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How can Western conservationists talk to Melanesian landowners about indigenous knowledge?[1]

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Resource Management in Asia-Pacific

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How can Western conservationists talk to Melanesian landowners about indigenous knowledge

Conservation is one of those industries that can easily creep up on us by surprise. I've always had a soft spot for nature, but nature is something which anthropologists find it hard to talk about these days. On the other hand, there is no getting away from biodiversity, nor from the huge amount of time, effort and money which has been injected into its conservation over the course of the last decade. During that time, Western conservationists have been engaged in many forms of dialogue with Melanesian landowners who happen also to be the owners of the biodiversity values which the conservationists wish to preserve or enhance. This dialogue has generally been directed towards the design, management and evaluation of 'integrated conservation and development projects', and its central topic is therefore construed, by both parties, as the relationship between 'conservation' and 'development'. Anthropologists have made occasional appearances as listeners or participants in these conversations, and even as project managers or technical advisers, but their own interpretations of this dialogue have not always been acceptable to the (other?) Western conservationists, whose ultimate aim is to address 'the needs of nature' rather than the aspirations of its local guardians.

The key question addressed in this paper is the role which conceptions of 'indigenous people' and 'indigenous knowledge' have in fact played in the construction of this dialogue, and the reasons why one or both concepts might or might not facilitate the construction of lasting 'conservation covenants' between the two main parties. To deal with this question, I shall first put forward a dramatic reconstruction of a few scenes in what I shall call the 'conservation policy process' in Papua New Guinea, with specific attention to the roles played by anthropologists, and most especially the roles which I have played myself. This is not because I feel that I have played an especially significant part in the process as a whole, even by comparison with other anthropologists, but because I want to get behind the many shelves of documents which have emerged from that process, and focus on the substance of the talk between conservationists and landowners which I have had the opportunity to hear first hand or second hand. From my reflection on these snatches of dialogue, I shall try to extract some messages which might serve to advance the terms of the debate between anthropologists who have an interest in conservation and conservationists who have an interest in anthropology.

The Second Taskforce Patrol to a Priority Forest Area (August 1990)

Wherein the anthropologist plays the role of a public opinion pollster in an area where most people think logging is the best thing since the invention of tinned fish, but finds that his findings are rapidly buried by foreign conservationists looking for a bunfight.

Ten years ago, in April 1990, I was sitting at a 'Round Table' (actually a square table) to which sundry 'stakeholders' had been summoned by the World Bank to talk about a Tropical Forestry Action Plan for Papua New Guinea (PNG). One of the few unexpected outcomes of that meeting was a resolution to establish a Task Force on Environmental Planning in Priority Forest Areas, with a mandate to take immediate action to counter the threat of logging in areas which were thought to contain plentiful amounts of biodiversity. The Task Force spent most its initial donor funding on a couple of expeditions to potential conservation areas in Milne Bay and New Ireland provinces, and in each case, an anthropologist was sent along to reflect on the feasibility of achieving 'formal landowner acceptance' of a conservation strategy which had not yet been devised (Filer 1991b; Young 1991).

And so it was that I and three national stakeholders descended (literally, by helicopter) on the people of the Lak Census Division, at the southern extremity of New Ireland, in August 1990. Our first port of call was the home of the locally elected member of the New Ireland Provincial Government, and the first of our three public meetings was held that night beneath his house, as the rain poured down around it. Our host warned us in advance that his own personal interest in protecting the local environment was not shared by most of his constituents, and that his own

survival as an elected politician depended on his ability to represent the views of those people who 'pull the strings on the backs of us leaders'. If by this he meant the village elders who then joined in the discussion, then we could understand why he had been persuaded to facilitate the deal between a Malaysian logging company and the local landowner company which was already awaiting the imminent approval of the relevant national government ministers. These old men could only talk of how much they had 'suffered' from the experience of living in the 'last' (most backward) corner of the province, if not the whole country, of their immediate need to secure some small amount of money to ease that suffering before they died, and of their absolute determination to sell their trees in order to get it. Their brains were pained by any thought of an alternative.

And what was the alternative? Not having a precise answer to this question, my colleagues and I did our best to improvise a floor show which contained a number of compelling images without making any specific promises. Talk about laws, policies, permits and agreements would surely lower the local brain pain threshold to an unacceptable degree. Our time was short, and so was the patience of our audience. So we talked about roads instead, not only because the logging company was promising to build them, but also because the Tok Pisin word rot provides the metaphorical key to almost every thought about 'development' in rural Melanesia. And we talked about the Bible as well, because this was the most familiar source of parables and homilies on such topics as poverty, greed, and deliverance, and hence, perhaps, on more elusive concepts such as 'conservation' and 'sustainable development'.

And thus we set out to take turns in expounding our latest version of the two-road theory of development. Those who travel the logging road, which looks so wide and straight at first, will sooner or later find that their progress is cut short by fallen trees, and that the road itself does not last very long, as logging roads and logging royalties both run out very fast in PNG. So this is the road to hell, or maybe a road that goes round in circles, and therefore does not get you out of it. The better road is the long and winding one, where the long-term benefits are greater, but so are the short-term sacrifices. The last people to make the choice could be the first people to choose the right road, and the first to discover the delights of the 'benefit package' with which the international community (or maybe God) was preparing to reward them.

In all three public meetings, we found that this kind of semi-Biblical talk had greater resonance than some of our other spontaneous experiments in 'landowner awareness'. For example, our audience saw little merit in the suggestion that future generations of local landowners might regard the decision to sell a lot of trees to an Asian logging company in the same way that the present generation regarded the earlier sale of land to European colonisers for the price of an axe or a piece of cloth. On the other hand, our talk about 'another road' provoked their recollection of the many empty promises which 'the government' had previously made, and our own association with the national Department of Environment and Conservation might well be taken as evidence that we were just the latest in a long line of hot air merchants.

One member of our team tried to overcome this obstacle by talking about a rare species of butterfly, which, according to his estimate, could be captured and sold for 50 kina (then worth more than 50 US dollars) a piece on the world market. In order to reinforce the point, he captured one himself and carried it from one meeting to another, using it as an illustration of the potential economic value of an unlogged forest. But that butterfly was the only visible and concrete thing we had to offer. The rest was just talk, and might mean nothing, as members of our audience constantly reminded us. We argued that the logging company had also made many promises which might prove to be false, and that the loggers had more reason to deceive the people than we did, because they stood to make a profit out of their promises, whereas we did not. But the loggers had already provided benefits, including quantities of money, which had much greater value than the sight of a butterfly and a lot of talk about 'another road'.

The Task Force decamped from Lak with a vague promise to return with a map which would represent the 'compromise' proposed by the provincial member at our first wet meeting – that a way might be found of dividing his electorate into areas which could be logged and areas in which

the 'other road' could be pursued. But my own faith in the feasibility of such a deal had been thoroughly shaken. Shortly afterwards, I wrote a newspaper article in which I made the following observation:

> Our conservationist friends in the developed world sometimes seem to imagine that Papua New Guinean villagers resemble the Indians of the Amazon rainforest – people living in simple harmony with Mother Nature, for whom 'development' is a menace imposed by outsiders. If these people went to Lak, they would be in for a big shock. It would probably be difficult to find another place in PNG where local landowners were more insistent on the need to have their trees cut down as soon as possible! (Filer 1991a).

By the time that this article was published, in January 1991, the Minister of Forests had already issued a Timber Permit to the local landowner company, and the cause appeared to be lost. The Task Force never did return to Lak, nor did it ever go anywhere else, so the scepticism of our local audience would seem to have been justified.

But this was not the end of the local story. In August 1992, long after the Task Force had been disbanded, the provincial politician who had acted as its host dispatched a letter to the International Tropical Timber Organisation, asking for help to control the environmental damage caused by the logging operation which was now under way, and to establish a 'Conservation Foundation' and a 'Wildlife Management Programme incorporating profitable environmental activities'. This letter eventually found its way back to the desk of a New Zealander who had just been appointed as Chief Technical Adviser to a new Biodiversity Conservation and Resource Management Programme to be housed in a Conservation Resource Centre attached to the national Department of Environment and Conservation. This entity had just been granted five million US dollars by the Global Environment Facility, primarily for the purpose of establishing a pair of experimental 'integrated conservation and development projects'. The Western conservationists associated with the programme read the member's letter as 'a social invitation from a unified group of landowners eager to explore alternative methods of forest development' (McCallum and Sekhran 1997: 19). So they spent the next three years in what eventually proved to be a losing battle with the loggers and their local allies. This seems somewhat strange, in retrospect, because the Chief Technical Adviser and his national counterparts already had copies of my own detailed report on the activities of the Task Force (Filer 1991b), which certainly did not support their chosen reading of the member's letter.

> One can only conclude that their decision to return to Lak was either the result of bureaucratic inertia and structural amnesia, or else a deliberate move to 'take the fight to the enemy' by taking the local politician's words at face value, and seizing the opportunity to mobilise a re-enlightened community against the forces of darkness which it had previously been so eager to embrace (Filer and Sekhran 1998: 248-9).

At any rate, the lessons learnt from their first big experiment (McCallum and Sekhran 1997) confirmed at least three of the lessons learnt in the brief encounters of the Task Force: the best (if not the only) way to persuade landowners that conservation is a good thing is to represent it as an alternative form of 'development'; it is very difficult to represent conservation as an alternative form of development without raising expectations or making promises about the delivery of such development; and it can also be very difficult to engage landowners in a dialogue about conservation and development options without exaggerating the intensity of factional struggles within their communities.

The First Lost Patrol to the Last Paper Park (April 1995)

Wherein the anthropologist plays the role of part-time translator and social baseline data collector, and almost breaks a leg while hunting for the residents of an uninhabited National Park which is not what it seems.

The steadily unfolding failure of the Lak experiment did at least cause its conductors to take more interest in the stories told by anthropologists about the people who lived with lots of biodiversity in their backyards. When they decided to initiate their second experiment in Madang Province, on the northeastern slopes of the Bismarck Range, they asked me to undertake a review of the ethnographic literature on the people living in or near the 'area of interest', and then to participate

in the first patrol that went to visit them. And so it was, five years ago, in April 1995, this time in the company of six other stakeholders and a large pile of camping equipment, that I alighted from another helicopter on the edge of an area which ought to have contained no people at all, since government census maps declared it to be a National Park devoid of human settlement.

