

ENEMIES OF CONSERVATION

Enlightened conservationists admit that wrecking the lives of millions of poor, powerless people has been an enormous mistake. By Mark Dowie

BANGKOK, THAILAND (NOVEMBER 2004): Against the wall of a large meeting room packed with committed environmentalists stands Martin Saning'o. The Maasai leader from Tanzania listens intently to a panel discussing the human factor in conservation, and patiently awaits an invitation to comment. He stands out as the only black man in the room. When his turn comes Saning'o speaks softly in slightly accented but perfect English, describing how nomadic herdsman once

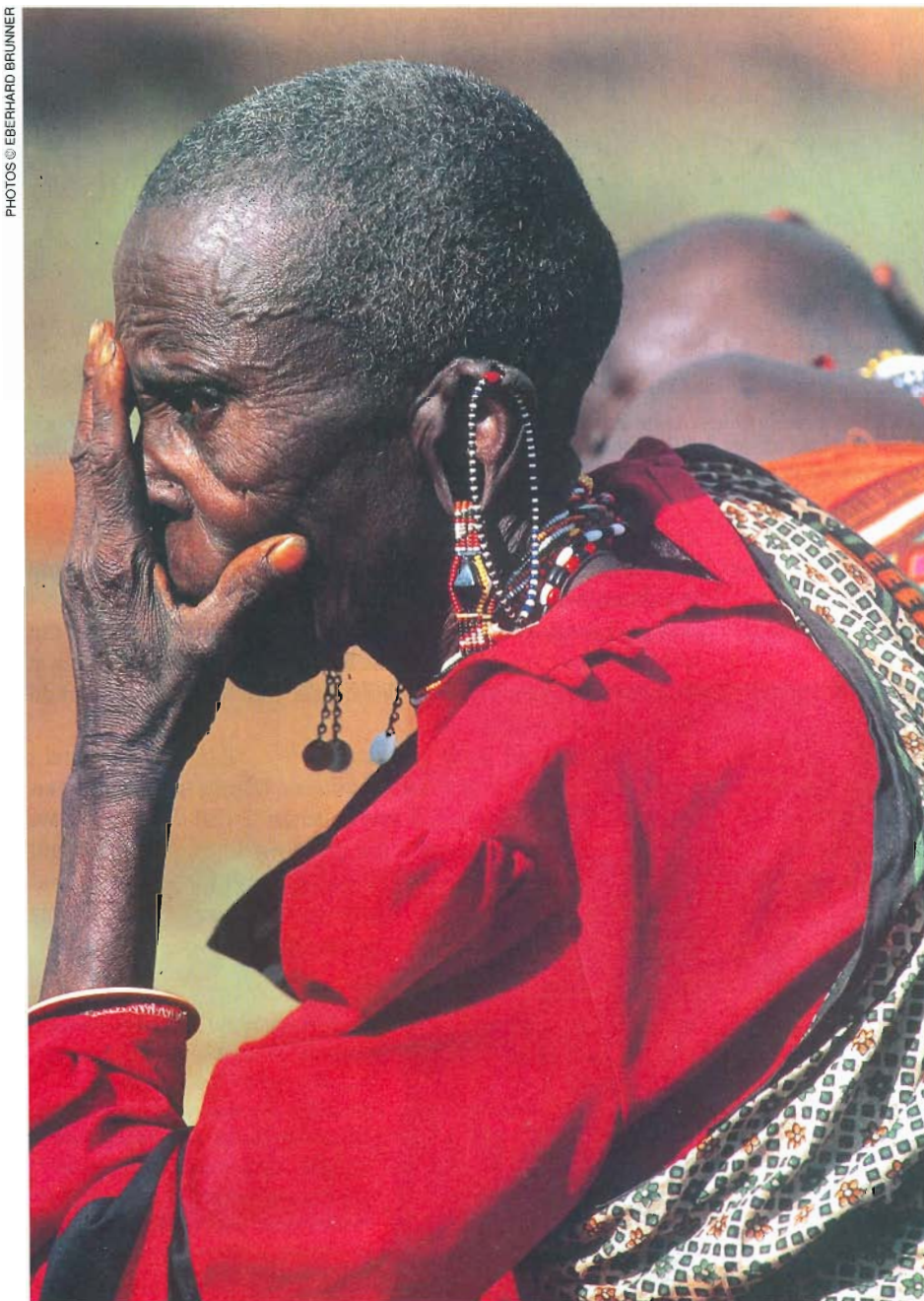
protected the vast range in eastern Africa they had lost over the past 30 years.

