

Book review

Corporate Nature: An Insider's Ethnography of Global Conservation by Sarah Milne (2023) 272 pp., The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona, USA. ISBN 978-0-8165-4701-2 (e-book), USD 35.00.

After many years of effort and advocacy, it is now widely agreed that social research has a vital role to play in biodiversity conservation. This research comes in various different forms and flavours, based on different objectives, methods and disciplinary perspectives. Some are obviously useful to conservation, such as studies of factors influencing pro-environmental decisions amongst consumers. Others may at first glance appear less useful, and even hostile or damaging to conservation, but have the potential to offer profound longer-term value if taken seriously.

Sarah Milne's book *Corporate Nature* is a perfect example of this latter category of conservation social research. It provides an in-depth account of the work of Conservation International in Cambodia over more than a decade, exploring how the idea of payments for ecosystem services became crystallized within the organization as a global policy idea that was then implemented on the ground without taking sufficient account of the local context. Milne alleges this led to a series of failures, including, in her view, complicity in a major illegal logging operation that was devastating for the unique biodiversity of the Cardamom Mountains and for the livelihoods of resident people. Milne also sees links between these failings and the murder of Chut Wutty, an environmental activist and former Conservation International employee who was her personal friend.

In carrying out the research for this book, Milne moved between different roles with respect to Conservation International over the course of more than 10 years—as an employee, an independent researcher and an external advisor and consultant at various

times. This is highly unusual, and gives the book an incredible level of detail and depth of analysis that would not have been possible without the insights Milne gained through being an active participant in much of what she describes. At the same time, it creates a challenging ethical and personal context in which Milne had to navigate what she calls her multipositionality. Milne's writing on this topic is a real highlight of the book, blending discussion of how she maintained academic rigour with a highly personal account of the difficulties she faced.

Milne's book is deeply critical of the work of Conservation International as an example of what she calls Corporate Nature: 'that which emerges from the technocratic, bureaucratic, and power-laden practices of mainstream global conservation organisations' (p. 6). She sets out in meticulous detail how a combination of new funding models and idealized policy narratives created conditions in which the organization had strong incentives to overlook failures, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that the prescribed approach was not working on the ground. Although the book is about Conservation International, I believe that the story it tells will resonate with many conservationists who have worked with or for international conservation organizations. Given their significant influence on contemporary conservation practice, this raises important questions about how international conservation is structured, funded and regulated that matter for everyone working in conservation. As Milne says, 'It is not just the mainstream conservation edifice that is at stake but nature-society itself' (p. 227).

I found most of the book highly convincing, yet one point struck me as less strong: the way Milne argued that replacing an expatriate country director with a Cambodian national had contributed to the problems she describes. Although this may

have been true in this particular case, I was surprised not to see some broader reflection on how this relates to current debates about decolonization and efforts to encourage local leadership, which her argument seems to contradict.

As a piece of academic writing, Milne is careful to situate her thinking in the relevant social research literature. She draws on theories such as Foucault's work on power, Igoe's on spectacle, and Scott's on legibility. These ideas may be unfamiliar—and possibly daunting—to some readers. However, the text is written in a highly accessible style, with new ideas being clearly introduced and explained before being applied to the particularities of the study context. As a result, *Corporate Nature* acts as a kind of primer for a body of theory that is highly relevant to the work of many people in conservation, but is often overlooked. The book will give readers a theoretical framework to understand, and perhaps to change, problematic things they see happening in conservation.

Milne challenges the structure and function of mainstream conservation, using meticulous evidence combined with social theory to make the case that conservation needs to change. The final section provides some ideas as to how this could be done, from a starting point of humility and willingness to embrace diverse perspectives rather than operating from a standardized top-down model. While the specifics of these recommendations need further development, I find the central message of the book compelling. I would encourage everyone working in conservation to read it, and hope that it will stimulate deep reflection about the way conservation works and how things could be done differently.

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