extinción. Lo que raras veces se percibe – y casi nunca se dice – es que estas actividades “benevolentes” de apoyo internacional típicamente resultan en la concentración de recursos y poder en manos de pocos, la construcción de imperios, y la complicación de situaciones ya difíciles, contraproducentes a los objetivos declarados. La Península de Yucatán es un caso clásico de imperialismo persistente: cuyo nombre geográfico viene de la deformación de la lengua Maya “*matan cub a than*” que significa “no le entiendo”, mientras que programas contemporáneos de desarrollo y conservación habitualmente exhiben ignorancia y dominancia cultural. Este trabajo explora una literatura diversa sobre las organizaciones no gubernamentales, refleja las consecuencias de dominancia cultural, e incita a los antropólogos profesionales a ser más afanosos en la difusión de conocimientos antropológicos relacionados con la protección ambiental.

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1. Introduction: Yucatán the metaphor

Renowned for both its biological and cultural diversity, the Yucatán Peninsula is at the same time a monument to one of the greatest challenges facing the effective conservation and management of these unique resources. The Peninsula, both through its history and in its formal name, stands as a celebration to misunderstanding, and the consequences that this rakes over complex issues that drive human–environmental interactions. Biosphere reserves, and other conservation initiatives, exist because of the desires, expectations, political decisions, and actions of people. At the same time, these initiatives are threatened by opposing desires, expectations, political decisions, and actions; when there is a lack of understanding, these threats can become severe and the initiatives, indefensible.

Half a millennium ago Iberian adventurers “discovered” the Peninsula, but not understanding the people and culture that they encountered, the Spanish Conquistadors totally misconstrued several fundamental aspects: the outcome of one of the first encounters between the Maya and the Spanish serves as a metaphor. The apparently simple Spanish question “Where do you live” was unintelligible to the Maya (who did not speak Spanish) and to this day we celebrate the confusion that resulted. The term “Yucatán” is not Maya in origin, and evidently derives from¹ the reply: “*matan cub a than*”

¹ Although there are variations in the interpretation of the origin of the term “Yucatán” (for example, Gate’s (1937, p. 2) translation of Friar Diego de Landa’s classic 1566 account of early conquest of the Peninsula stated that when early Spanish explorers asked the name of the land, the Maya responded “*Ci uthan*”, meaning “they say it”, while Praden’s (1975, p. 31) translation from the same source claimed that it came from “*Ciuthan*” meaning “they say so”), there is consistency in the explanation that the term is not Maya and derives from a misunderstanding of the Spanish conquistadors in their early

(i.e., in modern writing = “*ma t’aan, ku y u’ub a t’aan*” [Anderson, pers. commun.]), meaning “We do not understand what you are saying” (Restall, 1998, pp. 122, 219 [n. 81], 220). So, thanks to the misunderstanding, cultural insensitivity, and intervention (domination) of the European adventurers, the world has celebrated the “We-Do-Not-Understand-What-You-Are-Saying” Peninsula ever since it was “discovered” by foreigners.

The problem is not in the geographic term, for these names regularly stem from arbitrary decisions and accidents: the issue is the process from which the name arose and was officialized. As a metaphor “Yucatán” has dire implications for the future of biosphere reserves, not to mention for humanity and the environments on which our societies depend. Because we live in the post-modern, neo-liberal age of globalization (“PoMoNeLiAGlo”),^{2,3} the damage caused by social and political actions in one place has tremendous implications for environments and societies anywhere and everywhere – especially because in this PoMoNeLiAGlo the world’s carrying capacity for *Homo sapiens sapiens* is being challenged by global networks of commerce, extraction, consumption, and pollution. Social,

initiatives at exploring and conquering the peninsula that now has that name.

² Terms such as post-modern, neo-liberal, and globalization have been part of the vernacular for years, and there is often a feeling that we all know what we are talking about. However, these terms can be highly loaded, resulting in endless polemics to define them; too often, their meaning can vary considerably depending on context and intent of the author. Precise meanings are not critical for the present study, for the terms are used simply as metaphors of argot, meant to express the high degrees of inter-connectedness among diverse commercial, economic, political, and social systems throughout the world (see Sally, 2002 and citations therein).

³ In fact, perhaps more precise than post-modern, neo-liberal, age of globalization, these times should be described as Post-Exuberant (Brulle, 1995c, p. 57) – certainly, the term is more concise.

economic, and political impacts now swirl through the “global village,” sometimes with amazing speed and horrifying consequences, even on distant societies and their resource bases. Clear examples are the 1998 stock market crashes in Asia and then Russia, with profound effects on the economies of Latin America, and consequential aftereffects on their environmental and social programs (Gavin and Hausmann, 1999). Likewise, the global fallout from the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, with the “globalization of terror” had profound impacts on economies worldwide (Iwasaki, 2001; World Bank, 2001, 2002). There are many other less known, yet profound effects of global markets and networks. For example, Wright (1990) provides a detailed account of the role that the “global supermarket” has played in relation to agro-industry, which has enormous social and environmental effects on both producers and consumers. The liberalized market in timber products in Japan has resulted in vast deforestation throughout Southeast Asia, with concomitant negative effects⁴—both social and environmental (Dauvergne, 1997; Knight, 1997). Place (1998) reviews several studies that show similar effects where the environment in one place is influenced by commerce and policy in another. Some students have developed the concept of “shadow ecology” to describe a situation in which ecological impacts in one region shadow, or trace, the course of events in a distant, more financially powerful area (Dauvergne, 1997). A comparable concept is that of an “overdetermined system;” when considered in the context of an “overdetermined community,” the term refers to a situation in which forces external to a community, no matter how remote and distant, can have greater importance in driving the community than do internal forces (Hackenbert and Benequista, 2001).

These concepts are central to the thesis presented here. “A country’s shadow ecology is the aggregate environmental impact on resources outside its territory of governmental practices, especially official development assistance (ODA); corporate conduct, investment and technology transfers; and trade, including

consumption, export and consumer prices, and import tariffs” (Dauvergne, 1997, pp. 2–3). The complexity of the maze of interactions, decisions, interests, etc. that determine where, when, and how an ecological shadow will be cast is daunting, and their unraveling can produce an account that rivals the best of fiction (e.g., Wright, 1990; Dewar, 1995; Vandermeer and Perfecto, 1995; Dauvergne, 1997).⁵ With the individual coffers of hundreds of private corporations *each* far exceeding the national treasuries of all but a score of countries (Korten, 1995), there is plenty of opportunity for “economic shadows” to be cast over “sovereign states,” and it is no surprise that corporations, industries, and governments have these far-reaching effects. Yet, there are other actors that are often ignored, thought to be transparent, or even considered to be essential for balancing the negative effects of corporations and governments, and some of these other actors can also be instrumental in forming vast shadows on the ecology of distant lands. Among these lesser-appreciated shadow-casters are the non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and this paper reviews general issues and concepts relating to NGOs and conservation initiatives, providing some specific comments for the Yucatán Peninsula.

2. The Yucatán Peninsula as part of the post-modern, neo-liberal, globalized world

The Yucatán Peninsula represents many things: the substrate on which lowland Maya culture has flourished for 3 millennia; a former part of the Spanish Empire’s Nueva España (Restall, 1998, p. 179 [n. 5]); a breakaway province during Santa Ana’s newly liberated Mexican Republic, that commissioned the Texas Navy to protect it from the centralist forces of Mexico; a relatively neglected province in the southeast of Mexico (Reed, 1964, p. 29); the northern extension of the much-acclaimed “Ruta Maya” (Garrett, 1989); and the

⁴ Remarkably, the negative social and environmental effects are not limited to the nations whose forests are being felled for exports to Japan, but also occur in Japan, further illustrating the complications of the impacts of globalized commerce and shadow ecology (Dauvergne, 1997).