"Our ways of farming pollinated diverse seed species and maintained corridors between ecosystems," he explains to an audience he knows to be schooled in western ecological sciences. He then tries to fathom the strange version of land management that has been imposed on and impoverished his people, more than 100,000 of whom have been displaced from northern Kenya and the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania. Their culture is destroyed and they live in poverty, none of them having been fairly compensated for their land. This has all been done, Saning'o says, in the interest of conservation, which saddens him, he says, because he truly believes that "we were the original conservationists. Now," he tells the room of stunned enviros, "you have made us enemies of conservation."

This was not what 6,000 wildlife biologists and conservation activists from over 100 countries had come to Bangkok to hear. They were there at the Third Congress of the World Conservation Union, also known as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), to explore new ways to stem the troubling loss of biological diversity on an ecologically challenged planet.

Martin Saning'o was speaking for a growing worldwide movement of native peoples who share a common plight in conservation. The movement began in 1920 when a small delegation of pastoral nomadics showed up at the door of the newly instituted League of Nations. They were turned away. Undeterred, indigenous peoples from every nation on earth have since been traveling in increasing numbers to international conventions like the Earth Summit in Rio, the Convention on Biological Diversity, previous IUCN meetings in Caracas, Montreal and Amman, and more recently to the World Parks Congress held in

Conservation refugees exist on every continent but Antarctica, and by most accounts live far more difficult lives than they once did. They have been banished from lands they thrived on, often, like the Maasai, for thousands of years, in ways that conservationists who supported the displacements have since admitted were ecologically sustainable. This Maasai woman lives on the Serengeti.



PHOTOS © EBERHARD BRUNNER

Durban, South Africa, in September 2003 where Nelson Mandela pled with conservationists not to “turn their backs” on rural economies, and to treat indigenous peoples more fairly.

Encouraged by his remarks, the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum created expressly for the Congress declared: “First we were dispossessed in the name of kings and emperors, later in the name of state development, and now in the name of conservation.” National parks, they declared, were a good thing, but the parks-without-people approach to park management “is violating our rights.” Forced expulsions like the Maasai experience were, some said, nothing short of “cultural genocide.” Others called it a classic “takings.” But they all consider themselves “conservation refugees.”

Not to be confused with “ecological refugees”—people forced to abandon their homelands as a result of unbearable heat, drought, desertification, flooding, disease, or other consequences of climate chaos—con-

servation refugees are removed from their lands involuntarily, either forcibly or through a variety of less coercive measures. The gentler, more benign methods are sometimes called “soft eviction” or “voluntary resettle-

“Every form of refuge has its price.”

