

Letter

Culture and conservation: a reply to Chua

Any analysis or commentary on the nature of culture—or indeed on the culture of nature—is bound to come up against the thorny issue of how to define culture. In the process of eliciting contributions to a special section on culture and conservation for the April 2018 issue of *Oryx*, we cast our net wide, deliberately avoiding use of any prescribed definition of culture. The response to the call is therefore perhaps indicative of how (at least some) conservation practitioners and researchers frame the relationship between culture and conservation, that is, largely in terms of the cultural and spiritual values of nature and how these affect, and are affected by, conservation.

However, as Chua (2018) states, culture is not just the sum of its values: ‘values. . . cannot fully capture the material, economic, political and social realities, and inconsistencies, of people’s lives’. Indeed, this is where proponents of taking a cultural values approach to conservation may find themselves exposed to criticism for focusing on the cultural values of nature in isolation from the multitude of other factors that affect people’s lives, including but not limited to their understandings of, attitudes to, and engagement with nature. The evolution of my own organization’s framing and approach to cultural values, and culture more broadly, in conservation is a case in point (Infield et al., 2018).

Chua’s assertion that cultures are heterogeneous, complex, dynamic and often contested is not in itself controversial. This is largely acknowledged in my editorial (Schneider, 2018), as well as in several of the other authors’ contributions on culture and conservation in the April 2018 issue of *Oryx*. The fact that conservation itself shares many of these characteristics of cultures is also evident from an extensive literature on the evolution of conservation discourses (e.g. Mace 2014).

Like all communities, the global conservation community is not homogenous. Although its members share some commonalities, recent debates, for example on the so-called new conservation, illuminate apparent divisions over what should be conserved, in what ways, for what reasons and by whom (Holmes et al., 2017). Diversity of perspectives are commonly found even within the same conservation

organization. Such divisions are undoubtedly also evident at the local level, regardless of whether or not this is acknowledged in international debates, for example on the future of conservation in the post-2020 agenda. As Sandbrook (2015) stated in a previous *Oryx* editorial, ‘contemporary conservation is not one thing but many, and. . . there can be more that separates different conservations. . . than binds them’. More recent research by Sandbrook and others (C. Sandbrook, pers. comm.), based on responses to an online survey by 8,202 conservation practitioners and academics from 144 countries, demonstrates empirically that conservationists do agree on many important questions, including the need for a combination of people-centred conservation and scientific protectionism. Nevertheless, their analysis reveals strong disagreement on some issues, such as the purpose and form of protected areas, and on relationships between conservation and capitalism.

In conclusion, the roles of culture in conservation, the impacts of conservation on culture and, indeed, the cultures of conservation and their proponents are complex, interrelated and evolving. Given the diversity of conservation stakeholders at local, national and global levels, it is inevitable—and desirable—that the framings of the issues that arise from their consideration are open to debate.

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