⁵ One reviewer recommended streamlining the citations included herein, and providing just a key reference for major points instead of including a large number of citations for many points of discussion; however, because this article was written with a wide, multidisciplinary readership in mind, and because one reviewer questioned the veracity of some of the claims contained herein, as they fly in the face of standard dogma, it was decided to provide a variety of diverse sources that support the various claims so that the reader can explore the generalities in greater detail, and be alerted to sources from different disciplines.

geographic focal point of this volume. As with other parts of Mexico, Latin America, and the “New World” (e.g., Moran, 1990; Wright, 1990; McDonnell and Pickett, 1993; Dyer and McGoodwin, 1994; Johnston, 1994; Pye-Smith et al., 1994; Smith, 1994; Lean, 1995; Painter and Durham, 1995; Simonian, 1995; Vandermeer and Perfecto, 1995; Cooke et al., 1996; Adam, 1998; Place, 1998; Nicholson and O’Connor, 2000; Decker et al., 2001; Leff, 2001; see also Crumley, 1994), the history of the Yucatán clearly illustrates that *Homo sapiens* is part of – not apart from – the environment, and that the ways in which people behave and interact have major consequences on the environment, including the availability and distribution of basic resources (e.g., Kintz, 1990; Terán and Rasmussen, 1994; Faust, 1998, 2001; Faust and Bilsborrow, 2000; Folen et al., 2000; García, 2000; Faust et al., 2004). Throughout its various cultural and historic epochs, the Peninsula provides clear examples that social issues and environmental problems are interdependent and often best understood when viewed within a larger geographic context.

The political and cultural ecology of the people of the Yucatán Peninsula – as with any other group of human beings on this planet today – are conditioned not just by the local culture, political structure and environment in which these people live, but they are very much under the influence of a homogenizing world culture and mighty global market (e.g., Wright, 1990; Johnston, 1994; Korten, 1995; Utting et al., 1995; Vandermeer and Perfecto, 1995; Adam, 1998). This has direct – and profound – implications on the environment, biological resources, and the status of biosphere reserves. Bygone times of cloistered communities, characteristic of when the Spanish “pacified” the peninsula, that they called “Yucatán”, have long since disappeared; the days of Gonzalo Guerrero,⁶ when lone foreign heroes could waylay unwanted impositions emanating for outside the community have ended.

⁶ Gonzalo Guerrero is regarded as the father of *mestizos* (the Spanish term for persons of mixed European and Native American ancestry) and a folk hero: he is reputed to have survived a shipwreck in 1511, during early stages of Spanish exploration of the New World, as well as enslavement by his Mayan captors, and the threat of sacrifice, then to have married the daughter of a Mayan noble with whom he had children (the first *mestizos*), and to have been an effective military commander for the Maya, notably in their battles against the Spanish (see Clendinnen, 1987, pp. 17–18; Restall, 1998, p. 7).

In summary, social issues are intimately related to the ways that biosphere reserves are established, maintained, and even destroyed. Hence, the Yucatán provides an important setting for examining the out-of-focus forces on which biosphere reserves depend, at diverse levels, from local to global.

3. Biosphere reserves, biological conservation and biology

Biosphere reserves are a central component of biological conservation, hence critical to understanding their situation is an appreciation of the true essence of biological conservation. Although often described as a vibrant new discipline (e.g., Raven, 1987; Meffe and Viederman, 1995), the conservation of biological resources is not ultimately about biology. If it is to achieve its goals of “[a]ctive management to ensure the survival of the maximum diversity of species and the maintenance of genetic variety within species” (Allaby, 1985, p. 158) or the “protection, maintenance, and restoration of life on this planet” (Anon., 1987), in the end biological conservation must be about people as much as about the environment and biological phenomena: it must deal with human customs, human relations, human motivations, political institutions, and political structures that drive the interactions between people and their environment. This assertion, while a well-established fact for social scientists (Adam (1998) and Brulle (1995c, 2000, pp. 191–192) provide useful syntheses), has been accepted by a growing number of specialists trained in the biological sciences (e.g., Frazier, 1990, 1994, in press; Meffe and Viederman, 1995; Vandermeer and Perfecto, 1995; Clark, 2000; Reading and Miller, 2000; Decker et al., 2001). Although it has now become fashionable among conservation biologists to interweave comments about the social sciences into their discourses,⁷ the goal of seamless interactions between various diverse disciplines is yet

⁷ At the Annual Odum Lecture Series, held on 8 March 2002 at the Institute of Ecology, University of Georgia, five prestigious academics on the panel spoke to the enormous problems of biological conservation and society. They all emphasized the importance and urgency of understanding and resolving the complex issues involving human–environment interactions; many of them explicitly appealed for the empowerment of women, etc. Yet, with the exception of one black male, Nigerian economist, all the speakers were white, males,

to be effectively realized.⁸ Winthrop (2002: 51) concluded that “anthropology” as a discipline has at best a very low profile in the policy world”, while Clark (2000) explained the complexities of developing policies, and the fundamental need to use interdisciplinary skills at all levels.

The significance of the social sciences is particularly relevant because of the basic nature of conservation activities. The activities designed and carried out for the establishment and maintenance of biosphere reserves and other conservation initiatives fall under the broader category of “development activities,” for they routinely involve some form of “foreign aid.” However, just as in many conventional development initiatives (e.g., Cochrane, 1979; Cernea, 1991, p. 2; Metha, 2001), specialists from the social sciences⁹ have often not been a significant component in conservation and environmental activities, or when they have been, it was frequently too late and simply as a social palliative – or even as a deceptive ploy (e.g., Winthrop, 1997). To a great extent these conservation-development actions have been planned, supervised, executed and evaluated within an intellectual framework constructed by biologists, conservationists, naturalists, resource managers and economists from the industrialized world (Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; Place, 1998, p. 232; Wedel, 1998; Decker et al., 2001). Admittedly, the social sciences are not invisible to – or totally depreciated by – conservation biologists. Clear examples of the current trend to incorporate aspects from the social sciences are seen in recent publications that are fundamental to academics and decision-makers, by providing guidelines for environmental conservation (e.g., Heywood, 1995; Mangel et al., 1996; Noss et al.,

1997; Primack, 1998). Formulated by scores of world-renowned biologists, ecologists and conservationists, these “environmental bibles” make it explicitly clear that there is a basic need to take into account social factors, to understand and evaluate social phenomena, and even to carry out studies in the social sciences.

Perhaps in the future social scientists will routinely be included from the beginning among the strategic teams of editors and authors who conceptualize, write and publish these important documents. At that point, one might expect to find a conceptual change in the environmental bibles: instead of referring to “scientific” studies as the foundation, with ancillary help from the social sciences, possibly the social sciences will be accepted within the inner sanctum of scientific studies. But again, these details of names, credits, and social acceptability among scientists and their disciplines are not the fundamental problem, they are merely symptoms.

The central concern is that biological conservation, notwithstanding its “natural science” charisma and noble intentions, is a social–political activity, and as such it must be perceived, planned, executed and evaluated within this context (Clark, 2000; Reading and Miller, 2000). To ignore or negate this fact is to invite disaster; natural scientists are not trained to identify or understand political and social processes, much less how to develop effective means to deal with them (Brulle, 2000, pp. 191–192). Not considering this reality involves the same basic attitude as that which operated when a simple (and expectable) response – “We do not understand what you are saying” – was misinterpreted and transformed into a glorified, formalized, geographic appellation for an entire region.