But we already knew the maps were wrong. The proposal to create a National Park in this area had originally been made in 1969, during the period of Australian colonial administration, but its existence had never been officially gazetted because no attempt had been made to alienate the land in question from customary tenure. Furthermore, when officers of the national Department of Environment and Conservation visited the area in 1986, they found that parts of it were occupied by groups of 'squatters' who had recently arrived from the upper Jimi Valley in the neighbouring Western Highlands Province. Our own patrol was meant to make contact with these people, as well as with some of the 'indigenous' inhabitants of the proposed National Park, in order to get some first-hand insights into the so-called 'social elements of the integrated conservation and development process' (Filer et al. 1995).

Once the size of the patrol had been swollen by the engagement of eight local carriers, it was bound to make a serious impression on the scattered hamlets of the 'target population', who naturally wondered what we wanted. The task of explanation fell to the team leader, an American ornithologist employed as the Conservation Biologist on the Biodiversity Conservation and Resource Management Programme. He would deliver a short speech in English; this would be simultaneously translated into the local vernacular by one of our two interpreters; the audience would then discuss the message amongst themselves; one or two spokesmen would summarise the outcome of their discussion in Tok Pisin; I would then translate this response back into English for the benefit of the team leader; and his own response to this response would kick off another round of interpretation. When it sounded as if the message had been absorbed by the audience, and there were no further matters arising from the verbal broadcast, the team leader would normally go birdspotting in the forest, while other team members interrogated local informants on matters of possible relevance to the design of a conservation project.

The ornithologist's speech began with an account of debates about land use which was framed in terms of the ideas and interests of three different types of people – customary landowners, those who wish to exploit their resources, and those who want to conserve them. He then went on to explain how different ways of using the land are connected to different rates of 'development': if development is too slow, then people become frustrated with the rate of change, and old people complain that they will die before they get the benefits; but if development is too fast, the benefits may not last long, they will probably not be distributed equally amongst the adult population, and the next generation will lose out. Local landowners would need to determine the rate of development which was most likely to maintain the balance in their own communities. Outsiders interested in exploiting their resources might make promises of 'development', but had no real interest in helping local people to achieve lasting benefits. Our interest, on the other hand, was to help the local people to work out an appropriate mixture of 'development' and 'conservation' activities, and we therefore wanted to know how local people might feel about the idea of 'exchanging' conservation for development in ways which would bring gradual, but long-lasting, benefits to their community.

Local responses to this speech varied from one place to another, partly because of misunderstandings which arose in the process of interpretation, but most people expressed a general displeasure with the rate at which 'the government' was providing 'development' to their area, and they were very keen to know what our version of 'development' might look like, who would deliver and receive it, and when the benefits might be expected to arrive. Some were also keen to know where our 'headquarters' would be located, and also the boundaries of any areas earmarked for 'conservation', while some also expressed concern at the possibility of the government 'taking' their land. There was a persistent interest in the question of whether or how we might try to prevent them from selling their trees to logging companies – an option which had

clearly been under discussion in some quarters – but much less interest in the question of whether or how local people might secure employment in the establishment and maintenance of conservation areas.

There was also some difference in the reactions elicited from each of the three ethnic groups encountered during the patrol. The small number of Gende-speaking people whom we met during the first three days of walking down the slopes of the Bismarck Range were quite obviously living at the outer margins of their 'culture area', and although they had been living there for some considerable time, they had also lost what little access they once had to health and education services provided by the provincial government or the Catholic mission. For this reason, they evinced a feeling of self-pity, bordering on despair, which made the 'suffering' of the Lak people look more like a lucky break. One of their spokesmen lamented that the rugged terrain around his village would surely be enough to deter any logging company from trying to start a timber project, so his people had nothing to lose by supporting an alternative form of development in that area, even if they might still wish to allow logging to take place at lower altitudes. He also maintained that his people had a long tradition of looking after their natural environment, never taking more than what they needed from their forests and their gardens, and learning from an early age to leave things in reserve to satisfy their future needs, so if they could keep practising their traditional conservation methods and still benefit from some new kind of 'development', it would be like killing two birds with one stone.

The spokesman in a second Gende hamlet, further down the mountainside, also said that he could understand and support the proposal for a conservation area, but he doubted our commitment to deliver any sort of 'integrated development' project, because outsiders had made similar undertakings in the past, and the people still had nothing to show for it. As a leader concerned for the long neglect his people had suffered, he had on each occasion expressed interest in such proposals – whether for a mine, a road, a school, a health clinic, even for a church – in the vain hope that 'development' of some kind might come to his homeland. But, however well-meaning the proponents, none of these promises had been fulfilled, so even if he desperately wanted to believe that something would finally happen before he died, he could surely be forgiven for remaining sceptical until it did.

The much larger number of Jimi Valley 'squatters' whom we met during the next three days showed more of the energy and enthusiasm that one might have expected from a band of pioneers who had descended almost 2000 metres to make a new life on the floodplain of the Ramu River. One of their spokesmen suggested that they had come down to make a living from the abundant wildlife in the area, while another said that the wildlife was now 'finished'. Both statements were rendered more credible by the sight of several caged birds and animals awaiting their journey to distant markets, and by the sight of ten men chopping down dozens of small and medium-sized trees in a vain attempt to capture a single marsupial. But such reflections on the wildlife business were combined with the standard litany of complaints about the lack of government services, and expressions of disappointment over the failure to find a new experience of 'development' to contrast with the backwardness and aggravation of life in the upper Jimi. One group of settlers proudly displayed a half-built airstrip which was intended to address this deficiency, but the men who were clearing it refused to comment on the merits of our team leader's speech in the absence of a local university graduate who was said to be the airstrip's architect.

The last stop on our patrol was the real airstrip from which we flew back to Madang. The adjacent settlement was large enough to warrant the existence of a primary school, an aid post, and a mission station, and most of its inhabitants were also migrants from the Jimi Valley. But concealed amongst them were a handful of men who declared themselves to be members of small clans which had traditionally occupied the Ramu floodplain. We 'discovered' this ethnic minority when one member of our team made contact with the aid post orderly, who was a member of his own ethnic group, and learnt that the 'true landowners' wanted us to sleep in their own guesthouse, rather than the house to which the Jimi settlers had invited us. A rapid ethnographic appraisal, lasting roughly half an hour, led me to conclude that this would be a sensible move. From that point on, our

communication with the local residents was divided between public daytime meetings with the Jimi settlers, which the Ramu landowners watched in total silence, and nocturnal talks with the landowners in the privacy of their guesthouse, in which I was told that they had let the Jimi people settle on their land in exchange for the Jimi women whom they had married in order to boost their miniscule population. But diplomacy dictated that we should not mention such arrangements when both groups were present. Since the landowners were also unwilling to participate in a public meeting, it was hard to assess the response which the settlers made to our team leader's speech, because they might have been talking about the conservation and development of resources which did not belong to them, within earshot of men whom they knew to be the 'real' owners, and knowing that we might now share this same 'indigenous knowledge'.

The PRA Toolkit Workshop (May 1996)

Wherein one anthropologist plays the role of Chief Technical Adviser and benign guru, while another one plays the role of a wicked local government councillor, provokes the hostility of indigenous community development workers, and makes a premature exit from the scene.

Meanwhile, there was more bad news from Lak, where the battle between the logging company and the conservation project had resulted in a situation where 'the majority of landowners were "fence-sitting" – unwilling to make a firm commitment to conservation without first receiving some form of tangible reward', and where the very tangible rewards which the logging company had been putting in the pockets of some community leaders had caused the local 'conservation constituency' to lament that they had no leaders at all, and were therefore unable to act (McCallum and Sekhran 1997: 37). The prospect of defeat in Lak caused more heart searching in the Conservation Resource Centre, where a succession of project management meetings led to the production of a new 'Framework Plan' for the Bismarck-Ramu project. This was built around the key strategic principle that:

> ICAD community liaison staff must start by not talking about conservation, not talking about economic incentives, and not talking about development… Instead they should be listening to the community, and facilitating a debate within the community as it explores its own needs and beliefs… **Conservation and the establishment of protected areas will be the outcomes, not the motivators** (quoted in Ellis 1997: 16).

It was now clearly recognised that conservationists could not hope to 'outbid' developers for access to natural resources on customary land, and they must therefore stop thinking about conservation as an 'opportunity cost' for which landowners ought to be compensated, and start thinking instead about the pursuit of something called 'genuine community conviction'. And in the Bismarck-Ramu case, it looked as if they had the time and space to test the weight of such moral incentives, without having to counter the material incentives offered by immoral developers.

This strategic innovation coincided with the appointment of a new Chief Technical Adviser to the Biodiversity Conservation and Resource Management Programme. Unlike his predecessor, whose international career had been launched on the back of his experience as a park ranger in New Zealand, the new man was an applied anthropologist whose main qualification was his experience of working with an Aboriginal Land Council. Unlike his predecessor, he also knew a good deal about things like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), and might even have shared the responsibility for insisting that all the stakeholders now mixed up in the Bismarck-Ramu project, including himself, should participate in a workshop on this subject in order to refine a new form of 'community entry' to achieve the goal of building 'genuine community conviction'. For this purpose, the existing stakeholders were to spend at least a week in the company of several young Papua New Guineans who had been identified as potential members of a Community Development Team, and all of us were to participate quite thoroughly in mastering the art of PRA. The workshop was held in May 1996, and hosted, like many previous meetings in the conservation policy process, by the Christensen Research Institute in Madang, whose Director had also played a major role in producing the project's new Framework Plan, and which had now become the base for operations in the Area of Interest.

I do not know how PRA workshop facilitators get the training or reputation which makes them visible to donor-funded conservation projects, but the Canadian lady who had been recruited to direct the latest scene in our play lost no time in letting us all know that her 'toolkit' was the latest brand of weaponry to be deployed in the holy war against the anthropologists and sociologists employed by universities and research institutes. Since my own presence at the workshop was entirely due to the fact that my own research institute was meant to undertake a 'social feasibility study' of the Bismarck-Ramu project, this did not seem like an auspicious start to the proceedings. In my own role as the unacceptable face of intellectual property theft, I was inclined to ask as many awkward questions as I could. The first question which struck a chord with my fellow workshop participants arose from the Facilitator's attempt to persuade us to accept her way of measuring degrees of 'community participation' in project design. The problem encountered here was that of deciding how much weight to assign to the form of 'participation' which might in practice be consistent with the present structure of community leadership. If, for example, the members of a particular community were accustomed to follow the orders or advice of an individual 'big man', should a community development team insist on seeking to develop a more 'democratic' form of decision making at the risk of undermining his authority, and therefore his capacity to mobilise his own community for a good cause?