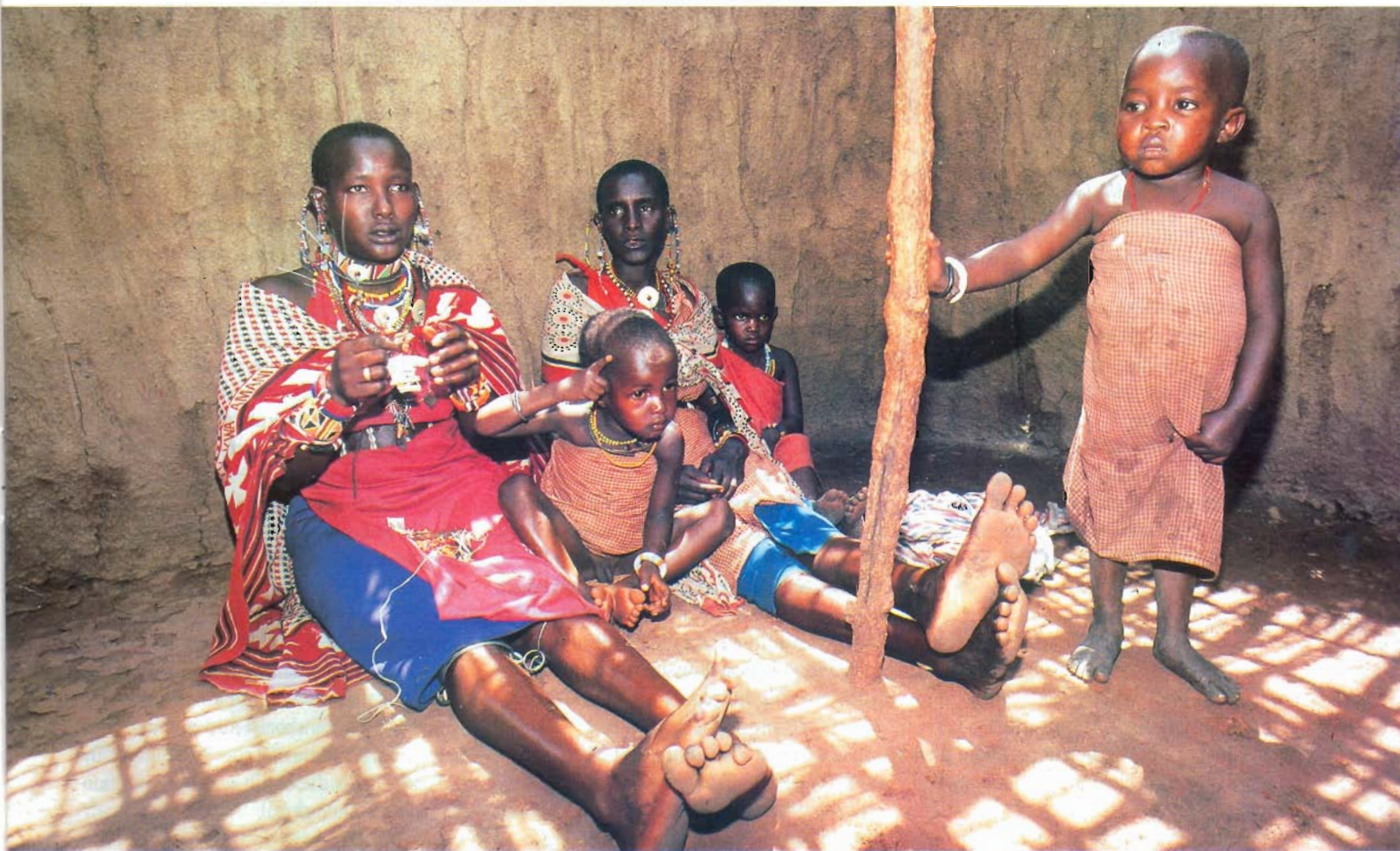
DON HENLEY & GLENN FREY
(OF THE EAGLES)

ment,” although in two years of international travel I have been unable to find a single new settlement of indigenous peoples who voluntarily agreed to relocate. Soft or hard, the main complaint heard in the makeshift villages bordering parks and game reserves, at the IUCN Congress in Bangkok and meetings that preceded it, was that relocation often occurs with the tacit approval or benign neglect of European- and American-based conservation organizations. The principal

five, which increasingly set and define the global conservation agenda, are: The Nature Conservancy (TNC); Conservation International (CI); The World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF); The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS); and the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF). Together these five organizations, affectionately nicknamed “the BINGOs” (Big International NGOs), have captured almost 40 percent of all funds donated from all sources to conservation worldwide.

The rationale for “internal displacements,” as these takings and evictions are officially called, usually involves a perceived threat to the biological diversity of a larger geographical area, variously designated by one or more BINGOs as an “ecological hot spot,” an “ecoregion,” a “vulnerable ecosystem,” a “biological corridor,” or a “living landscape.” The huge parks and reserves that are created by a host country’s government often involve a debt-for-nature swap (some national debt paid off or retired in exchange for a parcel of sensitive

More than 100,000 people have been displaced from northern Kenya and the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania, “in the interest of conservation.” Their culture is destroyed and they live in poverty, none of them having been fairly compensated for their land. “We were the original conservationists,” the Maasai leader from Tanzania Martin Saming’o says, “Now you have made us enemies of conservation.” This family of Maasai nomads will move with the grass and livestock and can build a new village in a few days.