There have been attempts to draw the attention of biologists and conservationists to some of the more striking syndromes in conservation activities that are social (i.e., not dealt with, or even considered, under normal biological investigation), and to signal how these are likely to have negative impacts on the desired goals of biological conservation (e.g., Frazier, 1994; Clark, 2000; Reading and Miller, 2000). However, these critiques are often met with not only a lack of understanding of the central issues, but a lack of interest or appreciation in addressing them. As several authors have described (e.g., Meffe and Viederman, 1995; Clark, 2000; Reading and Miller, 2000; Decker et al., 2001), it is not easy for many biologists and conservationists

trained in the biological sciences. Among the audience were people of other gender, cultures, and specialist academic disciplines.

⁸ A claim that specialists from different disciplines work together fairly seamlessly was made by one anonymous reviewer of this paper. While heartily congratulating the reviewer for his important accomplishments, in the author’s experience – as in the experience of a number of close colleagues, from other disciplines – true interdisciplinarity (viz. the efficient and effective interacting and communication of specialists from a variety of disciplines) is akin to other noble human goals such as liberty, equity, freedom, etc. – it is much discussed, but very rarely achieved. Hence, it is hardly something about which to be complacent.

⁹ Social sciences, *excepting* macro-level economics have been underrepresented in conservation and development initiatives.

to confer professional priority on “soft” social issues, or careful policy development. Not surprisingly, these conceptual and epistemological deficiencies and disciplinary biases have led to severe criticisms of the environmental movement (e.g., Bookchin, 1994; Dowie, 1995; Vandermeer and Perfecto, 1995; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; Reading and Miller, 2000; Decker et al., 2001). When considering the history, status, and future of conservation initiatives, including biosphere reserves, it is essential to understand the social context in which these are imbedded, particularly the agents most directly involved with the initiatives.

4. NGOs as agents of environmental conservation and community development in the PoMoNeLiAGlo

With occult – but powerful – factors impinging on societies and their environments, there is an urgent need, first to identify and understand these tremendous forces, and then to develop and implement mechanisms that balance or neutralize their negative and unwanted impacts. Among the various factors at work in the PoMoNeLiAGlo, that seemingly compensate for the impacts of the voracious multinational corporations, insatiable consumers, and other manifestations of neoliberalization and globalization, are “benevolent” actions directed at protecting the environment and empowering communities, of which the creation of biosphere reserves, biological conservation, and community development are major components. Among the social goals of these programs are the safeguarding of nutritional, physiological, economic, cultural, and spiritual sources of sustenance for the recipient societies; capacity building, civil society building, democracy development, institution building, and women’s rights and well-being, among others, are aspects that are routinely central to the stated objectives; other goals include saving endangered species, protecting environments – routinely through the establishment of biosphere reserves – and managing for the maintenance of “ecosystem services” (e.g., Friedmann and Rangan, 1993; Pye-Smith et al., 1994; Smith, 1994; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995; Lean, 1995; Caldecott, 1996; Daily, 1997; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; Margoluis and Salafsky, 1998; Brulle, 2000). Routinely these initiatives involve non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Outside the “in-

dustrialized north” (e.g., in much of Mexico and the Yucatán Peninsula) bilateral accords between “northern” and “southern” NGOs are commonplace. As mentioned above, it is imperative to appreciate that these sorts of activities – even though they may be labeled as “conservation” or “environmental protection” – fall within the general realm of development. The mechanisms for transferring information, funds and other resources, the personal, social, and political links that are involved in establishing and maintaining the interrelations between donors and recipients, and many of the general concepts, attitudes and procedures are shared between conservation/environmental projects and other initiatives focused on issues such as education, food security, gender relations and health (e.g., Friedmann and Rangan, 1993; Pye-Smith et al., 1994; Smith, 1994; Lean, 1995; Caldecott, 1996; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; Margoluis and Salafsky, 1998).

There are numerous descriptions of the explosive growth of NGOs in Latin America over the past few decades (e.g., Clark, 1990, p. 46 ff.; Dewar, 1995; Meyer, 1999; Markowitz, 2001). In part, this is because these organizations have several benefits over governmental agencies, particularly greater administrative flexibility and responsiveness, as well as relatively lower costs in administration, negotiation and monitoring (Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999). There are many accounts of NGOs – notably *small grassroots* organizations (or “grassroots support organizations” = GSOs) – providing invaluable services to marginalized people, especially in the Third World (e.g., Breslin, 1987; Smith, 1994; Lean, 1995); NGOs have been called the “building blocks of democracy” and “incubators for alternatives for people who traditionally lack alternatives” (Richy-Vance, 1993). NGOs are often categorized as not-for-profit, so Meyer characterizes them as producers of public goods (PPG), commodities that can be shared by many members of society, theoretically without resource depletion or social competition. More often than not, as Meyer explains, Latin American NGOs are producers of international public goods (PIPG), providing services that promote environmental protection, education, health and other aspects of human well-being. The services and products are utilized not only by the citizens of the communities in which the NGOs exist and operate, but on a broader, global level. A key role of

PIPGs is the provision of information related to these activities.

Routinely, the activities of implementing NGOs are supported through a form of “foreign aid,” in which resources (equipment, funds, information, concepts, socio-political contacts, etc.) are “donated” (or at least facilitated) by organizations in the “North,” to organizations based in the “South.” Although the budgets for conservation projects may be modest in comparison to the more conventional types of foreign aid, the processes involved are comparable, if not identical.

5. Donors and NGOs in the PoMoNeLiAGlo

The attitudes and positions of individuals in regard to integrating social–political considerations together with biological conservation and environmental protection warrant evaluation, whether the actors be biologists, conservations, or environmentalists on the one hand, or anthropologists, community workers, or sociologists on the other. However, there is an equally profound issue that needs to be understood: the role of key institutions. Recent descriptions of the “environmental movement,” particularly in Canada and the USA, have evaluated the behaviors, function, and effects of those organizations that are ideally positioned to promote fundamental improvements in environmental policies and social conditions. Many of these accounts portray a situation very different from the general dogma and mystique surrounding NGOs, especially concerning various of the most powerful organizations. Because NGOs represent agents of change, it is imperative to understand these various complexities.

One of the most fundamental points is that NGOs must develop means to acquire and access resources with which they can operate and implement their activities: they must find donors for support. As a consequence, many (if not most) NGOs are driven by their relationship with donors, past, present or potential, and this is one of the most severe criticisms. Countless studies (e.g., Wright, 1990; Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995; Struhsaker, 1998; Brulle, 2000) have provided detailed explanations on how donors direct the agendas, priorities, programs and institutional development of the recipients. In many cases, NGOs have adopted strate-

gies of seeking and nurturing political and financial alliances with government agencies and private corporations, even when many of these (potential) donors have checkered social and environmental records (e.g., Pell, 1990; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995). Some authors have described the policies of “mainstream environmental organizations” as a “sell out” (Dore in Place, 1998, p. 231). Not surprisingly, descriptions of how private corporations “influence” (viz. manage and manipulate) environmental groups are not uncommon: Pell (1990) argued that corporate money buys access to environmental groups, insider networks, and thus to agendas of both NGOs and government agencies; the persistent presence – if not dominance – of corporate officers on the boards of NGOs, or in other leadership positions, is another manifestation of this tendency.

Dewar (1995) gave a detailed account of the environmental movement, viewed from Canada, describing the roles of government, private corporations, and NGOs. She found that the maze of interrelationships was so complex that it was a major challenge to tease apart specific links, and uncover who was truly responsible for what. She concluded that many organizations classified as NGOs are really “PGOs” (“private governmental organizations”) or “GOPs” (“governmental organizations privatized”) simply because these organizations are funded – and directly influenced – by governments. In some cases, she found that so-called “non-governmental” organizations functioned as extensions of certain government initiatives (often representing the interests of only a few people in government), but without the bureaucracy, accountability and checks and balances of government. “NGOs heavily dependent on government funding may have sacrificed some of the inherent advantages of being NGO – their independence, their credibility, and their objectivity.” (Fox, 1987, p. 13, cited in Meyer, 1996, p. 456).¹⁰

¹⁰ To these concerns must be added the fast-growing trend in many countries, for governments to contract out certain functions that had, until recently, been the sole responsibility of the state, not only giving but mandating the private sector to take on roles that were previously the bailiwick of governments. As a result, lines of distinction between government and private sector are often blurred, and accountability and responsibility are lost (or hidden) in new, untried levels of bureaucracy.

