

Protected Areas and Environmental Justice

Spring 2013 MES Elective

This graduate elective is focused on the following question: Can protected area policies achieve conservation objectives while respecting and furthering the rights and interests of peoples with long historical and cultural ties to such areas? We now stand at a critical juncture in the history of protected area designation and management, at home and abroad. As the human capacity to transform the landscape, the waters, and the atmosphere of the planet reaches unprecedented levels, the isolation of natural areas from human occupation and use is being increasingly challenged as an inappropriate or misguided policy. Resident (especially indigenous) peoples often see the traditional, exclusionary model of nature protection as a form of environmental injustice. For protected area managers, regulatory enforcement has become difficult or impossible in traditional nature reserves of the world's poorest countries. Within academia, increasing numbers of scholars are challenging the conceptual basis of wilderness preservation and national parks, while other scholars staunchly defend preservation as the best policy by which to stem the massive tide of global extinctions. As a result, an impasse has been reached in protected area policy. The choice of conservation strategies today will have lasting consequences for future ecosystems and peoples. Endangered species and cultural traditions can be lost by a misstep in either direction, i.e., through precipitous policy shifts or through stubborn adherence to misguided policies. In this course, we will attempt to first understand this impasse and then to look beyond it, toward the most likely short-term, medium-term and long-term strategies for achieving lasting natural area preservation with social justice. Readings will be drawn from fields such as geography, history, conservation biology, and political ecology. Theoretical debates will be grounded in case studies from North America and other world regions.