Now this felt like the sort of question which ought to phase a Facilitator who did not seem to know very much about village politics in PNG. On the third day of the workshop, while we were all learning about that well-worn tool known as 'semi-structured interviews with key informants', I offered to arrange a play within a play in order to reveal some of the difficulties which can arise in an attempt to figure out the leadership structure of a strange community by means of this particular instrument. The exercise which I devised to amplify this problem was based on my knowledge of a community which I had actually encountered when undertaking a social impact assessment for a mining project. I arranged for myself and two associates to pose as three leading members of this community, each located in his own hamlet or village, and invited three members of the Community Development Team to see if their 'semi-structured' interviews with each of us would bring out the 'problem of leadership' which existed in our midst. The problem buried in our hidden script was based on the paradox of the Cretan Liar. One of my associates was a 'real chief', while the other was a 'false chief', who was prepared to present himself as a chief to inquisitive outsiders because the mining company had mistakenly accorded him this honour when he made a nuisance of himself. I myself was a somewhat unassertive local councillor, who was not and did not pretend to be a chief, but was prepared, like the real chief, to reveal the false pretences of the false chief if asked the right question. The Facilitator knew the answer, and her role was to brief the Team on how to set about finding it with their chosen 'tool'.

But instead of asking the right questions, the Community Development Team wanted me to convene a 'village meeting'. Sticking to my role, and knowing the real context from which my script was derived, I explained that it was very difficult for me, or anyone else, to convene meetings of the whole community because people lived in villages which were separated by steep mountains, and most would not come if they were summoned, especially if they did not know the reason for doing so. For some reason, this prompted my interviewers to ask whether local people went to church. I replied that some people went to church, but not very many, because many people in this community had virtually abandoned the Christian faith. Seeing that they were now beginning to look seriously confused, I promised that I would try to organise a meeting in time for their next visit.

But they never came back. Instead, they declared that this community would not see any more of their project, and then blamed the game itself for their discomfiture. The game had shown that the team members were still stuck with the problem of how to explain themselves and their 'project', which caused them to forsake the 'tool' which they had just been trained to use. They were still acting like missionaries rather than detectives, wanting to assemble and address a group of villagers, instead of finding out what village leaders had to say about each other. On the other hand, the breakdown of this little 'role-play' underlined the contradiction which it was intended to address, between the actual structures of village leadership and the ideological content of the PRA toolkit.

At the same time, this contradiction was now seen to be embedded in the workshop itself, and not in some real or imaginary village. The Facilitator could not accept responsibility for failing to persuade the Community Development Team to play the appropriate part, and neither I nor my fellow anthropologist, the Chief Technical Adviser, could blame her for this failing without undermining her authority over the entire proceedings. So, having made my peace with the team, I did the honourable thing and ran away.

Once back in the safety of my office, I wrote down a lot of rude remarks about PRA, of the sort which have also been made by other academic commentators. For example:

> Only in retrospect has it become clear that the determination of the PRA people to keep social scientists away from 'their' subject villagers is not simply part of a struggle for influence in the design and implementation of the ICAD project, but is fundamental to the 'philosophy' of PRA itself. The reason being that PRA is not about discovering the real wants and needs of rural villagers; it is a way of manufacturing a new form of consent, of training 'the poor villager' to speak and act in ways which serve to confirm the reigning intellectual fashions of an international aid community which is under increasing pressure to justify its own existence.

But two points in my private diatribe have a more particular bearing on other scenes in this unfolding drama. First, I asked myself

> whether the Lak project would have been better designed and implemented if the Task Force had done PRA instead of doing what it did. The answer, I believe, is that a PRA exercise would have done no better, and might have done worse, at the business of revealing community attitudes, for the simple reason that PRA exponents already have a vested interest in demonstrating their own capacity to stimulate 'community development' or 'popular empowerment'. The problem with 'mere research', in this particular case, is not that it had an alienating or disempowering effect on the local community, but that the 'project managers' could not absorb its findings. From this point of view, 'project managers' and 'community developers' may well have one thing in common – a refusal to countenance the truth when the truth interferes with their existing assumptions and commitments.

And this led me to reflect on the religious significance of another tool in the PRA toolkit, which is the sort of 'community mapping' exercise in which a variety of sticks, stones and other physical objects are used to construct a physical and figurative replica of a community's resource base. Given that the workshop was held in Madang, my mind wandered back to the 'indigenous' maps of the world which local 'cargo cult' leaders might have constructed in much the same way (see Burridge 1960).

> PRA is a form of ritual performance, and perhaps even a variety of religious belief, which is founded on the very peculiar idea that 'development projects' fail because of an artificial separation of the work of 'community empowerment' and the work of 'social research', and which cannot make sense unless it does have the effect of producing 'development'. In this system of belief, the 'social scientist' is someone who transfers knowledge (and therefore power) from the community to 'the state', while the 'community development worker' performs the opposite function. For this reason, 'community development workers' will always be morally superior to 'social scientists', regardless of the practical context in which their work is carried out, the detail of their actual relationship to other parties in the 'development process', or their individual knowledge or experience of local social conditions. If there is one thing which is guaranteed to irritate the practitioners of this religion, it is the prospect of 'social scientists' investigating the results of 'community empowerment'. After all, they might just find that it was all a hoax!

I quote these thoughts as I wrote them at the time, because they still resonate with some of the lessons which the project managers had drawn from their bad experience in Lak, and which had caused them to embrace this new approach to the business of 'community entry'. How were they to avoid the development of a 'project-dependent' mentality, which the community development workers themselves described as a 'cargo-cult' mentality, by offering to trade 'development' for 'conservation'? How could they assess the 'sincerity' of local communities which offered to participate in such a strange exchange? If the PRA workshop really did fail to provide the answers,

it did not remove the questions. In this case, however, the real proof of the pudding was in the story-telling which ensued.

The Excavation of Rural Desire (May 1996 to March 1998)

Wherein all foreign scientists are initially banned from the front of the stage, but one rural sociologist makes a late entrance to conduct a Social Feasibility Study, and annoys the Chief Technical Adviser by suggesting that conservation might not be feasible after all.

Once the curtain had descended on the PRA Toolkit Workshop, the Bismarck-Ramu project began its new lease of life as an exercise in the discovery of self-reliance. The conversations which ensued may be divided into ten scenes in our dramatic reconstruction of this second phase. The first comprised a Training Programme for the first recruits to the Community Development Team, which took place immediately after the workshop had been concluded. The next eight scenes were the eight 'rounds' of Community Development Patrols to the Area of Interest which were conducted from July 1996 to December 1997. The final scene comprised a series of meetings between project staff and those residents of the Ramu floodplain who had survived the preceding test of their conviction, at which the talk finally turned towards the prospect of establishing a 'conservation area' in their midst. My own truncated account of these transactions is not based on first-hand observation, but originates in my reading of the grey literature produced by other actors who were more directly engaged.

The Training Programme was orchestrated by an American Community Development Trainer who was not an anthropologist, but who, unlike the Workshop Facilitator, did have a long track record of walking and talking in PNG village communities. His own written records of this training exercise feature the deconstruction of two 'texts' produced by other Western conservationists associated with the project. The first of these was an essay written by the Director of the Christensen Research Institute, an American entomologist who now doubled as the project's Education Coordinator. This essay (Orsak 1997), which was clearly based on the author's own experience, took the form an imaginary dialogue between conservationists and landowners, in which the latter presented a familiar litany of reasons for not listening to the former, and the author suggested a number of ways in which the conservationists might rephrase their arguments in order to avoid such reactions. Many of these suggestions, including one which stressed the need to avoid the word 'project', had been incorporated into the project's new way of thinking about the business of Community Entry (Ellis 1997: 17).

But members of the Community Development Team were reportedly unable to understand, or unwilling to accept, the argument that traditional Melanesian culture lacks a 'conservation ethic', because they felt that Melanesians were accustomed to think of themselves as being part of their natural environment, rather than being separated from it, and this meant that there could be no point in making a distinction between the idea of people looking after their forest and the idea of 'bush spirits' (masalai) looking after it or the idea of the forest looking after itself (Lalley 1998). The Community Development Trainer took this to be a sign of the gap which really exists between Western and indigenous conceptions of the 'natural environment', rather than a function of the role which the trainees were now expected to play as mediators in the conversation between conservationists and landowners, and the trainees themselves were disposed to expect that 'indigenous knowledge' and 'community conviction' would be found together in the bed of self-reliance, once they got beneath the mental blankets of 'development-dependency'.

The second text whose deconstruction helped to shape their vision was the 'opening speech' which project staff had made at village meetings during previous patrols to the Area of Interest.[2] The

[2] There are three different versions of this speech in the relevant patrol reports (see Filer et al. 1995: 29; CRC 1995a: 33-4; CRC 1996a: 6), the last of which seems to have been the main focus of attention in the Training Programme. Van Helden (in press) has provided a detailed account of the way in which the Community Development Trainer set about deconstructing this version (see also Ellis 1997: 22-3).

result of this exercise was a prototype or paraphrase for the opening speeches which would henceforth be made by members of the Community Development Team:

> We are not working for a bank, a logging company, a mining company, a church, or a political party. We are not even working on a 'project', we are simply an 'environmental group' (*environmen lain*) working with the Department of Environment and Conservation. We are not going to 'help' you to 'conserve' or 'develop' your 'resources', nor is the 'government' going to do so. We are only here to talk. We don't know what you know. Perhaps we can teach each other something. Perhaps we can help you to help yourselves. And we will only stay here if you want us to (CRI 1996a, Appendix 3).

This display of verbal diffidence was intended to prevent the listeners from engaging in what the team members later came to describe as a process of 'jumping through hoops' in order to capture the windfall benefits which villagers have learnt to associate with passing 'projects'. But it also contained an element of bad faith in its own right, because it concealed the ultimate objective of a donor-funded conservation project, as if this were a secret mystery which could only be revealed to those villagers who learnt to jump through another set of hoops in order to demonstrate their 'conservation conviction'.

The Community Development Patrols were sent out at intervals of approximately two months. In each case, the Community Development Team spent a few days in a joint 'briefing session' under the supervision of the Community Development Trainer, and was then divided into two or three smaller groups, which each spent about three weeks visiting a number of local communities in the Area of Interest, before finally returning to base for a 'debriefing session' in which their findings were recorded for posterity. The 'community development process' was itself divided into seven 'steps', each of which required a separate visit to any given community (Ellis 1997: 21). During the first two visits, the interaction between team members and local villagers was conceived as a process of 'story-telling', 'trust-building', and the 'hearing of community themes' (ibid.: 30). The more elaborate instruments in the PRA Toolkit were saved for the 'diggings' undertaken in subsequent visits, lest they be construed as 'gimmicks' by an unfamiliar audience (van Helden n.d.).

