

How to ensure justice in conservation action, beyond participation? Insights from Mexico

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Over time, local communities have developed different ways to relate to and care for nature. This local diversity in conservation approaches is why local communities play a crucial role in environmental protection. However, conservationists have largely overlooked traditional practices and ways of relating to nature. Conservation actions have even displaced local communities based upon conservation practitioners' globalised ideals and narratives of conservation strategies with little or no regard for local practices and worldviews. Therefore, when actors who are not a part of local communities implement conservation initiatives, local communities may, and often do, perceive injustices resulting from such implementation.

In this article, we argue that the efforts to enhance participation of local communities in conservation have not always enabled local communities to shape conservation action in accordance with their traditional worldviews, knowledge-systems and cultural practices. We build our argument on the authors' extensive research in four Mexican forest areas. We contrast this research with the literature on environmental justice and conservation. The cases we have chosen are all characterised by positive conservation outcomes as well as the inclusion of local communities in various governance processes, and as such are considered best-practice conservation initiatives in

Mexico. Yet, in all cases, engaging in externally-driven, participatory conservation initiatives forces local communities to change their traditional relationships to nature. We conclude that achieving the recognition of local worldviews, values and knowledge systems requires two major changes in conservation governance: developing an awareness of the structural political and economic factors impacting on decision-making in conservation, and reaffirming the legitimacy and importance of local knowledge-systems.

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