



NATURAL ALLIANCES BETWEEN CONSERVATIONISTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) is dedicated to saving wildlife and wildlands, to assure a future for threatened species like elephants, tigers, sharks, macaws, or lynx. That mission is achieved through a conservation program that protects some 50 living landscapes around the world, manages more than 590 field projects in 53 countries, and supports the nations largest system of living institutions—the Bronx Zoo, the New York Aquarium, and the Wildlife Centers in Central Park, Queens and Prospect Park. We are developing and maintaining pioneering environmental education programs that reach more than three million people in the New York metropolitan area as well as in all 50 United States and on six continents. We are working to make future generations inheritors, not just survivors.

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ABSTRACT

The survival of both indigenous peoples and much of what remains of nature lies in the ability of both sides to find common ground. However, parks and protected areas have become the focus of conflict between conservationists and indigenous peoples. This antipathy is based on differing views about the nature of human impact on the natural world and masks the strong potential for these two groups to work together. In this paper we provide a case study illustrating how effective such cooperation can be. The Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco National Park and Integrated Management Area was designed and implemented as the result of a collaboration between the Wildlife Conservation Society and the *Capitanía de Alto y Bajo Izozog*, the organization representing the 10,000 Guaraní people known as Isoceños. The park, encompassing approximately 3.5 million hectares of Bolivian Chaco, is the only national park in the Americas established on the initiative of a Native American People, and the only one where a Native American organization shares primary administrative responsibilities with the national government.

Keywords: indigenous people, parks, cooperation, conservation, alliances, NGOs

INTRODUCTION

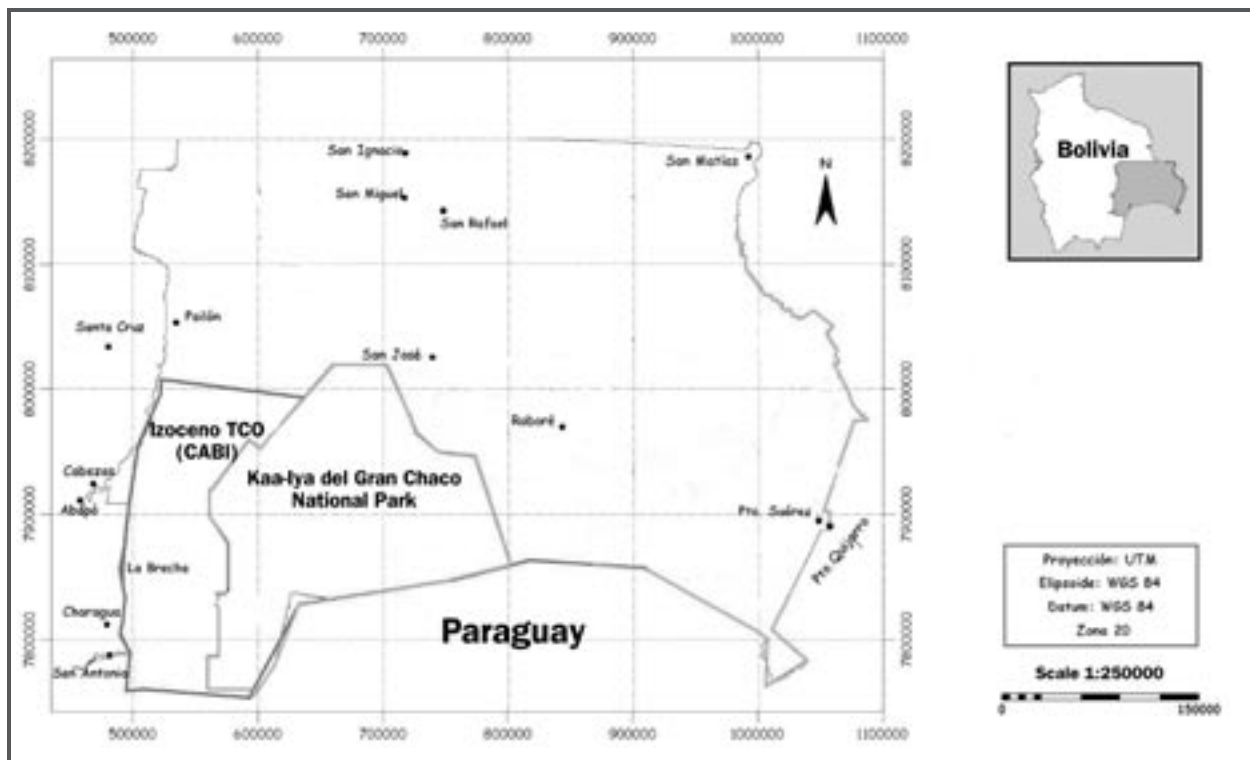
Both indigenous peoples and large natural areas are threatened by forces associated with expanding industrial society. The survival of both indigenous peoples and the natural world lies in the ability of people concerned with the two sets of issues to find common ground and work together. The map of this common ground is being obscured by suspicion, shortsightedness and politics. Advocates for both sides most often come into conflict over the creation and management of parks and protected areas.

While park advocates are arguing with indigenous peoples and their advocates about the proper role for people in conservation, the forest they both wish to preserve is being destroyed. Despite a commonly shared realization of this loss of forest, the dialectic seems to be irresistible, spinning both sides towards mutual loss. The explanation for why potential allies see each other as enemies runs through history, politics, and science and is typified by short-sighted advocacy, conflicting discourses, political correctness, and a lack of perspective on large-scale threats and potential alliances.

In this paper we focus on forested settings declared by the State as parks and protected areas, particularly in the Amazon Basin, and the often acrimonious debate as to whether people should be excluded from these areas. This debate is framed in the larger context of human-nature interactions and contributes to the on-going discussion about the relationship between environmentalism and indigenous peoples. Brosius (1999) has emphasized the need to understand these larger contextual arguments, or environmental topologies – constructions of actual and metaphorical space – arguing that these lay the groundwork for



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intervention by defining political and institutional space, prescribing interventions and identifying appropriate agents of action. This paper is an effort to understand the interplay between the interests of indigenous peoples and their advocates and park advocates and to document a case study from the Bolivian Chaco, in which an indigenous community and a conservation organization have, by uniting efforts and forming a partnership, achieved significant progress towards their two sets of objectives. We hope that this will change the valence of the current, often sterile and acrimonious debate and encourage others to create, strengthen, and document other cooperative ventures.

THE CHALLENGE AND THE OPPORTUNITY

Both the natural world and indigenous and traditional peoples and their homelands are threatened. In all areas, indigenous peoples (see Colchester 2004 for definition) are going extinct, culturally and linguistically, if not demographically. They are being expelled from their lands and losing rights to resources necessary for their cultural survival. Despite this trend there remain an estimated 250 million indigenous people in more than 70 countries (Davis 1993) and the territories they inhabit are estimated to cover 12 to 19 percent of the earth's land mass (Durning 1993 in Davis and Dunn 1994). In more recent estimates, Molnar *et al.* (2004) state that at least 120 million hectares are contained in large