After eight rotations of the fieldwork cycle, 34 communities had received at least one visit from the Community Development Team, but very few had reached 'Step Five', which was the point at which they were able to formulate an 'Action Plan' to address their own problems in a self-reliant manner, and hardly any had ascended to 'Step Seven', at the very top of the ladder, where the role of project staff would supposedly be limited to monitoring and facilitating the implementation of this plan. That is partly because most of the communities had received less than five visits by the end of 1997, but in some cases, the process had been cut short by the failure or refusal of local villagers to play the game according to the rules developed in the briefing and debriefing sessions which took place backstage.

Backstage was the place where nearly all the Western conservationists associated with the project stayed throughout this period, in order to avoid being cast in the role of 'bosses' whose white skins might be taken to presage the delivery of 'cargo' (CRI 1997b: 6). The only significant exception to this rule was the Social Feasibility Consultant, a Dutch sociologist attached to my own division of the National Research Institute, and even he was not allowed to enter a community until its members had safely climbed the first two rungs on the ladder of self-reliance. His role was to document the findings of the barefoot anthropologists in the Community Development Team, to verify or supplement these findings through his follow-up patrols, and then present the outcome as a descriptive account of social relations in the Area of Interest (van Helden 1998a) and a more prescriptive assessment of the 'social feasibility' of establishing a conservation area within it (van Helden 1998b).

Two fundamental 'community themes' were dug up from this field of inquiry. One was the relationship between thousands of 'Jimi people', including those resident in the upper Jimi Valley and those living on the margins of the Ramu floodplain, and a few score 'Ramu people', most of whom were living along the banks of the Ramu River. At one stage, members of the Community Development Team described this relationship as an instance of 'neocolonialism', in which the Jimi

people were colonising the Ramu people in both a physical and cultural sense, as most of the 'original landowners' had already begun to speak the language of the newcomers who were taking their land and plundering their resources, and the highlander's fear of lowland sorcery had become their last line of defence (CRI 1996b: 45). The second theme was the intense political rivalry, and occasionally violent conflict, between the clans and sub-clans into which the Jimi people were divided at all altitudes. For those who formed the 'colonising frontline' in the Ramu floodplain, these political relationships were further complicated by the fact that a minority did have a solid claim to be the traditional owners and occupants of the Bismarck foothills, and even segments of the floodplain itself, while the majority did not (van Helden 1998a: 236-9). In this social and political context, the Community Development Team made the somewhat unremarkable discovery that some of the Ramu people had an interest in the conservation of indigenous knowledge and natural resources, while most of the Jimi people were primarily concerned with the distribution of wealth, status and power.

In retrospect, the weight of demands with which the Jimi people ultimately crushed the community development process might be blamed on the expectations which had already been raised before that process was initiated, and might thus be taken to confirm the principles by which it was designed. In the Jimi Valley, the Community Development Team was almost ambushed by a gang of youths who thought it was a 'group of company officials or agents' bearing large quantities of money (CRI 1996b: 27-8), and was later confronted with demands for compensation for the 'theft' of natural resources by the 'foreigners' who had conducted a Biological Survey in October 1995 (CRI 1996c: 37). And on the Ramu floodplain, the team was constantly embroiled in a continuation of the squabbles about payment and employment which had first erupted when the 'project base' was set up next to the half-built airstrip back in February 1996 (CRI 1996b: 30-1; Ellis 1997: 29).[3] But it soon transpired that the root cause of such misunderstandings and disputes could be traced back to the employment of the airstrip's local architect as the project's Community Facilitator, and their subsequent escalation was due to his own determination to 'capture' the project in order to win votes at the national election which was due to be held in June 1997.

Members of the Community Development Team began to suspect that they were being used as props in the Community Facilitator's power play when members of the three Jimi Valley communities to which he guided them during their first patrol all declared a 'spontaneous' interest in the conservation of their natural resources (CRI 1996a: 40; Ellis 1997: 28). The project managers behind the scenes wondered whether the Community Facilitator might have failed to grasp the project's new philosophy because he had failed to attend the PRA Workshop at which it was first expounded, but they did not fail to grasp the risk which his political ambitions posed for their new strategy. He was soon summoned to headquarters and placed behind a desk, and therefore had to quit the project to continue his electoral campaign. But his method of advertising the project's existence still served to undermine its objectives. His claim to be the 'boss' who had secured a huge amount of project funding from the World Bank (CRI 1997b: 16) caused all sorts of rumours to invade and obstruct the Jimi people's participation in the community development process. There were some who partly believed his claim, and wanted to know why they were not getting a bigger share of this 'free money'; there were others who were somewhat sceptical, and wanted to know when they would get to meet 'the real boss'; and for those who did not trust this candidate at all, there was the option of believing that what he had 'really' done was to help the government sell their land to the World Bank (CRI 1997a: 10, 15, 42). Those members of the Community Development Team who hit this wall of ideas in the Jimi Valley were also warned that their lives were in danger, so they beat a hasty retreat.

The concept of the project did not enable the excommunicated Community Facilitator to win the election. But even after the votes had been counted and the rumours had subsided, the Community

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[3] The house in question was eventually burnt down, 'apparently by accident', in August 1997 (Ellis 1997: 29).

Development Team was still lamenting its inability to wean the Jimi people away from their handout mentality.

> The team's observation of the attitudes and body language of people during meetings gave an indication that there is really little interest in any community development if it requires the people to get organised or do actual work. The community has said again that, 'The CDT come and come again and nothing is given to the villagers'. It appears that in spite of the amount of time put into the village development process, the communities still have an overwhelming reliance on 'cargo' and they are waiting for the CDT to bring something (CRI 1997b: 39).

The persistence of such 'cargo expectations' was not only linked to the many promises which had just been made by candidates competing in the national election, but also to the promise of drought relief which followed shortly afterwards, to the experience of an influenza epidemic which also afflicted the area in 1997, and to the more abiding shortage of both natural resources and development opportunities in the Jimi Valley (Ellis 1997: 43; van Helden n.d.). But when one reads the reports of the Community Development Patrols, one finds that the number of conversations in which the Jimi people wanted to know what the team had to offer is matched by the number of conversations in which they wanted to know what the team really wanted. For example:

> They always want to know exactly what we are after. Their never-ending [enquiries] make us feel like we have confused them more than ever by coming in and working with them….. [They] keep coming and asking questions such as: 'After you had visited us for so many times and have had enough of that, what will come next? What are you going to do; what are you going to establish?….' (CRI 1996b: 41).

And it sounds as if they never could get a straight answer to such questions.

The talk presented by the Ramu people was considerably less demanding, but in some ways more mysterious, less 'political', and more 'religious' in its flavour. While most of them had not been 'spoilt' by the sight and sound of Western conservationists during the previous phase of the project, the concept of the 'cargo cult' was no less evident in their reactions to the process of 'community development'. But while the Community Development Team used this concept to explain the Jimi people's failure to realise or practice the virtues of self-reliance, the Ramu people used it to explain, and in one case to reject, the process of discovering these values. In other words, the Ramu people thought the project which was not a 'project' was perhaps a cult, whereas the Jimi people knew the project was a 'project', or subscribed to the belief that it must be a 'company' of some sort, and demanded that it yield the sort of benefits which members of the team called 'cargo'.

When the Community Development Team made its second visit to one Ramu River hamlet, the headman was quite effusive in his greeting:

> My dear children, I am greatly delighted that you had cared enough to visit me again as you had promised me the last time. What better time could you have chosen to visit me and your brothers and sisters here, than during such a time like this when I am no better than dead….. You must NOT leave us, never, remember that we are family now. We are on the ground now; we haven't yet set foot on the first step on the ladder leading up to that house you mentioned. And the door into the house like you mentioned is way up there out of our reach. Just think of the taro. When you plant it, does it grow, mature, bear and ripen overnight? Not that I know of! Or do you know of such a 'miracle' taro? My children, let's talk reality and stop dreaming! In the same way as we wait for the taro we plant to grow, mature, bear and ripen; you and I (us) must work hard and take our time. We must NOT rush, for rushing is risky, as far as my experience makes me believe (CRI 1996b: 42).

One of the headman's sons glossed this welcome by declaring that the team had been brought to them by Jesus Christ himself, and made allusions to the parable of the sower and the seed:

> You are the sower and your words are the seed. We who listen, for our part, are the different types of soil. What we do after we hear your words and even after you had gone will show what kind of soil we each are. If we are good soil then the seeds you sow will grow and bear fruit (ibid.).

Encouraged by such thoughts, the team set off to make its initial visit to a neighbouring hamlet, whose inhabitants were also 'surprisingly hospitable' and exceedingly devout. On the other hand, their spokesman's response to the team's explanation of its 'work' was quite at odds with their initial hospitality:

> My people and I have the right to know whoever comes into our land and also why he or she comes in. We asked you to clarify to us your work and you claim that you have done so. The fact is, we are even more confused, because your words are like complete nonsense, they are absolutely meaningless….. How can we possibly make our decision/stand if we are not clear about your work? Therefore we ask you not to come again here in the future….. (ibid.: 44-5).

So the team members said 'thank you very much' and quit the scene.

They were understandably puzzled by this negative outcome, which was apparently unique in their experience of first encounters. But a partial explanation emerged during a subsequent patrol along the banks of the Ramu River, when the team members got a 'very cool reception' in two other hamlets, including the one whose headman had previously spoken of them as his 'children'. Now the headman addressed them as 'spirits of the dead people' (CRI 1997a: 21), and they were given to understand that the community which rejected their initial advances had since

> spread rumours about the CDT's being members of a cargo cult known as 'Bembe'. The suggestions were that we were spirits that had come back from the dead ('daiman') and sinners ('sinman') and that people would fall ill if they spent the money that we had paid them for accommodation. People were obviously very confused because last time the CDT's had come and when somebody had been ill, they had given them medicine and had treated him well. People initially did not know whom to believe and waited without giving us food until they had heard our side of the story. It seems that our exercises, including going back and forth to town and resource mapping had backfired on us in the sense that local people had interpreted them as part of the magic that we were using to bring them under the spell (ibid.: 42).

But the headman himself, who seems to have believed this story, still wanted the team to make regular visits, 'otherwise the communities would lose interest in us' (ibid.: 21). The team members thought it was 'quite ironic that the strong emphasis on avoiding unrealistic expectations and self-reliance makes people think we are a traditional cargo-cult', but they also found something more rational and sinister in the hostility of one local leader who was 'strongly in favour of logging and had rightly identified us as potential opponents to such activities' (ibid.: 42-3).