6. NGOs that serve as donors in the PoMoNeLiAGlo

Many NGOs in the “North” serve as donors for supporting activities and organizations in the Third World, and it is important to understand how they function and how effective they are in their own right, before considering the recipients. Clark (1990), Brulle (1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996, 2000) and Brulle and Brown (1997) provided detailed analyses of the environmental movement, particularly in the USA, with a special focus on the NGOs specializing in this field. Brulle (1994, 1995a, 2000) explains that the environmental movement offers the potential as a major political and social factor to empower society and produce an improved social order.

Although there has been a clear evolution of the movement and its key agents (Brulle, 1996), numerous authors (e.g., Clark, 1990; Isbister, 1993; Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Brulle, 1995c, 2000; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995; Wedel, 1998) have explained that despite the dominant beliefs, NGOs are frequently top-down and non-participatory in function. Brulle (1995c, 2000) concludes that in structure and function many of the more powerful environmental NGOs are oligarchic – not democratic or even “representative.” Nepotism and favoritism are usual (Clark, 1990, p. 59; Brulle, 1995c, 2000; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995): “[t]hey are subject to favoritism and particularism” (Meyer, 1997b, p. 132). This theme is emphasized by Dowie (1995) over and over again throughout his book, arguing that the conservation, or preservation, movement was primarily for white men, an elitist club characterized by being “genteel, white and very polite,” “safe, respectable, very polite” (p. 3). This is consistent with the detailed analysis of Brulle (2000). Not only is this structure contradictory to what most NGOs preach (thus, hypocritical), but it is inefficient in terms of developing and making the most out of the personnel in the organization (Clark, 1990, p. 58).

The strategy to court power and social acceptability has been given such priority that many NGOs have not only lost, but in some instances they have cast aside or even suppressed, an awareness of fundamental social and grassroots problems – even though these issues are basic to conservation issues. One of the most profound criticisms of the environmen-

tal movement in Canada and the USA¹¹ is that despite enjoying generous political and financial support, it is irrelevant – not pertinent to the needs of society (Bookchin, 1994; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995).

Like Dowie (1995), Brulle (1995c, 2000) argues that the environmental movement in the USA has failed in many respects – that between rhetoric and concrete action there is a deep chasm. Brulle extends the investigation deeper into the social causes, identifying the socialization process, with concomitant deep cultural and economic roots, as a primary cause of environmental problems. As Brulle explains, profound social change will be required to resolve fundamental environmental problems, so to be effective, NGOs must provide true leadership roles, not just platitudes and socially agreeable images. But, instead of dealing with the major issues at hand, and addressing the root problems, many of the more powerful U.S.-based conservation organizations are described as having taken on the customs of their socio-political superiors: in addition to consolidating their own social and political power, the compulsion to establish and maintain a socially agreeable image has become paramount, even if the basic objectives in environmental protection and biological conservation are never met, or are actually contradicted (Miller et al., 1994; Dowie, 1995).

In their desperate drive to win respectability and access to power, mainstream leaders of environmental NGOs politely pursue a course of accommodation and capitulation with “elected” officials, regulators, and even polluters and wildlife traffickers. This almost reflexive insistence on compromise has “pushed a once-effective movement to the brink of irrelevance” (Dowie, 1995, p. 6; see also Bookchin, 1994).¹² To

¹¹ The continued reference in this paper to NGOs in Canada and the USA as examples is because of the relatively large body of information that exists on these organizations from these countries. This does not mean that similar problems do not exist elsewhere, but rather that there is little or no systematic information. Indeed, a description of fundamental administrative, management, and ethical problems in World Wide Fund for Nature, India (Rai, 2001) makes this point very clear.

¹² This infatuation with compromise and patronization, with resulting superficiality, and the courting of irrelevance, was driven home by the former Director of Program Development of a well-established, U.S.-based conservation organization, which prides itself with having programs in scores of nations. In reviewing a manuscript on

consolidate power and out-compete other NGO competitors for donations and access to power, some NGOs have adopted strategies that are more in line with the cutthroat corporate world, than with charitable organizations espousing ethics, democracy and other noble humanitarian goals (Thornton and Currey, 1991; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995). Conflict of interest, willful blindness about contradictory situations, misrepresentation, nepotism and favoritism, manipulation, collusion, and conspiracy are a few of the characteristics that flow through Dewar's (1995) detailed account. One of her most disturbing conclusions is that certain environmental NGOs have been adept players in using "a cloak of green" to promote policies that are in the best interests of transnational corporations, particularly the globalization of trade. The result has been the fortifying of transnational corporations with the concomitant debilitation of sovereign governments: routinely this is in direct opposition to local environmental needs.

In declaring that the environmental movement in the USA is "courting irrelevance," Dowie (1995) offered three fundamental causes: a naïve (or convenient) reliance on authority and good faith in the government; a hegemonic drive to concentrate power, despite alienating and undermining the grassroots of their own movement; and the incapacity (or lack of desire) to estimate "the fury of their antagonists." He acknowledged that the air, water and land "... are certainly in better shape than they would have been had the movement never existed," providing examples of true leadership by certain politicians and civil servants. However, Dowie (1995, p. x) was adamant that the environment "... would be in far better condition had environmental leaders been bolder; more diverse in class, race, and gender; less

compromising in battle; and less gentlemanly in their day-to-day dealings with adversaries."

Since institutions are primary agents of change, a tremendous responsibility for resolving root environmental issues lies with the environmental NGOs. However, numerous authors (e.g., Bookchin, 1994; Dowie, 1995; Brulle, 1995c, 2000) argue that in the main protagonists and organizations in the USA are not addressing the fundamental issues. These authors demonstrate that in many instances, the measures taken are cosmetic, short-sighted, or even self-serving. Certainly, Dewar's (1995) description painted an extremely troublesome image of both donor and recipient NGOs, where deception and manipulation were portrayed as the norms for consolidating power, but transparency and democratic procedures were unusual, to say nothing of the dissonance between the stated objectives – noble and altruistic – and the actual behavior, best described as crass self-interest under the guise of charity.

7. Recipient NGOs in the PoMoNeLiAGlo

How does the situation regarding NGOs – particularly those in the USA and Canada – relate to the people in the Third World, such as those whose ancestors responded "*ma t'aan, ku y u'ub a t'aan*" half a millennium ago? Just as corporations are multinational, extending tentacles over the world, exploiting resources and impacting social and political decisions, conservation and other development activities are exported and guided in a Newtonian fashion: they emanate from where there is an abundance of material resources and information to where there is a scarcity of these elements.¹³ As mentioned earlier, biological con-

animal conservation they censored the terms Third World as "antiquated and pejorative" and "Likewise, 'peasants' is offensive". It is difficult to imagine in what language people like this communicate when they leave their plush offices in the USA. Will they disband the Third World Academy of Science and the Third World Network? Will they discredit some of the most forthright defenders of the peasants, biodiversity and environment of the Third World, authors (e.g., Shiva, 1992, 1993) who happen to have been born and live in the Third World, a term to which they constantly refer? What of the petitions for protection of the environment and indigenous denizens of the Fourth World – too often regarded as inferior to peasants (e.g., Bodley, 1988, 1990)? This is to say nothing of the fact that anyone who understands the etymology of the phrase Third World will appreciate that the term is in fact a socio-political satire (Isbister, 1993, p. 14)!

