

The real custodians of the forest

Colonial conservation is destroying biodiversity, argues Mya-Rose Craig

“Something has gone very badly wrong here,” Channel 4 reporter Ade Adepitan says, following an interview with representatives from the Baka people in the Congo. He is reporting for an investigation into wildlife charity WWF’s plans to create a national park in the region against the wishes of the local people.

WWF has spent 10 years in the Congo Basin attempting to create a huge protected conservation zone, Messok Dja, a dense rainforest, supported by the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Congolese government and international funding. WWF has been funding anti-poaching ‘ecoguards’, who patrol the region and enforce anti-poaching laws.

As reported in *The Ecologist*, 2016, there have been serious allegations of human rights abuses by these guards against the Indigenous Baka people, including murder, gang rape, beatings and torture. The Baka continue to be forcibly removed from their forest, prevented from hunting for food, and wrongfully accused of poaching, their hunter-gatherer lifestyle disappearing as they relinquish ancient traditions, according to NGO Survival International. A 2019 BuzzFeed report stated that WWF’s board had been aware of the abuse and had attempted to cover it up. In February this year, *The Guardian* published a leaked draft report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on the allegations.

In a written response to the UNDP report, WWF said: “We are especially distressed by the concerns raised regarding relationships between government-employed rangers and local communities, including allegations of abuse, and we are treating these as matters of highest importance. Any breach of our

social and human rights commitments is unacceptable to us.” It went on to say: “Local people and communities must be stewards of conservation efforts. This is why we have been reviewing our approach in Messok Dja for the past 18 months ... to identify solutions together with the communities, and we will continue to do so, learning from and together with partners like UNDP.”

“WWF’s activities fund abuse and intimidation. It’s the same story from the Congo to India – the theft of tribal peoples’ land and relentless persecution in the name of ‘conservation,’” Survival International director Stephen Corry said. “But this ideology is so entrenched, and the vested interests are so powerful, that it’s going to take a global outcry to change it.”

It is only the pressure of public opinion, the risk of the loss of public funding, and condemnation at the highest levels that will lead to a change in the behaviour of global conservation, and subsequent decolonisation.

Conservation in Africa is failing to protect wildlife, despite the exclusion of local and Indigenous people. For example, black rhino numbers in the Maasai Mara in Kenya have fallen from 120 animals in 1971 to only 25–30 animals now, due to poaching. Meanwhile, in the Ruaha-Rungwa region of south-central Tanzania, the elephant population is estimated to have fallen from more than 34,000 in 2009 to only about 8,000 in 2014, mainly for the same reason.

Why is conservation failing? Partly because of the original blueprint it is based on: the national park system that was set up in the United States in the 1890s. This blueprint was created by John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt and other conservationists, who claimed

that Indigenous Native Americans had a detrimental impact on the land through subsistence hunting. The result was the removal of Indigenous people who had in fact been maintaining the landscape for thousands of years.

Muir was highly influential in the founding of Yosemite National Park in 1890 and is referred to as ‘Father of the National Parks’. In his essay collection *Our National Parks*, he appears to show more sympathy for animals than for Native Americans who had been killed and driven from their homes