Whatever their 'real' motivation, those Ramu people who espoused, or were said to espouse, the ironic perception of the project as a sort of cargo cult did not reach the top of the ladder which led to the 'house of conviction'. The first signs of this achievement were detected amongst the small group of Ramu people encountered by the very first patrol to the Area of Interest, living in immediate proximity to a large bunch of very demanding Jimi people. And for this very reason, their convictions had a question mark against them, because the community workers and project managers could see them '*not as a drive for conservation alone*, but as a way of addressing the major social problem of integrating the Jimi settlers, with their aggressive land use patterns, into the Ramu way of life' (Ellis 1997: 49-50, my italics). The minutes of meetings held at the end of 1997 suggest that it might not have been a 'drive for conservation' *at all*. When the Community Development Team met with members of the two landowning clans, and told them that 'the Project would only be involved with them if they want to conserve their natural resources', the landowners evaded this question by asking that 'the team should not meet and work with the Jimi settlers' (ibid.:56). The team disregarded this request, and held a separate meeting with the settlers, in which they rehearsed the substance of their earlier discussion with the landowners.

> The settlers agreed and supported the landowners' idea of conservation. They reported that there were rumours that some of the landowners had interests in logging….. The settlers see that if logging is brought in they will be adversely affected. Each family has a very small area to spare for logging. Secondly, the areas that they normally hunt in which are beyond what they were allocated by the landowners might be destroyed by logging.

> They will find it very hard to continue living the way they do now. Hunting and gardening practices would be affected (quoted in Ellis 1997: 56).

When the Conservation Area Manager finally came to talk to the landowners in April 1998, they had already reconstructed their desire for conservation as a desire to make provision for the livelihood of 'future generations', thus neatly aligning themselves with the Fourth Goal of the National Constitution, but this was still not enough to convince the conservationists of their sincerity (ibid.).

Greater progress seems to have been made in meetings with the residents of another village on the Ramu River, even though their interest in 'conservation' also stemmed in part, if not entirely, from their wish to keep or get the Jimi people off their land. This was the village where people could clearly remember the original visit by an officer of the Australian colonial administration

> who discussed the establishment of a National Park and told people to limit their hunting in certain areas and not to use guns. The Ramu river communities still purport to observe these rules but are very concerned about the continuous hunting on their lands by Jimi Settlers. It is not entirely clear whether they understand the full concept of a national park or whether their interest in such is mainly a result of the need to stop the Jimis from further encroaching on their ancestral lands (quoted in Ellis 1997: 51).

These people had reiterated their interest in the establishment of a 'national park' when a team of government officials came back to assess the original proposal in 1986 (Filer et al. 1995: 47), and repeatedly brought the matter up in conversations with the Community Development Team. Indeed, one might well wonder what difference, if any, the team actually made to these people's stated preference for 'conservation', apart from persuading them that the government would not do very much, if anything, to help them realise their goal. It is true that they had to prove their own capacity for self-reliance by meeting the cost of a trip to Madang to meet the Conservation Area Manager, and when this action was rewarded by his return trip to the village, the villagers had found some more 'convincing' reasons for their preference. Apart from defending their resources against the encroachment of the Jimi people, they also wanted to reinforce clan boundaries within their own community, they were worried about the possible impact of a large-scale mining project, and they saw some potential for attracting tourists to the area. But when the Conservation Area Manager raised the question of whether traditional beliefs and practices would provide a suitable basis for conservation, one villager replied as follows:

> We cannot use the same practices used by our ancestors nowadays, because educated people do not respect and listen to the village elders. Educated people are proud of themselves, they think that they have been to school and are more knowledgeable than the village elders. Therefore if village elders make rules to conserve a certain area, people that have some form of western education will not adhere to those rules (quoted in Ellis 1997: 57).

This sentiment did not exactly fit the bill to which the Community Development Team was wedded at the outset, which was to find or plant 'community conviction' in the rediscovery and reproduction of 'indigenous knowledge'.

But the pursuit of 'indigenous knowledge' may have been partly responsible for creating the perception in some of the other Ramu River communities, that the Community Development Team was an 'occult group' or a 'pagan cult' (van Helden n.d.). One of the team members recalled a stroke of luck which preceded the team's arrival in a village which had not previously been visited, when a woman was 'captured by spirits' and then recaptured by other villagers.

> That spirit abduction fed directly into the CDT work, because the community was then brought back to its traditional awe of the environment, a respect amounting to fear. Before they had become disrespectful in cutting down trees, hunting and exploiting the environment, but now they have a healthy fear of just what they might be doing (quoted in Ellis 1997: 47).

Under normal circumstances, team members had trouble eliciting such stories because villagers were 'well aware that talk of bush spirits is not greeted with respect by most strangers' (ibid.). But if

the strangers in question were typically teachers or preachers of a strong Christian persuasion, for whom the project managers had designed a separate education strategy (ibid.: 41), it was also understandable that villagers of a strong Christian persuasion might have their own doubts about 'strange' community development workers engaging in this same kind of talk.

At least the Ramu people showed a lot of interest in the subject of 'indigenous knowledge', even if they were sometimes inclined to reject it as the work of the Devil. But the manner in which the subject was broached in their conversations with the Community Development Team would only have confirmed the Jimi people's prejudice against them. On one occasion, as they set off to visit a Ramu community, the team members received the following piece of advice from their Jimi hosts:

> They will not feed you, they will not house you. And if they ever do house you, this will mean you sleeping underneath their houses. They don't even have food anyway, for they know no gardening. We were the ones who taught them gardening and all other skills; we civilized and 'tamed' them. They live only on sago. They can't even talk sense with you like we do, and they will never understand your message (CRI 1996b: 41).

What made 'sense' to Jimi people, by and large, was talk about 'development', which members of the team refused to talk about because they thought that it was just another name for 'cargo' (Ellis 1997: 36). And what did not make sense to Jimi people, by and large, was the team's inclination to talk about 'indigenous knowledge' as knowledge about 'the bush', about nature rather than culture, and to talk about its value in spiritual, rather than purely practical, terms.

Yet I would not go so far as to say, from the evidence available, that the Jimi people had their feet firmly planted on the ground, while the Ramu people had their heads in the clouds or their minds in 'the bush'. On both sides of the fence, villagers were equally concerned to search out ways of establishing material exchange relationships with the Community Development Team, and seem to have been equally puzzled by the team's reluctance to reciprocate (CRI 1997a: 11; van Helden 1998a: 258). And it would be hard to argue that one side had more or less of an interest in the prospect of large-scale 'resource development', whether by logging, mining or petroleum companies. In this respect, the difference resided in the fact that such companies really did show rather more interest in the resources claimed by the Ramu people than in those claimed by the Jimi people, and if the latter really did believe that an 'Iraqi' logging company was about to harvest the timber in the upper Jimi Valley (CRI 1997b: 15), then theirs was by far the greater delusion.[4]

The bottom line, if such it can be called, is that the people who were most convinced about the need for 'conservation' were Ramu people who harboured a desire to roll back the tide of territorial encroachment by groups of 'colonising' highlanders, and were much less concerned about the threat posed by foreign resource developers (van Helden n.d.). Proponents of the project's 'community development' strategy would say that it does not matter *why* people want to conserve their resources, so long as they *really* want to do it (Ellis 1997: 54). But then we have to ask whether this conviction stems from the correct application of a PRA Toolkit, and whether those who are convinced have also got the *power* to achieve their goal when they have learnt that no one else is going to help them if they cannot help themselves. However long the Community Development Team spent 'digging' into the local social soil with its 'timelines' and 'resource maps', what it found at the bottom of the hole was something already present on the surface – a set of disputed territorial boundaries and unequal spatial relationships.

The community which finally found out that it *could* get some help from the 'project' to establish the conservation area which it had wanted to establish for the past twenty years also found that this device would not serve its original purpose of making the 'government' make the Jimi people go back where they came from. Perhaps the lessons learnt from the community development process

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[4] It is conceivable that local people's talk about this implausible prospect was a rhetorical device intended to get rid of the Community Development Team, but team members do not seem to have considered this possibility.

would compensate them for this disappointment, and enable them to strike new bargains with their neighbours. Their neighbours, on the other hand, now knew the hidden purpose in this complicated 'game of moves and counter-moves' (van Helden n.d.), and some had started writing letters to the project managers to ask if they could have a conservation area as well (Ellis 1997: 61).

The game was up, and soon enough, the game was almost over. Although the Community Development Team kept on making its rounds through the Area of Interest for several months after its efforts had first shown signs of success, these activities stuttered to a halt when donor funding for the project's second phase dried up, and the government lost its few remaining shreds of capacity to keep it going. This was not for lack of effort on the part of project management to prove that this experiment had been a great deal more successful than the one in Lak. When the Social Feasibility Consultant produced a draft summary report which failed to place a sufficiently positive spin on the outcomes of the community development process (van Helden 1998b), the managers commissioned another report which made up for this deficiency (Ellis 1997). The project's new philosophy was not the main point at issue in the series of negotiations which failed to produce the money required to keep the project going. But the rules of the Global Environment Facility, which funded the first phase of the Biodiversity Conservation and Resource Management Programme, were such as to require another funding agency to 'co-finance' the second phase. The most plausible candidate for this role was The Nature Conservancy, which had a plan to develop a 'sustainable' large-scale logging project to the north of the Ramu River, and to 'integrate' this development with its support for the establishment of conservation areas within the Bismarck-Ramu project's Area of Interest. This scheme faltered for several reasons, but one contributing factor was the resistance of the Community Development Team to any prospect of large-scale resource development, even if this were to be sponsored by an international environmental NGO, since any such activity was seen to contradict the basic principles of the community development process (Tormod Burkey, personal communication). At any rate, the new style of 'community entry' was now justified in a sense which had not been intended, for any promises which might have been made would by now have been broken, and any expectations raised would by now have been dashed. One can only wonder what kind of footprint (or mindprint) the team has left in the local soil.

Melanesian Masters of the Conservation Universe (January 1999)

Wherein the anthropologist took a back seat in the audience, thought for a moment that he must have stumbled into a Christian Revival Crusade, but was still able to ask a pertinent question.