¹³ It is important to clarify that although nowadays it is commonly assumed that the North is the source of information, initiative and innovation in the environmental movement, the history of environmentalism is rich and diverse, easily predating the Christian era and encompassing a wide diversity of cultures and lands (Grove, 1995), including Mexico (Simonian, 1995). Hence, the flow of resources from donor to recipient is dictated more by contemporary discrepancies in financial resources and technical information, rather than by a superior grasp of the problems and appropriate measures for their solution, or some deep-rooted cultural difference between donors and recipients. Grove (1995) provides a detailed analysis of environmental imperialism.

servation and environmental protection ventures regularly share the same basic characteristics with activities categorized as “development,” “foreign aid” and “institution building.” When this flow of resources, information and political contacts is influenced – or driven – by much larger social, political and economic forces, the best of intentions may not be adequate to insure that the actions will really be effective, and beneficial to the majority of people in the recipient society. This is the case with any sort of activity which falls under the category of “development,” “foreign aid,” or “institution building,” as shown by a large and diverse literature (e.g., *Cochrane, 1979; Blase, 1986; Clark, 1990; Cernea, 1991; Isbister, 1993; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995; Wedel, 1998; Meyer, 1999*).

Northern-based NGOs, just like the Northern-based trans-nationals that tower above them, have tremendous impact on the planet’s environment and rural societies by influencing the ways in which diverse people and institutions around the world interact with their environs. This is not only because of the direct actions taken by these NGOs, but is also due to the ways in which they influence – consciously or unconsciously – their sister organizations in the Second and Third World.

Often, the controlling influence of donors is not totally intended, but results from inadequate procedures. For example, the issue of how “aid” is directed to recipients is critical. To make possible, and facilitate, the transfer of resources and information, a target for reception must be identified and incorporated into a scheme. Obviously, it is much simpler – and administratively much more effective – to focus the point of reception, rather than to try to direct resources to diverse, dispersed, heterogeneous members of a society. How is a focal point of this nature identified and selected? There must be a modicum of communication and confidence between the exporter (donor) and the importer (recipient). The recipient must speak the donor’s language, must be sufficiently sensitive to the donor’s culture to gain and maintain their confidence. With these criteria, the recipient can assure a flow of resources and information (*Clark, 1990, p. 55; Frazier, 1994*).

However, these criteria to establish and maintain a bond of confidence between donor and recipient need not take into account the details of how the later is related to the society in which they are immersed. In

other words, the activities, concepts and priorities of the importer may or may not be pertinent to the needs and expectations of the society in which they live. The problems that the agent, or NGO, identifies and actions that they promote may or may not be congruous with the majority of society (*Frazier, 1994*). Myriad studies (e.g., *Clark, 1990, p. 5; Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Dewar, 1995*) have described how NGOs in the Third World are normally driven by the demands of donors, not necessarily relevant to the societies in which the recipients exist and work.

In large “foreign aid” activities, this phenomenon can take on remarkable proportions, with donors dictating totally irrelevant, even counterproductive, priorities (*Wedel, 1998*). Indeed, the actions and policies of donors can disrupt and destroy justifiable institutions serving clientele in the recipient country (*Meyer, 1992a; Wedel, 1998*). Both *Meyer (1992a)* and *Wedel (1998)* argue that it is not rare for institutions irrelevant to the needs of society to be specifically created because of the demands and influence of donors. These authors explain in great detail that it is normal for the recipient in these transactions to represent the elite,¹⁴ and not necessarily the “grassroots” or even the majority of the so-called recipient society. Agents are often driven by what looks good or proper to them, or what makes them feel important, criteria that may be contradictory to the needs of the recipient society (*Scott, 1998*).

In the end, recipient NGOs are responsible only to their donors, and not to the general public (*Clark, 1990, p. 46 ff.*); “externally funded NGOs in developing countries are primarily serving the international donor community rather than the domestic beneficiary” (*Meyer, 1992b, p. 1123*). The problem is especially grave when powerful donors, pushing primarily development agendas for financial and political reasons (e.g., World Bank, USAID, CIDA) have redirected priorities and actions in conservation and development programs – especially in the Third World (*Isbister, 1993; Dewar, 1995; Struhsaker, 1998*).

¹⁴ The elite in the recipient society are not necessarily just people from the highest socio-economic classes, but can be people who have adopted what they consider to be a higher culture, such as through foreign schooling and/or contacts.

There is nothing new or unique about the way that NGOs behave while acting as brokers of resources, and diverse examples of similar anomalous relationships with other sorts of agents abound. Half a millennium ago certain Maya elites in Yucatán became adept at building alliances with the Spanish Conquistadors, at the cost of other Maya groups and the common Maya people; indeed, some “Maya Conquistadors” may have been far more severe to Maya than were their Iberian allies (Restall, 1998). Another case in point, albeit extreme, comes from the shores of Venezuela. A local NGO, well connected to northern counterparts, arranged the staged filming of a dolphin kill in order to create a high visibility, national scandal and thereby attract support from foreign sponsors in the activist conservation community (Salvatierra, 1995a, 1995b). Accounts of recent fiascoes in Central Europe where billions of dollars in “foreign aid” yielded results counterproductive to the stated goals, detrimental to the recipients as well as to the donors (Wedel, 1998), drive even farther home the point that simply transferring and receiving resources does not necessarily solve social and environmental problems – not infrequently, it aggravates them!

Given the basic faults that have been identified in the more powerful environmental and conservation organizations in Canada and the USA (e.g., Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995; Brulle, 2000), it should be no surprise to find recipient NGOs in other countries that are irrelevant to their own societies. Because the structure, function, priorities and behavior of recipient NGOs is routinely influenced, or even directed, by their donors, it is more than likely that the recipients will acquire, or be directed to adopt, the same characteristics as their patrons, the donors. If there are fundamental lacunae in the social organization and function of the donor organizations, one can expect little better in the recipients who will be encouraged to emulate their socio-political “superiors”.

The exception to the generality of donors driving agendas is found when there is a clear understanding of priorities and processes. When the objectives of a donor are to listen, learn and then help try to strengthen a recipient, with development *and* dignity, agendas are more likely to be relevant to solving the issues at hand (Breslin, 1987; Smith, 1994). “[W]hile transfer of technology and infusion of capital may produce growth, they do not necessarily foster development.” At the

heart of the issue is a change in attitudes, self respect, self esteem, dignity, identity, autonomy, independence, outside respect, creating a space for participation and change, and self-determination (Richy-Vance, 1993, p. 123).

External agents often play a critical role in facilitating empowerment of marginalized communities, implementation of conservation plans, and effective environmental protection and community development. These agents can be local, and need not necessarily be international or national. “But the danger in depending on external agents is that grassroots struggles for livelihood may become mere exemplars of larger societal processes that have become ideolized [sic].” (Friedmann and Rangan, 1993, p. 18). Moreover, it is a major challenge for most donor organizations to sacrifice the brandishing of their image and other fast track measures of success in favor of small-scale, inconspicuous improvements of marginalized peoples who have no political or financial power with which to reward the donor.

