

Supporting Forest Defenders: An Anthropologist's Perspective on Advocacy and Research

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Abstract

This research contributes to discussions about how applied anthropological perspectives and methods can contribute to demands for rights and forest protection by indigenous peoples. Threading together unique experiences among the Kayapó in Brazil, an internship with Amazon Watch, and collaborative event ethnography conducted at the 2016 World Conservation Congress, I identify examples of effective and justice-oriented conservation collaborations between practitioners and indigenous communities. Analyzing my field experiences in conjunction with a literature review, I recommend ways in which anthropologists can prepare for successful conservation work with indigenous partners.

Methods



Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Purdue Climate Change Research Center, the department of Political Science at Purdue University, and Purdue University's College of Liberal Arts. CEE relies on collaboration, in coordinating field work, collecting and analyzing data, and thinking through meaning, and this research reflects the efforts of the larger team working on site in Honolulu. The WCC CEE team is: project leaders Dr. Kimberly R. Marion Suiseeya (Assistant Professor, Northwestern University) and Dr. Laura Zanotti (Associate Professor, Purdue University), and researchers Kate Haapala, Sarah Huang, Savannah Schulze, Elizabeth Wulbrecht, and Kate Yeater.

Thanks to Dr. Laura Zanotti, Dr. Jennifer Johnson, and the Purdue University Department of Anthropology, Dr. Diego Soares da Silveira and the Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, the Associação Floresta Protegida, and Andrew Miller and Christian Poirier with Amazon Watch. Additional funding and support from the Margo Katherine Wilke Undergraduate Research Internship, CLA Job-Ready Internship initiative, and Purdue Honors College.

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Results & Discussion

Discourses surrounding indigenous peoples and forest protection

Historically, indigenous peoples in the Amazon have been identified as irresponsible resource managers, impediments to development, and primitive wards of the state (Wright, 1988). Such discourses frame conservation partnerships locally and discussions within global environmental governance (Adger et al., 2001). Following rising concerns about climate change and an increasingly global indigenous movement, securing indigenous rights has become paramount to effective and just conservation in Amazonia. Perspectives and methods utilized by anthropology practitioners can reconstruct the narrative about indigenous peoples into one that emphasizes indigenous voices and experiences, exchanges knowledge, and recognizes the connection between indigenous self-determination and the protection of the rainforest (Brosius, 1999).



Advocacy and activism-oriented work

Anthropology is political, and to maintain that one can remain neutral – merely serving as the social science consultant among a web of corporate actors, NGOs, and indigenous communities – is not neutral at all but partisan (Kirsch, 2002). The inherent politics and privilege of activist research must not result in unequal collaborations, but rather highlight the value in knowledge production and exchange across communities in all processes of community-conservation partnerships (Straubhaar, 2015). Various forms of engagement with the struggles of indigenous communities reaffirms the relevance of our discipline (Low and Merry, 2010).

Community-conservation partnerships

Using a political ecology framework, anthropologists interrogate the historical and structural injustices that prevent just and effective work with indigenous peoples. Recognition of different knowledges and readings of the landscape, as well as translating differences across scales is critical for establishing successful alliances that ensure rights and environmental wellbeing (Rocheleau, 2008; Velásquez Runk, 2009). Whether serving as consultants for development projects, hosting indigenous partners, translating, or conducting on-the-ground project implementation, practitioners bring an awareness of the need for ethnographic data and methods within conservation initiatives.

Recommendations

To ensure that research and work with indigenous peoples is justice-oriented, anthropology must continue to engage in partnerships that are context-specific and culturally appropriate. Ultimately, elevating the voices and experiences of indigenous peoples in conservation discussions can improve the success and appropriateness of development projects. Consistent reflection on the positionality of practitioners is necessary, and improved training can support these efforts.