The scenes recounted to date could be read or heard as part of a linear progression, a single 'plot' which began with the entry of the Task Force to the 'last corner' of New Ireland, and which has now ended with the departure of the Community Development Team from the 'lost paper park' in Madang. But the Biodiversity Conservation and Resource Management Programme never had any kind of monopoly over the conversations between Western conservationists and local landowners in PNG, even though the Conservation Resource Centre was responsible for organising the PNG Country Study on Biological Diversity (Sekhran and Miller 1994), hosting a subsequent workshop to develop a National Conservation Strategy, and then another series of national talking shops to reflect on the practical experience of other 'ICAD Practitioners' (James 1996; Saulei and Ellis 1998). It was in fact a rather peculiar creature in the conservation policy process, precisely because it was housed in the national Department of Environment and Conservation, and therefore had the benefits and costs of being seen as part of the 'government' which normally failed to meet the expectations of rural villagers. Most of the other 'ICAD projects' in PNG have been designed and implemented through partnerships between national and international NGOs, whose own specific aims and interests have variously coloured the nature of their dealings with local landowners.

There is no space here to review the multitude of 'scenes' which have ensued from these interventions, nor have I personally played a part in any of these scenes, aside from helping other social scientists to witness and record the action. I shall therefore confine my attention to one of the national talking shops which was not organised by the Conservation Resource Centre, in which the participants gathered to reflect on a number of conservation projects which were not funded by

the Global Environment Facility, and where my own interjection, as a member of the audience, was motivated by my own coincidental prior knowledge of the area in which one of these projects had put down its roots. This event was sponsored by an organisation known as the Biodiversity Conservation Network (BCN), whose approach to the business of establishing conservation areas in PNG was markedly different to that which had recently been espoused in the case of the Bismarck-Ramu project. These contrasting strategies or 'scripts' alert us to a range of possibilities for local variation in the substance and outcome of the talk which has been going on between local landowners and Western conservationists.

The BCN was initially established as a five-year programme in late 1992, but the period of implementation was later extended to six and a half years, which meant that the programme came to an end in the first half of 1999. Its funding was actually treated as part of the US government's 'attribution' to the Global Environment Facility (BCN 1997: 120), but it was implemented as one component of the more enduring Biodiversity Support Program, which is sponsored by a consortium of three American NGOs – the World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and the World Resources Institute. During the six and a half years of its existence, the BCN provided 'implementation grants' to a total of 20 conservation projects in the Asia-Pacific region, of which six were located in the Melanesia, including three in PNG. The purpose of these grants was to evaluate the effectiveness of what BCN called 'enterprise-oriented approaches to community-based conservation of biodiversity' by testing the 'core hypothesis' which stated that 'if local communities receive sufficient benefits from an enterprise that depends on biodiversity, then they will act to counter internal and external threats to that biodiversity' (ibid.: 1).

The various NGOs which were on the receiving end of these grants were apparently required to volunteer some of their staff for a form of initiation into the mysteries of the 'project cycle', that ceremonial practice which is familiar to denizens of the aid industry, in order to improve their capacity for 'adaptive management'. The initiates were thus taught to rethink their projects (and now also think about how to spend the BCN grants) by following the path which leads from the production of a 'mission statement' to the process of revising management and monitoring plans in light of lessons learnt from their implementation (Margoluis and Salafsky 1998). The second stage of this initiation involved the production of a 'conceptual model', which consisted of a lot of boxes containing the various factors which had some positive or negative impact on the conservation of biodiversity in the place where a given project was located, and a smaller number of circles containing the specific project 'interventions' which were intended to modify the causal connections between these factors, and thus to test the core hypothesis. There is no evidence to suggest that these conceptual models were displayed to local landowners, which is probably a good job, because the only examples which I have seen are almost impossible to decipher. But the trainee managers who were responsible for producing them were certainly advised to 'consult with local stakeholders' regarding the nature of local 'threats' to biodiversity and the 'opportunities' for countering these threats. And that is the only form of direct conversation between conservationists and landowners which makes an appearance in the training manual.

Table 1 summarises the results of this conceptual modelling exercise, and the main issues arising from the practice of 'adaptive management', for each of the three BCN-funded projects in PNG. Those 'threats to biodiversity' which are shown in square brackets are those which were thought to have been diminished through the pursuit of each project's 'enterprise component'. The Lakekamu Basin project was reckoned to have been the least successful of the three (Salafsky 1999), but that is not the reason for my interest in its engagement with the local population.

Table 1: BCN-funded project activities and issues in PNG.

Project location	Lead agency	Threats to biodiversity	Enterprise component	Issues arising
Crater Mountain	Research and Conservation Foundation	Industrial logging Hunting [Mining]	Research-based ecotourism	Community management of business
Lakekamu Basin	Conservation International	Industrial logging Oil palm plantations Mining	Ecotourism	Community management of business
East New Britain	Pacific Heritage Foundation	Mining [Industrial logging] [Hunting]	Small-scale timber harvesting	Demonstrating sustainability of enterprise

Source: BCN 1997: 118.

In January 1999, as the BCN programme drew to a close, Network personnel convened a workshop for the various characters engaged in each of these three projects (and also the one project located in Fiji) to review the lessons which they had learnt from their experiments with the 'core hypothesis', and after three days of discussion behind closed doors (on a small island), the participants presented their findings to a public meeting in Port Moresby. After the newly anointed Melanesian Masters of Business Administration had recounted their own experiences in the biodiversity business, their patrons in the Network offered the audience a number of 'general but non-trivial guiding principles' which took the form of 'conditional probability statements':

> For example, we might say 'In Melanesian type social systems, it is generally better to work with the big man to solve conflicts unless he is corrupt.' The key features here are that the principle applies to more than one place (in Melanesia) but not everywhere. Furthermore, it is not guaranteed to work in all instances – the user has to be smart enough to apply it to his or her own situation – for example, to determine if the big man is corrupt or not (BCN 1999: 6).

Two particular points struck me as I listened to this presentation. One was the evangelical zeal of the American conservationists associated with the Network, which had presumably permeated all their previous conversations with the Melanesian conservationists whom they had been initiating into the business of turning biodiversity into a commodity. The other was the fact that local villagers were represented, by the Melanesian conservationists, as people who still had a great deal to learn about this new form of entrepreneurial culture, and who still had to be persuaded to abandon a variety of economic practices which were themselves regarded as major 'threats to biodiversity'. If the Melanesian conservationists had been preaching with the same vigour as their American mentors, and thus breaching one of the main 'taboos' imposed on the Bismarck-Ramu project, they had not yet won too many converts from the communities which hosted their projects.

My only contribution to the public action in this scene was to ask one of the national staff employed on the Lakekamu Basin project why he thought that small-scale alluvial gold mining was such a big threat to biodiversity, when it did not entail the use of mercury or other hazardous substances, and how he expected the local villagers, who had obtained the bulk of their cash income from this activity for many decades, to sacrifice it in exchange for money to be earned from 'ecotourists' who had not yet put in an appearance. His answer to the first question was that people who practice small-scale alluvial mining are more likely to welcome the prospect of a large-scale industrial mining project than people who do not. His answer to the second question was that it was very difficult.

The small miners in question had originally learnt their craft from the European prospectors who were active in this area during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, and who then vanished from the scene (see Nelson 1976). So their knowledge of mining was not exactly 'indigenous', even if it was by now customary, and since 'we all know' that mining is a dirty business, it was evidently not the sort of knowledge which had any sort of place in an

'entrepreneurial culture of conservation'. But 'we all know' that logging is a dirty business too, especially when it is done in 'virgin tropical rainforests'. So if Western conservationists feel the need to wean indigenous miners off their gold pans in order to save them from opening their arms to large-scale mining companies, how can they also be selling the virtues of 'walkabout sawmills' to villagers who might *otherwise* open their arms to large-scale logging companies? For that is what they do in many other Melanesian conservation projects, where knowledge of small-scale sawmilling is not even traditional, let alone indigenous.

No one at the meeting had a ready answer to this final question. Perhaps the answer lies in the physical or conceptual difference between rocks and trees. 'Ecoforestry' adds economic value to the forests which contain biodiversity values, and if we get our definitions right, it *simultaneously* causes its practitioners to appreciate the value of the biodiversity in the forests which they are only very *gradually* cutting down. Mineral resources have no place in such equations, and the pursuit of gold, by any means at all, is nothing but a testament to human folly.

The gold-panners of the Lakekamu Basin had not yet had much opportunity to evaluate this line of reasoning, because the new business on offer was ecotourism, not ecoforestry. Or perhaps it was no new business at all. As one of the national conservation project staff described the prospect:

> After the first year, we had a training session about ecotourism. One of the guys got all inspired and wanted to build a guesthouse. He organized his family and built the place. This was really hard. I was glad that he was showing interest, but I was worried about not having any guests come. They built the house and then they started asking when the tourists would come. I didn't know what to tell them. And this has turned out to be a problem. Only a few people have come and already the guesthouse is starting to fall apart. I feel responsible for what has happened and that I let them down. Even now, when I go back to the Basin, they ask me, 'When will they come? Is there any news of tourists coming?' (BCN 1999: 166-7).

While this family waited for Godot, the alluvial miners, crocodile hunters and betelnut farmers went on minding their own business, mindful perhaps of other promises and prospects of 'development' which had previously come to nought.

Back in 1988, before this 'conservation play' began, I conducted a social impact assessment of a medium-scale industrial mining project in this area, in which I made the observation that

> it is better to promote those money-raising activities which have already proved viable, and even those which have previously failed for identifiable and remediable reasons, than to promote novel activities whose viability is an unknown factor (Filer and Iamo 1989: 58).

The project in question never got past the design stage, but I certainly did not find that this prospect of 'development' held any special appeal for the alluvial miners in the area, who had tried and failed to obtain the mining company's assistance in getting their own product to market, and who were understandably concerned that it might later find some way to put them out of business. Little did they know that, when the mining company had gone, a 'conservation company' would come and look for ways to do so.

An Open-Ended Bottom Line

I have chosen to represent the conservation policy process as a play full of odd characters and strange talk, not because I wish to emphasise the absurdity or futility of that process, but because I want to underline its unpredictable, disputed, open-ended quality. Some anthropologists might prefer to deconstruct the narratives contained in that tedious mass of project and policy documents which is produced by 'global actors' like the Global Environment Facility (Zerner 1996). But this kind of 'discourse analysis' only seems to reinforce the semblance of imperial power which it purports to criticise (Grillo and Stirrat 1997). The discourse of 'integrated conservation and development' actually *disintegrates* in talks between the 'stakeholders' who do not live in Washington and do not read academic journals. It is only by participating in these conversations, both as listeners and speakers, that we can see how conservation policy is manufactured on the national and

local stages where the global script does *not* dictate the outcome of the play (see Croll and Parkin 1992: 33-4).