8. Demystifying NGOs in the PoMoNeLiAGlo

NGOs can provide invaluable, even unique, services. But, the myth that NGOs always represent the grassroots has been severely challenged: as a rule the people they provide services for are those who have access to political and financial resources. Both Meyer (1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999) and Wedel (1998) explain that it is usual for local elites to benefit most from the programs of NGOs and “foreign aid.” In challenging the dogma surrounding these organizations, Meyer is very clear in her description of not-for-profit NGOs, explaining that they “have the reputation of reaching the poor and of promoting local participation because of their small size and political independence; and they are considered to be low cost and innovative”, but “[t]here may be more mystique than substantive advantages in these reputed characteristics of NGOs” (1992, pp. 1118–1119). Dowie (1995) repeatedly explains that although there is dedication, passion and vitality in the roots of the environmental movement, neither political power nor “real money” routinely reach the lower levels: “most funding is siphoned off by international NGOs and southern professionals before it hits the grass [grassroots organizations

and groups]” (Meyer, 1995, p. 1278).¹⁵ Clark (1990, p. 46 ff.) comes to similar conclusions, based on NGOs all around the world. Indeed, tribal people – the so-called “Fourth World” – have routinely been victims of development and “foreign aid” initiatives carried out by both governments and NGOs, even if these organizations are from the Third World (Bodley, 1988, 1990; Johnston, 1994).

Meyer (1995, p. 1279) reported that specialists “lament the proliferation of such illegitimate, opportunistic NGOs.” She goes on to explain “While the vocabulary of entrepreneurship, with its profit-seeking capitalists, is little used in the NGO literature, a recognition of the dynamic entrepreneurial nature of the response to funding for environmental protection is critical.” Because of the way the major NGOs have operated, by monopolizing political power, social contacts, media coverage, and financial support, environmentalism has remained narrowly defined. Although the politically powerful NGOs can take credit for many of the environmental accomplishments, they must also share the blame for diverse environmental setbacks – a responsibility that is very rarely honored (Dowie, 1995). Clark (1990, p. 46 ff.) also explains that it is usual for NGOs to focus on self-promotion and fundraising, with little effort in objective evaluation or learning from experience: there are numerous accounts of dissonance between perceived/projected success and true performance.

Even without the stratified relationship between donors and recipients, there are basic aspects of NGOs that need to be critically and objectively assessed (Clark, 1990). Markowitz (2001) explained that there is a remarkable paucity of anthropological information in this arena; tellingly, she suggests that this may be, in part, because most research is donor-driven.

The issue of evaluation is yet another Pandora’s Box. To begin with, objective assessments of conservation and development work are not easy to find. Even so, it has been well established that there is no single recipe for measuring success in NGOs, conservation and community development: each case must be treated individually (e.g., Richy-Vance, 1993; Pye-Smith et al.,

1994). Moreover, there is a constant risk that the criteria, scales and measures used will depend on who is in control and what their interests are (Lélé and Norgaard, 1996); measures and criteria of success are subject to political pressures, and often are changed to accommodate modified agendas (Struhsaker, 1998).

This is not to say that there are not NGOs or even some donors who shine brilliantly with their clarity of purpose and integrity (e.g., Breslin, 1987; Thornton and Currey, 1991; Friedmann and Rangan, 1993; Richy-Vance, 1993; Meyer, 1995), but this depends on fundamental objectives of the organization, and it is not uncommon for establishments categorized as “not-for-profit” and “charitable” to have agendas very different from their publicly stated objectives (Miller et al., 1994; Dewar, 1995).

As Clark (1990, p. 50 ff.) and Meyer (1997a, pp. 1127–1128) explain, NGOs are both political and economic entities, and it is difficult to separate the economics from the politics. Markowitz (2001) explained the risks and challenges to doing ethnographies of NGOs, and the fact that this requires working within a web of relationships that are inherently unstable, as well as using “multilocal research strategies,” because of the strength of the transnational processes involved. There is also a problem in assuming residential and institutional stability of the organization or people under review when in fact no such stability exists.

After a series of detailed studies, Meyer (1997b, p. 133) concluded that often the reputation of NGOs has been overstated and “[t]hey are not a panacea and cannot replace government.” She went on (p. 143) to warn that “participation may be merely perfunctory as entrenched local interests maintain control of most incoming benefits.” Hence, “[s]kepticism is in order as donors begin another round of institution building” (p. 134). Other authors have come to similar conclusions: the complexity of understanding NGOs and the many items on their agendas is daunting (Markowitz, 2001). As Richy-Vance (1993, p. 28) explained, “NGO” is an unwieldy term that defines a vast diversity of organizations, based on what they are *not*.

Analyses of NGOs, conservation, and development activities are replete with commentaries, from indirect to very detailed, about the issues discussed above – the social and environmental dangers are enormous (e.g., Clark, 1990; Thornton and Currey, 1991; Meyer, 1992b, 1995; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995; Wedel, 1998;

¹⁵ Indeed, the term *astro-turf* organizations is now used to refer to those institutions that purport to represent the grassroots (i.e., marginalized members of society), but use this as a cynical deception to garner power, respect and resources for their elite officers.

Brulle, 2000). The concentration of resources and information, even if the amount is not particularly significant to the exporting/donor organization, may represent an incomparable treasure to the recipient. With this, the imbalance in resources and disparity in economic, social and political influence is exacerbated in the region where the importation is made. Empires in the Third World can be quickly built and fortified with relatively small amounts of money and other resources. The impacts on the local society, and by consequence, the effects on the local environment can be devastating (Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Korten, 1995; Wedel, 1998).

In this respect the allegory of Ferdinand Marcos and Manuel Noriega as political giants – *cum* monsters – should be perfectly clear: they were created and nurtured by targeted “foreign aid” and “development” projects from U.S. donors who were driving political agendas. The careers of these two social pariahs led to enormous social and environmental costs, born not only by their respective homelands, but by many other people and areas under their sway. There is a great deal that these two historic figures can teach us about biological conservation, development and “foreign aid,” and their histories stand as poignant metaphors from which conservation biologists and field anthropologists should learn about the social processes that routinely drive biological conservation, development and “foreign aid” (Frazier, 1994).

9. Environmentalism, NGOs and political ecology in the Yucatán

Focusing on the We-Do-Not-Understand-What-You-Are-Saying Peninsula, there appear to be no studies (anthropological, economical, sociological, etc.) of either the indigenous NGOs, or the role of large, external organizations as donors and exporters to the region. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that descriptions of conservation, development, “foreign aid” and institution building from other regions (as summarized above) strike notes of recognition for various people familiar with conservation and development activities on the Peninsula. At a personal level, nearly eight years working in the Centro de Investigaciones y de Estudios Avanzados, INP, Mérida, Mexico, as a researcher/professor/conservation biologist, interacting

with villagers, fishers, students, other professors and researchers, state and federal governmental agencies, NGOs and other members of society, has convinced me that numerous descriptions of conservation and development activities in other parts of the world are very relevant to the Yucatán Peninsula.

During the last decade, as elsewhere in Latin America (Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Richy-Vance, 1993; Markowitz, 2001), there has been a rapid proliferation of NGOs in Yucatán; they come in multiple sizes and forms, representing a diversity of interests, with environmental and social issues central to most of them. Some of these NGOs are intimately linked to larger institutions (particularly in the U.S. and Mexico City); others have been created to meet the agendas of international donors such as the UNDP (Hartasánchez, 1997), while still others are small and seem to have developed from self-defined needs to address specific issues in a restricted geographic area.

This growth of NGOs in Yucatán, especially since the end of the 1980s, has been accompanied by an increasing inflow of money, technology, information and other resources, allegedly to help the local people and to protect their environment. In some cases “partnerships” have been forged between donors and recipient NGOs, in which one importer has exclusive rights to an exporter’s resources (e.g., Pronatura, Peninsula Yucatán and The Nature Conservancy, J. Quiroz, pers. commun.), or at least an established pattern of support (e.g., Ducks Unlimited, Mexico [DUMAC] and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and several small organizations and the regional UNDP office). As expected, this has resulted in the concentration of resources and power in some local organizations. Following the example of their more powerful northern role models,¹⁶ many local organizations strive for political endorsement, which produces intense competition and non-cooperation between local NGOs (cf. Clark, 1990, p. 56). Frequently, the small, indigenous grassroots organizations have been trampled to the bottom of the

¹⁶ This is not to imply that complex, self-serving political maneuvers, intense socio-political competition, non-cooperation (even if covered with a mantle of cordiality), and internecine combat are new to the Yucatán, or are there only because of foreign agencies; among Mexicans, the level of *grilla* in Yucatán is renown. Markowitz (2001, p. 43) knowingly questioned: How do we find a compass for sorting out the myriad internecine rivalries that characterize the NGO world?

heap by those that have access to greater power, political connections or media coverage.