Three of these children are suffering from river blindness, a condition that could be cured with cleaner water. The tallest girl in the middle leads the others. "We recognize that indigenous people have perhaps the deepest understanding of the earth's living resources," concedes Conservation International's chairman and CEO Peter Seligman, and "our planet's ecological health is inextricably linked to human health, security and ability to prosper. Conservation simply cannot be achieved without full recognition of this basic truth.... We firmly believe that indigenous people must have ownership, control and title of their lands." So why don't they?

land) or similar financial incentive provided by the Global Environmental Facility and one or more of its eight "executing agencies" (bilateral and multilateral banks), combined with an offer made by the funding organization to pay for the management of the park or reserve. Broad rules for human use and habitation of the protected area are set and enforced by the host nation, often following the advice and counsel of a BINGO, which might even be given management powers over the area. It's a system that too often leaves local people entirely out of the process.

The response of big conservation, in Bangkok and elsewhere, has been to deny they are party to the evictions while generating inspired promotional material about their affection for and close relationships with native people.

"We recognize that indigenous people

have perhaps the deepest understanding of the earth's living resources," concedes Conservation International's chairman and CEO Peter Seligman, and "our planet's ecological health is inextricably linked to human health, security and ability to prosper. Conservation simply cannot be achieved without full recognition of this basic truth.... We firmly believe that indigenous people must have ownership, control and title of their lands."

The Nature Conservancy's "Commitment to People" states that "we respect the need of local communities by developing ways to conserve biological diversity while at the same time enabling humans to live productively and sustainably on the landscape."

The World Wide Fund For Nature [formerly World Wildlife Fund or WWF] adopted its own Statement of Principles which uphold the rights of indigenous peoples to

own, manage and control their lands and territories—a radical and discomforting notion for many governments.

In 1999 the World Commission on Protected Areas formally recognized indigenous peoples' rights to "sustainable traditional use" of their lands and territories. The following year IUCN adopted a bold set of principles for establishing protected areas, which state unequivocally: "The establishment of new protected areas on indigenous and other traditional peoples' domains should be based on the legal recognition of collective rights of communities living within them to the lands, territories, waters, coastal seas and other resources they traditionally own or otherwise occupy or use."

Tribal people, who tend to think and plan in generations rather than weeks, months and years, are still waiting to be paid the consideration promised in those thoughtful pronouncements, which are aggressively projected toward major funders of conservation who have become increasingly aware of and sensitive to indigenous peoples and their cultural survival. But it all appears to be rhetoric, as there is no concrete evidence anywhere in the world of TNC or any other BINGO respecting "the needs of local communities...to live productively and sustainably on the landscape." And if they were really sincere about their support of indigenous peoples they would today begin opposing the eviction of thousands in Gabon from eight of 13 new national parks formed largely at their behest.

The Conservation Impulse

Land and wildlife conservation was our nation's first environmental impulse. Long before Americans became concerned about pollution, pesticides, ozone or global warming, we noticed that unwise use of land and water could lead to catastrophic consequences—drought, erosion, pestilence and species extinction. Conservation biologists and ecologists studied the damage for half a century before deciding that biological diversity was not only the clearest sign of a healthy biosphere, but it was also the reward of sound land stewardship, and thus the essential goal of conservation. Of course, people who worked and lived off the land already knew that. Then conservation scientists noticed that biodiversity was declining at an alarming rate. Around that crisis a social movement formed in America at the turn of the 20th century. By the early 1970s the biodiversity preservation impulse had gone global.

Global conservation, like most NGO

enterprises, is supported by individual donors and philanthropic foundations. But unlike national and local conservation nonprofits, billions of dollars are also received or transferred, by or through the BINGOs, from bilateral and multilateral banks, national governments, government agencies (like USAID) and increasingly from multinational corporations. This development has not only brought hundreds of millions of dollars into BINGO treasuries, but it has also forced them into close alliances with environmentally challenged global economic interests, and distanced them from local communities.

In a world where money is power, the influence over global conservation policy and strategy held by five organizations with more than \$5 billion in assets and over \$1 billion combined annual revenue is considerable, particularly when measured against the economic strength of communities affected by their actions.