Anyone intending to deconstruct my own dramatic account of the policy process might well begin by questioning the way in which I represent the actors in the play, their roles, their masks, their costumes and their motives. Why does my title place such emphasis on the dialogue between conservationists who are 'Western', rather than 'Northern', 'foreign' or 'global' in their character, and Melanesians (or Papua New Guineans) who are described, on most occasions, as 'local landowners', rather than 'rural villagers' or 'indigenous people'? And why do I place more emphasis on the role of national conservationists and foreign anthropologists, as go-betweens or mediators in this conversation, than on the parts played by government regulators and foreign developers in supporting or thwarting the conservation agenda? It is important that we pose these questions, because the answers amount to a portrait of the broader political setting or social landscape within which the play takes place.

This is not the place in which to describe the very complex set of institutional arrangements through which the 'donor community' has funded regional or national conservation programmes and projects over the course of the last decade, nor do I wish to imply that this 'community' has acted with a common and consistent purpose in this policy domain. The foreign conservationists who have arrived in PNG to spend this kind of money have mostly had white faces and English-speaking tongues, and have perhaps been more predominantly 'Western' in appearance than the foreigners employed in other branches of the aid industry. But the reason why the 'Western' label seems especially appropriate in PNG is because the battle for 'biodiversity values' has mainly been pitched in the country's lowland rainforest habitats, where the 'great enemy' is a logging industry dominated by Asian, and especially Malaysian, investors. When the national government has occasionally propounded a 'Look North' policy, it has not been looking up to Washington or London, but has been trying to encourage all forms of Asian investment in order to escape the humiliation of its longstanding dependence on Australian aid (Filer 1996). The area of overlap between the forest policy and conservation policy domains in PNG has essentially been a battlefield between a group of Occidental donors, led by the World Bank, and a group of Oriental loggers, led by Rimbunan Hijau. The choices made by Papua New Guineans, both at the level of the state and at the level of the village, have thus become the prizes in this tug of war (Filer and Sekhran 1998: 6).

Over the past decade, the government has been persuaded to impose severe restrictions on the further expansion of the logging industry, but these policy measures have not stopped the loggers from making promises of 'development' to local landowners whose forests have not yet been logged, and they have not enhanced the government's own capacity to persuade the landowners to stop listening to such promises. So this latter task has been left to the conservationists, whose 'projects' are thus designed to win back the hearts and minds of landowners who tend to blame their own government for their own lack of 'development'. The landowners count as 'landowners' because the point at issue here is the use of customary land, on which 99 percent of the country's natural forests happen to grow. Indeed, they have come to think of themselves as 'landowners', or sometimes as 'resource owners', because they have come to believe that their best chance of 'development' is to sell the natural resources which their land contains (Filer 1997). But their determination to defend their customary title to the land itself has also grown apace, because they do not trust the government to do so, and because its loss would leave them powerless and impoverished (Ballard 1997). Their land is their last card in the gamble for modernity, and their status as 'landowners' is critical to their self-esteem, if not to their standard of living.

In this respect, we might say that they also count as 'indigenous people', even if they do not use a comparable phrase themselves, because such people are normally defined, at least in part, by their 'close attachment to ancestral territories and to the natural resources in these areas' (World Bank 1991). But there are two reasons to avoid this label in the present context. The first is that most definitions of 'indigenous peoples' also place some emphasis on their subordinate political status, as ethnic or tribal minorities which are distinct from the 'dominant society', but the concept of a 'dominant society' does not help us to understand the role of landowners, or for that matter the

role of national politicians, bureaucrats and conservationists – *who are also landowners* – as arbiters in a tussle between Occidental donors and Oriental loggers. The second is that the idea of a 'close attachment to ancestral territories' can all too easily beg one of the main questions posed in my account of this struggle, by leading us to assume that these 'indigenous people' are also 'rainforest people', with a traditional interest in the conservation of natural forests or forest species.[5]

And this is where the subject of 'indigenous knowledge' enters the picture, as the topic of a sort of sub-plot, in which national conservationists and foreign anthropologists sit behind a fence and debate their respective roles in the bigger battle on the other side. Many anthropologists have made it their business to debunk what Ellen (1993: 126) calls the 'myth of primitive environmental wisdom', and Melanesian specialists (myself included) have been amongst the most vociferous exponents of this stock in trade (Bulmer 1982; Dwyer 1982, 1997; Allen 1988; Filer 1991b, 1994). But what concerns me here is not so much the 'truth' as the 'politics' of this sceptical approach to the value of 'indigenous knowledge' in the conservation business. Brosius (1999) has recently suggested that the deconstruction of 'essentialised images' serves no useful purpose if it only demonstrates our own exclusion from the policy arena, and might, in certain circumstances, offer extra ammunition to the forces of darkness. Instead of quibbling while Rome burns, we need to ask how anthropologists can help to fight the fire.

The Melanesian version of Rome does not resemble the Malaysian political setting in which Brosius has situated his own argument, even if it does contain Malaysian logging companies. Anthropologists and conservationists alike have far more freedom to criticise the loggers and the government, and there is much less chance that anything they do or say will jeopardise the rights or compromise the strategies of customary landowners. Anthropologists (myself included) have played many active roles in the conservation policy process, even to the point of managing the government's 'own' conservation projects, and in these different capacities, they have adopted different views about the substance and significance of 'indigenous knowledge'. Yet these views, taken as a whole, still tend to diverge from those espoused by the 'indigenous' conservationists employed in the same industry, who seem to feel obliged, at least in public, to uphold the 'myth of primitive environmental wisdom'.

Yet they have good cause to do so, if they believe that this will maximise the flow of foreign funds which keeps them in employment. And even if the wise men in the World Bank claim to know the difference between the myth and the reality, the Occidental donors have no cause to challenge myths which help to build the confidence of their allies in the national 'policy community'. This is one reason why the donors are prepared to pay for large numbers of national 'community workers' to be trained in the mystical arts of PRA, and then to use these skills to replicate the more rapid 'rural appraisals' offered by alien anthropologists. But the more time that is spent gathering local participation in a positive appraisal of 'indigenous knowledge', the greater the risk of seeming to patronise local landowners who think *they* know that *Western* knowledge is the key to their 'development' (Filer and Sekhran 1998: 331).[6] The subjects of this process have every right to wonder why outsiders of any complexion are being paid good money for such work, when it seems to demonstrate the limits of their own access to the donor dollar.

It could be argued that the value and scope of 'indigenous knowledge' has already been diminished or distorted once local actors assume the character of 'landowners' or 'villagers', rather than 'indigenous people'. But we do not have to assume that all 'indigenous knowledge' belongs to 'indigenous people', that 'indigenous knowledge' is necessarily distinct from other forms of

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[5] Brosius (1999: 282) reverses the equation by pointing to the common assumption that 'rainforest peoples' are by nature 'indigenous peoples', or that rainforests ought to be occupied by 'indigenous peoples', and ought not to be occupied by other types of people, such as peasants or migrants.

[6] When one of my own national staff attempted to deploy the Bismarck-Ramu 'PRA tools' in another part of the country, village elders asked her why she was treating them like schoolchildren.

knowledge, or that any form of knowledge is the special property of an equivalent class of people. The semantic point at issue is connected to the economics and politics of conservation in a specific regional and sectoral policy domain. The concept of 'indigenous knowledge' has gained currency in the Melanesian conservation business in a way that tends to make the adjective prescribe or circumscribe the *object* of the knowledge. It has to be knowledge of what and where the 'wild things' are, because that is the knowledge which matters to conservationists who want to keep those wild things *as* they are. It cannot be knowledge of subsistence farming or alluvial mining, let alone knowledge of 'cargo cults' or electoral politics, because such knowledge cannot be used for this purpose. But if we cease to think of Melanesian landowners as 'rainforest peoples', and see them as they generally see themselves, as 'gardening' or 'farming' peoples, then we are obliged to recognise that the productive powers of their 'indigenous' or 'traditional' knowledge are weighted heavily towards the art of cultivation, and that the process of 'development' has only added to this bias.

No wonder, then, that when the community workers engaged on the Bismarck-Ramu conservation project tried to rationalise their own method of dealing with 'indigenous knowledge', they said they were 'digging' and 'planting' (Ellis 1997: 45), not 'hunting' and 'gathering'. But they were still looking for knowledge of the 'natural forest', and what they seem to have found is knowledge of 'bush spirits', a form of pagan religious belief, *rather than* the sort of ethnoscientific knowledge which could usefully be sold to foreign scientists or ecotourists. They might well argue that the separation of these two forms of knowledge reflects the alienation of the landowners from their original social and intellectual 'landscape', or the transformation of a 'disenchanted forest' into an 'economic resource'. But arguments like this hold little water with the modern Christian villager who thinks of 'custom' as the work of Satan. Since most members of the national conservation community, unlike the anthropologists and other foreign scientists with whom they work, are active members of some Christian church, they cannot readily deal with the topic of 'indigenous knowledge' without attempting to reconcile Christian and indigenous cosmologies.[7] This kind of syncretism might appeal to Catholics or Anglicans, but is regarded with suspicion or hostility by most of the other churches. The Community Development Team saw the repudiation of custom as a sign of 'dependency', and even of the 'cargo cult mentality', but some villagers saw the attempt to 'reconvert' them to customary values as a sign of that very same thing.

The designers of the Bismarck-Ramu project tried to address this problem by engaging a Church Liaison Officer to liaise with local Christian leaders who might otherwise resist the 'traditionalism' of the community development process. This man justified the significance of his own role by commending the ability of local pastors to enter an unfamiliar community and establish their own authority within a matter of days, by simply commanding the villagers to perform essential 'public work' (Ellis 1997: 40), and certainly without spending a lot of time 'hearing community themes' or exploring 'indigenous knowledge'. No lessons seem to have been drawn from the contrast between the commanding presence of Christian preachers and the 'uncommanding', 'non-preaching' talk favoured by the barefoot conservationists. But if we compare the Bismarck-Ramu project's style of 'community entry' with the hard-nosed 'business preaching' favoured by the Biodiversity Conservation Network, we may well be reminded of the different approaches which orthodox and evangelical missionaries took to the task of 'moulding Christian conviction', rather than 'conservation conviction', when they first arrived in Melanesia (Michael Young, personal

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[7] In one of the national talking shops hosted by the Conservation Resource Centre, the national participants decided that their Christian cosmology stood half way between the Melanesian community's traditional absorption into its own landscape and a secular 'Western' form of alienation and individualism. Christianity was conceived as a 'triangle', whose points represented God, Man, and Nature, and the Christian conservationist could rotate the triangle to put Nature at the top (Saulei and Ellis 1998: 212-3).

communication).[8] This does not mean that we are witnessing the spread of a new sect devoted to the worship of Biodiversity; it only means that conservationists and missionaries face a similar choice of moral incentives and rhetorical devices when they seek new converts to their cause. In both cases, the risk of appealing to 'indigenous knowledge' is the risk of ceasing to be a 'true Christian'.