Agendas are also set by outside organizations. For example, organizers of DUMAC's regional training program "Reserva" were eager to evaluate their progress after nearly a decade of courses, and in order to enhance interactions and exchanges they planned to hold an intensive workshop with representation from various generations of students. However, the major funding agency did not consider this a priority; instead, the course organizers were instructed to modify the periodicity of the course, as well as the number of students per course. While it could be argued that the result is advantageous, the process was very much one of the outside donor driving the local agenda.

Accounts of abuse of resources for personal gain, along with blatant favoritism, are rife in local NGOs in the Yucatan, but it is extraordinary to hear of even token demands for accountability, much less sanctions. In several cases, it was clear that both local leadership, as well as overseas agencies, were simply turning a blind eye to base mismanagement, if not corruption. One local NGO, with direct personal links to people in influential positions in government, established a local reputation for officialized nepotism.

Following the models of powerful First World NGOs, programs are ordinarily reported as raving successes, while mistakes and failures never occur, or so it would appear (cf. Clark, 1990, p. 46). Success is routinely measured in terms of the quantity of resources received and controlled by the organization, the numbers of political contacts and high-profile, media-focused events, with emphasis on short-term goals, rather than long-term objectives. Obviously, this is inconsistent with the recommended ways to measure success in conservation and development activities (e.g., Margoluis and Salafsky, 1998).

Remarkably, the role and participation of Yucatec Maya, the "original" and numerically dominant inhabitants of the Peninsula, are inconspicuous in planning, execution and evaluation of many of the projects that are devised and carried out, ostensibly for their benefit: there is, however, no lack of people from Mexico City (or elsewhere such as Europe and the USA) in positions of authority and power in local conservation NGOs and governmental agencies. For all the knowledge, tradition, and geographic seniority that the Yucatec Maya may have, in the main their most consequential role for

the global conservation and development brotherhood is as charismatic symbols of romantic, bygone Classic times: images of Maya ancestors, their glyphs, temples, gods, and icons adorn the publications of many Yucatecan NGOs, but there is little effective communication between decision makers and other members of the empowered sectors of society on the one hand and the living Maya on the other – a situation that is little different from that which existed between the Mayan ancestors and the Spanish conquistadors.

Given the way in which "foreign aid" routinely works, with donors driving agendas in the recipient countries (Meyer, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Struhsaker, 1998; Wedel, 1998), given the way in which many powerful NGOs in Canada and the U.S. are structured and function, with autocratic, non-democratic procedures and focused on political and financial gain (Brulle, 1995c, 2000; Dewar, 1995; Dowie, 1995), it should not be surprising that the less powerful organizations on the We-Do-Not-Understand-What-You-Are-Saying Peninsula simply follow suit.

Hence, although there have been no detailed studies of the NGO phenomenon in Yucatán, the patterns of institutional structure, development, organization, administration and interactions mirror what has been documented elsewhere. What is clearly missing is an independent, honest assessment of how these organizations are actually affecting the social situation and environment in the Yucatán.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

The contributions that NGOs have made to environmental conservation and community development are many and varied. They "have helped force changes in the way multilaterals [multinational corporations] do business and have increased their accountability to stake holders" (Rich, 1994, cited in Meyer, 1997b, p. 123). Donors have enhanced institutional innovation by making new ideas and resources available to political entrepreneurs (Meyer, 1992a, p. 642). NGOs have great strength in their heterogeneity and flexibility to change (Meyer, 1992b, p. 1119). They have provided "space" and mechanisms for participation at the "forgotten end of the social scale," enhancing the development of civic responsibility and democracy

(Richy-Vance, 1993). Organizations of this nature can respond to and nurture the emotional, spiritual and religious¹⁷ needs, which are routinely ignored by countless conservation and development initiatives, but are known to be essential for community development and environmental protection (Richy-Vance, 1993; Smith, 1994; Lean, 1995; Elder, 2002). They have been instrumental in providing much needed foundations for self-respect, local pride and a sense of community and place, through providing favorable conditions and appropriate forms of support for local initiatives to take root (Pye-Smith et al., 1994). And, despite his stinging critique of the environmental movement in the U.S., Dowie (1995) does admit that NGOs have made important contributions. But, at the same time, it would be naïve and irresponsible to pretend that everything is perfect, and free of problems – to accept the myth about NGOs being a panacea: “Ideology cannot be allowed to blind us to the realities of existing environmental struggles” (Friedmann and Rangan, 1993, p. 19).

“Several insightful anthropologists have shown that, although aid agencies tend to promise neutral technical solutions, they nonetheless reflect political ideologies that have important unanticipated consequences for recipients” (Wedel, 1998, p. 10; see also Wright, 1990). Moreover, there are serious criticisms that conservation biology and science itself cannot be held up as positivist, totally neutral and value-free (Norton, 1988; Nader, 1996), despite the fact that the practitioners of these disciplines typically evade the issue of value judgments (Lélé and Norgaard, 1996; Adam, 1998). It cannot just be assumed that the environmental movement, conservation activities, and community development in Yucatán (or anywhere else), just because they are appealing and well presented, are actually meeting their stated objectives – nor indeed that their objectives are realistic or acceptable to the communities being directly impacted. Nor is it responsible to ignore institutional problems and pretend that they will just go away, or somehow magically get better over time. For example, there are indications that even the

more carefully conceived and executed small grassroots programs in the Yucatán Peninsula have basic problems (Hartasánchez, 1997) – this is to say nothing of those NGOs that are perpetually in the media, constantly claiming myriad and incredible accomplishments. On what basis can one simply assume that these complex problems will somehow disappear?

Admittedly, the allocation of benefits and provision of environmental IPGs (international public goods) cannot realistically be expected to be either optimal or fair – indeed, there are no clear mechanisms to evaluate “fairness” (Meyer, 1995, p. 1286). However, as Dowie (1995) and Brulle (2000) explained, to be relevant, environmentalism must embody justice, with representation and participation of the masses. Clearly, if the scientists and scientific procedures involved in environmental work are to have broad acceptance, they must relate with social realities and values (Lélé and Norgaard, 1996). Accounts of reserves being set up without adequate involvement of local people, and the ensuing conundrum of social, political, and environmental problems, are well known; but there are many other, less obvious, areas where the actions of NGOs can result in serious setbacks, both socially and environmentally.

To a great extent, these issues were identified decades ago. Although there is an extensive literature on diverse aspects of institution building and the responsibilities of institutions, much of it available for more than 25 years (see Lélé and Norgaard, 1996, p. 363), it is consistently underutilized – if not ignored. If this is true in the well-endowed world of international development projects, it is even more so for the less politically and financially attractive world of biological conservation. Clearly, serious conservationists must make better use of the extensive literature on development, particularly as it applies to NGOs.