CI, WWF, WCS and TNC—with chapters in almost every country of the world, millions of loyal members and nine-figure budgets—have undertaken a hugely expanded global push to increase the number of so-called protected areas such as parks, reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and corridors created to preserve biological diversity.

In 1962, there were some 1,000 official protected areas worldwide. Today there are 108,000, with more being added every day. The total area of land now under conservation protection has doubled since 1990, when the World Parks Commission set a goal of protecting 10 percent of the planet's surface. That goal has been exceeded, as over 12 percent of all land—a total area of 11.75 million square miles—is now under conservation protection. That's an area greater than the entire landmass of Africa. At first glance, so much protected land seems undeniably positive, an enormous achievement of very good people doing the right thing for our planet. But the record is less impressive when the impact upon native people is considered.

For example, during the 1990s, the African nation of Chad, with the encouragement of organized conservation, increased its protected area from 1 to 9.1 percent of its national land. All of that land had been occupied by what are now an estimated 600,000 conservation refugees. No country besides India, which officially admits to just under a million, is even counting this growing new class of refugee. World estimates offered by the U.N., IUCN and a few anthropologists who study the problem range widely from

five million to tens of millions. Charles Geisler, a rural sociologist at Cornell University who has studied displacements in Africa, believes the number on that continent alone now exceeds 14 million.

The true worldwide figure, if it were ever known, would depend on the semantics of words like “eviction,” “displacement” and “refugee,” over which parties on all sides of the issue argue endlessly. Regardless of which estimate or definition is chosen the larger point is that conservation refugees exist on every continent but Antarctica, and by most accounts live far more difficult lives than they once did, banished from lands they thrived on, often, like the Maasai, for thousands of years, in ways that conservationists who supported the displacements have since admitted



In 1962, there were 1,000 official protected areas worldwide. Today there are 108,000, with more being added daily. The total area of land now under conservation protection has doubled since 1990, when the World Parks Commission set a goal of protecting 10 percent of the planet's surface. That goal has been exceeded, as over 12 percent of all land—a total area of 11.75 million square miles—is now under conservation protection. Environmentalists, especially Europeans and Americans, love the wildlife safaris and the “protection.”

were ecologically sustainable.

It has taken big conservation a decade or more to glimpse the folly of some of its heroes, like paleontologist Richard Leakey, who at the 2003 World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa, set off a firestorm of protest by denying the very existence of indigenous peoples in his homeland, Kenya; calling for the removal of settlers from game reserves and other protected areas throughout Africa; and then arguing that “the global interest in biodiversity might sometimes trump the rights of local people.”

Though he has his following, and still raises millions for conservation at elite soirees in Europe and America, few of Leakey's professional colleagues agree with him. Younger, enlightened conservationists are now willing to admit that wrecking the lives of 10 million or more poor, powerless people has been an enormous mistake; not only a moral, social, philosophical and economic mistake, but an ecological one as well.

They have learned from bitter experience

that national parks and protected areas surrounded by angry, hungry people, who describe themselves as “enemies of conservation,” are generally doomed to fail. As Cristina Eghenter of WWF observed after working with communities surrounding the Kayan Mentarang National Park in Borneo: “It is becoming increasingly evident that conservation objectives can rarely be obtained or sustained by imposing policies that produce negative impacts on indigenous peoples.”

Wildlife conservationists may finally be heeding the question anthropologists have been asking them for decades: “If in the course of saving biological diversity you destroy cultural diversity, what have you accomplished?”

And more and more conservationists are

asking themselves another question: When, after setting aside a “protected” landmass the size of Africa, global biodiversity continues to decline, might there not be something terribly wrong with this plan, particularly after the Convention on Biological Diversity has documented the astounding fact that in Africa, where so many parks and reserves have been created and where indigenous evictions run highest, 90 percent of biodiversity lies outside of protected areas, most of it in places occupied by human beings? If we want those people to live in harmony with nature, history is showing us that the dumbest thing we can do is kick them out of it. ■

Mark Dowie is the recipient of 18 journalism awards, including four National Magazine Awards. He teaches science at the University of California Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, and is the author of “American Foundations: An Investigative History from MIT Press.” He lives in Chileno Valley, Calif.