But this risk is greater for those conservationists who espouse the new 'Catholicism' of the Bismarck-Ramu project than for those who espouse the Biodiversity Conservation Network's version of the 'protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism'. That is because the 'Protestants' are offering *material* incentives, not just moral ones, 'integrating' conservation and development by trading or exchanging the prospect of 'business development' for the conservation of 'natural commodities', whereas the 'Catholics' reject 'developmentalism' as a 'cargo cult', as yet another form of religion, and seek instead to 'cultivate' the plant called 'self-reliance' through the exchange of ideas, not the sale or purchase of commodities. The difference between them stems from their evaluation of the chances of successfully competing with 'developers', and most especially with logging companies, who promise more material benefits for less hard work.

The business experiments promoted by the Biodiversity Conservation Network have not required a positive evaluation of traditional cosmologies. On the contrary, they look more like a set of minor rituals in the religion of 'developmentalism'. But 'indigenous knowledge' is still conceived as a sort of 'lost cause', in the sense that the current economic activities of the average villager, especially those which earn money, are seen to be minor versions of the menace posed by logging companies. The knowledge of animal behaviour which grew from traditional hunting practices has been distorted by the use of shotguns to satisfy new markets for particular species, while the knowledge of plants which grew from traditional cultivation practices has been distorted by the clearance of old forests for new cash crops. While business is a good thing in itself, most existing forms of business are bad for biodiversity, and even the traditional arts of subsistence no longer carry the traditional guarantees of sustainability.

Yet those forms of 'indigenous knowledge' which seem to have some bearing on the development of alternative forms of 'biodiversity business' are *also* distorted through their attachment to economic activities and social relationships which are commonly less 'traditional' and less rewarding than the ones which they are meant to replace. It is one thing for the hunter to know his birds or the gatherer to know her trees, but such knowledge is not sufficient, and might not even be necessary, for people to make a decent living as small-scale sawmillers or guides on hire to adventure tourists. Nor is it obvious, either to landowners or economists, and even with substantial donor subsidies, how such occupations can generate the levels of cash income that would dissuade people from selling their birds or their trees, or persuade a typical community of Melanesian gardeners that an unexploited forest has more value than a garden full of coffee.

Whether we take the sacred or secular road to 'indigenous knowledge', conservation demands more time and effort, more education and collaboration, more conversation and negotiation, than local landowners are normally willing to supply, because conservationists tend to put their projects in places which already possess a natural abundance of biodiversity values, and often little else. In circumstances such as these, the conservationists are often selling victory against an enemy who is not really present in the field, and might never get there. In which case, we might ask why any package of incentives is required to fight a phantom?

> Conservationists are easily perceived as people who wish to maintain the status quo, which means poverty and a lack of services, by telling communities not to obtain 'development' by the only means that seem to be available. The populations of the Bismarck Fall and the Ramu Valley, for example, have, until now, lived under 'conservation circumstances'. They

[8] Greenpeace recently sponsored a tour of PNG by a Green Baptist pastor whose enthusiasm for literally preaching conservation should have seemed like heresy to members of the Bismarck-Ramu Community Development Team.

> own a virtually untouched and enormous swathe of land in the Bismarck Fall, and to their great regret, experience a situation of 'conservation' rather than 'development' every day of their lives. It is unlikely that people will continue to accept this status quo if they are offered an alternative through mining, logging, or any other form of resource exploitation (van Helden 1998a: 255).

The conservation of biodiversity values in a country like PNG is not necessarily, or even normally, the result of talks or deals by which conservationists persuade local landowners to change their attitudes or behaviour. Where the 'threats' posed by developers exist only in the minds of landowners as a sign of their desperation for 'development', it does not follow that the current economic practices of those who labour under such illusions pose a smaller or a more insidious version of this threat. Where logging or mining companies really have made an assault on biodiversity values, with or without the active encouragement of local landowners, the latter may still combine their enthusiasm for 'development' with demands for 'compensation' which actually serve to undermine the object of their own desire, and conservation may then be the unintended or 'perverse' result of their attempt to capture larger 'rents' from the developers (Filer 1994). And whether the developers are present on their land or only present in their minds, local landowners may reduce their own exploitation of local forest resources, despite rapid population growth, because they want to 'modernise' their own lifestyles, and thus dissociate themselves from those activities, like hunting, which are hallmarks of the 'forest-dwellers' who they do not want to be (Kocher-Schmid and Klappa 1999). The moral imperatives embedded in these options cannot be readily accommodated by the contrast between a valid defence of 'indigenous knowledge' and a blanket condemnation of 'development-dependency'.

If conservation biologists like to think of 'indigenous knowledge' as knowledge *about biodiversity*, the province of the 'parataxonomist' who shares their own interest in the classification of wildlife, we anthropologists are more inclined to think about it as a *form* of *cultural* diversity, and even to defend and celebrate it on these grounds. But if Melanesian biodiversity values have now become a sort of metaphorical commodity on sale to the 'donor community', what is the current value of Melanesian *cultural* diversity in any but the rapidly contracting market for traditional ethnography? And how is the conservation *or reduction* of this cultural diversity connected with those projects and policies which are funded and constructed for the purpose of sustaining its biological equivalent? Most anthropologists would probably agree with Bulmer's (1982) argument that biodiversity conservation cannot be achieved by means of an appeal to the values of a 'traditional culture' that does not contain anything like a 'modern conservation ethic'. At the same time, the lingering diversity of 'traditional culture' would seem to constitute an obstacle to the conservation of biodiversity because it adds an element of uncertainty to the reaction of different local communities to the community awareness or development strategies adopted by the conservationists. On the other hand, some communities appear to regard the conservation of their own cultural identity as an activity which makes more sense than the conservation of any particular species or habitat within their territorial boundaries (van Helden 1998a: 261). Since identities and boundaries are closely intertwined, their simultaneous defence may be the only point at which local landowners can accept a 'modern conservation ethic' as something more than a luxury which they cannot and will not want to afford until they have some more 'development' (ibid.: 263).

When we think of 'indigenous knowledge' as the property of a local community, or even the cultural unity of a 'culture area', we also need to remember that 'natural' biodiversity values are inversely related to population density, and that effective conservation of these values needs a space that is normally much greater than the territory occupied by a traditional political community in Melanesia. This means that conservationists tend to end up in places which are not only 'remote' and 'backward', but which also feature traditional cultural 'fault-lines', often overlaid by recent population movements, where talk of boundaries is highly problematic and 'political', and any kind of 'project' which distributes benefits to local people can expect to start a mass of territorial disputes. The Bismarck Fall and the Lakekamu Basin are two such places (see Kirsch 1997; van Helden 1998a). A recent gathering of PNG 'ICAD Practitioners'

> noted that in the past there were no land disputes. Now that we have money there are disputes. The possibility that ICADs may exacerbate disputes should therefore be taken into account (Saulei and Ellis 1998: 216).

Perhaps the traditional absence of land disputes belongs in the same romantic bag as the 'traditional conservation ethic', but their diagnosis of the present situation has some merit.

While this may seem to justify the Bismarck-Ramu project's method of withholding money and promoting 'self-reliance', its 'resource mapping' practices could hardly fail to turn local knowledge into the knowledge of disputed territory. And if it is true that social relationships within and between Melanesian communities are normally 'grounded in the landscape' (Filer and Sekhran 1998: 31), this may tell us more about the problem of striking 'conservation covenants' with local landowners than about their understanding of a 'conservation ethic' or their appreciation of 'indigenous knowledge'.

> Where several local communities are given the time and space in which to make their own choice between activities which may have positive or negative impacts on biodiversity values, there is no guarantee that people who make the 'right' choice will occupy a series of contiguous territories which combine to make a single conservation area of several thousand square kilometres. If anything, it is rather more likely that neighbouring communities, or even sections of a single community, will take different options as a new means to represent and pursue their existing social and political divisions (ibid.: 294-6).

The conservationist's dilemma here is that the weaker party generally takes the side of 'conservation', but the weaker party typically lacks the numbers and capacity to protect and manage a conservation area without external assistance. One of the most striking features of the current Melanesian form of landed property is that the power of local landowners to exploit 'projects' for their own ends is not matched by their power to deal with troublesome neighbours, nor is it matched by the power of the State to keep local boundaries in order.

At the end of the day, as we still beat around the bush, we need to ask whether conservationists who often seek to avoid a confrontation with developers, which they cannot hope to win, can win the hearts and minds of landowners whose own achievement of conservation is not exactly what they want. The Occidental donors who fund conservation projects are not in the business of funding the roads, schools or other public goods which would satisfy the most immediate and explicit desires of the rural population. And that is partly why the 'mediators' in the conversation between Western conservationists and Melanesian landowners are backed into a corner where 'indigenous knowledge' gains its peculiar significance. But the celebration of 'indigenous knowledge' by community development strategies which are premised on the existence of a 'traditional conservation ethic', or the partial exploitation of such knowledge by business development strategies which seek to divert rural villagers from their current economic practices, cannot readily address the basic facts of rural poverty and social inequality.

For this reason, we also need to ask whether conservationists could achieve more of what *they* want by seeking to modify the behaviour of local communities than they would achieve by either doing nothing at all, leaving landowners alone to suffer in silence, or by using their own scarce resources to change the actions of other characters in the policy process (Dove 1996; Brandon 1997). I have previously argued that the Occidental donors could carry on their fight with the Oriental loggers by the simple expedient of 'persuading' the national government to cease the dispensation of timber permits in areas which are known to be rich in biodiversity, without necessarily having to fund conservation projects in those areas (Filer and Sekhran 1998: 257-8). The World Bank has actually used its own financial leverage to wrap increasing volumes of red tape around a forest industry which it now regards as a threat to the values of 'good governance' (Filer, Dubash and Kalit 2000), and in this respect, it has helped to create the physical space in which conservation projects are freed from the necessity of competing directly with the logging companies. But if the conservationists have bought more time in which to carry on their dialogue with local landowners, they may still find, at the end of the day, that money talks louder than birds.

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