At the root of this dilemma is a much more ponderous issue. Rarely have environmentalists “challenged the fundamental canons of western civilization or the economic orthodoxy of welfare capitalism – the ecologically destructive system that gives the nation’s resources away to any corporation with the desire and technology to develop them” (Dowie, 1995, p. 28). Economic growth is simply accepted, nearly on the same rank as gravity, by most people in the PoMoNeLiAGlo, or Post-Exuberant Age, despite the fact that this clearly is a fantasy and con-

¹⁷ Although much of literature available in the West focuses on relationships between Christianity and the environment, it is essential to understand that every religion has some position on the issue of environmental quality (Anon., 1986, 2001), and non-Christian religions such as Buddhism (e.g., Batchelor and Brown, 1992; Darlington, 1998) and Islam (e.g., Agwan, 1997; Kula, 2001) also have environmental movements and environmental ethics.

tradicts the fundamentals of long-term access to basic resources (Frazier, 1997; Czech, 2000). In the same light, the global impact of commoditization has had immense and devastating effects on diverse environments (Manno, 2000). Several authors who have dared to explore the roots of contemporary problems (e.g., Clark, 1990, p. 150 ff.; Brulle, 1995c, 2000; Vandermeer and Perfecto, 1995; Adam, 1998; Czech, 2000; Manno, 2000) call for a new pragmatism, with not only structural adjustments, but also structural transformations to redefine development activities. Lélé and Norgaard (1996) point out the fundamental – and hypocritical – problem of conservationists relying on technologies that are “unsustainable,” and Czech (2000) explains why the cannons of contemporary economic systems are at direct odds with environmental protection. Certainly, the high fashions in conservation and development, such as “sustainable development,” are more a political convenience – or a deceit – than a boon (Frazier, 1997). Until there are fundamental changes in the way the dominant society functions, the issues discussed herein will continue to be but symptoms, subject to social and political “band aids” of dubious long term benefit. Clearly, NGOs are in many respects part of the dominant society, despite where they may be headquartered. However, as Brulle (2000) has explained, NGOs have the potential to take the lead in providing societies with examples of real and lasting solutions to the complex social and environmental problems posed by contemporary issues: the question is whether they will rise to challenge.

The Yucatán Peninsula provides prime examples of persistent imperialism. Not only is the geographic name a monument to cultural ignorance and domination, but the contemporary situation indicates many cases of imperialism in the developmental and environmental arenas. Libraries are replete with volumes on the cultural and economic conquest of the Americas by European – and Amerindian conquistadors; and discourses on past and present effects of these historic events are endless. What are often missing are explicit analyses of the ways in which these issues are played out under contemporary systems, particularly in the Peninsula. As Markowitz (2001) and others concerned with the interaction between environment and society have lamented, there is a paucity of information on how the agents of change, particularly NGOs, are dealing with these complex, interdisciplinary issues.

There is an urgent need for greater involvement of professionals trained in the identification, description and evaluation of human social processes, political structures, social interactions, communication, symbolism, cultural matrices, and the sources of human motivation that illuminate the questions of why people do what they do. As Durrenberger (1990, p. 82) explained: “. . . these matters of allocation and distribution effects – political matters – are often what anthropologists are most competent to talk about. . . It is not that anthropologists or social scientists are the only ones to have noticed this, but that it is part of our subject matter, part of the data we try to understand while it is not part of the subject matter of biologists.” At one level, one could say that social scientists understand about the accelerators, steering wheels and brakes of societies. But that simile is inadequate; they are the scientists who understand the thrust systems, gyro-stabilizers, orientation systems, range, useful life, and costs of vehicles much, much more complex – and far less predictable – than rockets.

This urgent need for social scientists to be more active in biological conservation and environmental protection, particularly in the root problems of social organization and motivation, must overcome what has been an unhealthy reticence – or perhaps taboo – for social scientists to incorporate environmental issues as priority matters for investigation (Beck, 1992, 1995): a position that does no good for either the social sciences or the environment on which societies depend.¹⁸ The investigations of anthropology and political ecology that are carried out in the Yucatán must contemplate major forces impacting resource availability and distribution. To understand these questions today, in the PoMoNeLiAGlo, attention must be given to the institutions involved at diverse levels: it is just not adequate to know how much effort goes into planting a *milpa* (the local term for a cornfield) and how much it will yield in a good year, or how many deer there are in a biosphere reserve and how many are killed for illegal trade with nearby urban centers. There is dire need

¹⁸ This is not to dismiss the many critical initiatives to promote environmental protection that are undertaken by anthropologists, economists, historians, literary experts, media specialists, political scientists, sociologists, and other specialists in disciplines outside of the biological sciences. However, in this writer’s experience, there is still a fundamental lack of real integration of the various disciplines that are brought to bear on the complex problem.

to understand and evaluate those institutions that claim special relevance to the issues of environmental conservation and community development, particularly donor and recipient NGOs. Social scientists must go “beyond the traditional cultural ecology approaches” to incorporate the role of public policy processes and its actors (Orbach and Johnson, 1988, p. 9). “What we need at this critical juncture is an effort to transcend the impasse created by debates around abstracted and ambiguous categories such as environment, development, and sustainability and the romanticized notions of popular environmental action. In order to move beyond the totalizing tendencies of grand structural theories, we need to develop middle-range explanatory frameworks that integrate global processes with local environmental action and reveal the particular outcomes experienced by peoples and communities living with localities and regions” (Friedmann and Rangan, 1993, p. 11). Furthermore, these studies must be disseminated to international, multidisciplinary groups involved in diverse aspects of these activities (e.g., Faust and Smardon, 2001).

Clearly, for this to be effective, other disciplines must promote and support these initiatives: biologists, conservationists, and ecologists (among others) must recognize the limits of their work and comprehension, and actively seek and promote cooperation with other disciplines, particularly the social sciences not just talk about it. Communications and interactions within conventional discipline-bounded professional groupings and organizations in anthropology and the other “social sciences” on the one hand, or conservation biology and ecology on the other, will do little to solve the root problems. There are countless professional societies, journals and other academic vehicles and actions directly involved with biological conservation, but with few exceptions, these are designed and run by and for “conservation biologists” on the one hand, or “natural scientists” on the other. Specialists from the different disciplines must “invade the professional space” of the other disciplines; go to “their” meetings about biological conservation, political ecology, cultural anthropology, and let “them” know the relevance of “your” work. Publish in “their” journals.¹⁹ Publicly debate “their” conclusions, illuminate “their” unspoken assumptions,

test “their” taboos, shake “their” intellectual structure so that *in collaboration* a stronger edifice can be designed and built.

At an individual level, people involved in the development, maintenance, and evaluation of biosphere reserves and other conservation initiatives need to promote and insist on full accountability from all actors, particularly local and donor NGOs. This may create very awkward situations, especially if the NGOs are funding work, trips, research, student assistants, etc. However, one can hardly expect to be taken seriously by local communities and the people most effected by conservation initiatives – no matter how ethical and devoted one may be at an individual level – if one’s activities are patronized by the same organization that has acquired a reputation for manipulating local people, while its officers enjoy a posh existence, pampered with access to power and material resources. When such reputations are unwarranted, there must be careful work to debunk them; and when they are warranted, there must be careful work to resolve the fundamental problems, not just the institutional images.

There is a general pattern for the specialists most concerned with biological conservation (anthropologists, biologists, community workers, conservationists, development workers, ecologists, social workers, etc.) to immerse themselves, with total dedication, at the grassroots levels, in the trenches, and to ignore, neglect, or avoid issues at higher organizational levels. Like it or not, we are all part of the PoMoNeLiAGlo – post-modern, neo-liberal, age of globalization. Pretending to be Gonzalo Guerrero among the Yucatec Maya when unwanted impositions of the outside world could be deterred with wizardry will do little to help the people and environments – the intended beneficiaries of our intellectual efforts.

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not a professional biologist, commented: We don’t have the credentials to publish in *Conservation Biology*. This may be the attitude of some biologists who have the power of censorship, but it must not be tolerated if the field known as biological conservation is to be effective. It will be up to the social scientists to join the rebellion to this situation.

¹⁹ One of the reviewers of this paper, a founding member of the Society for Conservation Biology, a dedicated conservationist, but

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