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10

Nature for Money

The Configuration of Transnational Institutional Space for Environmental Governance

Kenneth Iain MacDonald

Shaheen raised his hand and pointed across the river valley. 'Look ... there ... ibex - a small group.' We were high up in a glaciated valley, just a few hundred metres below a towering tongue of ice. I squinted and looked across the river valley. I couldn't see anything that looked like a mountain goat. Shaheen pointed again and tried to verbally guide my eyes to the right spot. All I saw were a few grey rocks against the bleak grey-brown scrub covered slope. And then, no bigger than an ant on the horizon, one of the grey rocks moved. It was no more than a flicker, but it moved. Shaheen sat for an hour watching them graze. He took in the surroundings, calculated their movements and planned the following day's hunt. Six days after leaving the village, we returned with an ibex - and the ritual sharing of meat began. The ibex is loaded with cultural significance for peoples in northern Pakistan (MacDonald 2004). As the spirit of fertility in the former animist belief system, it retains a symbolic potency in these agro-pastoral societies. One manifestation of this potency lies in the offerings of meat given by the hunters to figures of authority in the village and poorer households as an expression of commitment to the social reproduction of the village polity. This is one among a number of practices that define socio-natural relations in northern Pakistan. It is also a practice that defines Shaheen.

A number of years later during a break in a meeting of the Working Group on Access and Benefit Sharing, a body of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), I spoke with Salim a negotiator for Pakistan, about the sustainable use initiatives designed to restrict ibex hunting in northern Pakistan. Rather than demonstrating any familiarity with the sites affected by his work, he was more familiar

with the institutional spaces of the CBD, and the cities around the globe they periodically occupy. Even as the text he inserted into the Convention and his work in shaping the decisions of the Convention and its programme of work had a substantive potential to affect peoples' lives by seeking to reconfigure their understanding of biodiversity, restructuring access and use rights, or redefining their historical use of biodiversity as criminal; Salim and his ilk were not only physically, but ideologically and subjectively, distanced from these places and the effects of their work and what it is to engage with 'nature' in those places – the meaning of a particular species, the affective dimensions of holding centuries of accumulated knowledge of a species or an ecosystem, the idea of an 'ecosystem' as a productive landscape.

Indeed, the work of Salim is not in any affective, or physical way engaged with people like Shaheen and the spaces they inhabit. Even as he claims to represent them, he is not accountable to them; he does not travel into their communities to tell them about the intent of the CBD, its programme of work, or even of its existence. And yet, his ideas, his knowledge, his hopes, aspirations, desires and frustrations, and those of thousands of others like him have been brought into relation, and at least partially shaped by, the existence of the CBD. Even as Salim and Shaheen are unknown to each other, they are bound together through the nexus of interests that have sought to define and address 'global environmental problems' through the institutionalised context of statist mechanisms like the CBD.

Over the past three decades the institutional and organisational environments in which biodiversity conservation is imagined, planned and practised have grown significantly and become increasingly integrated. The CBD has effectively brought into being a new locus around which new power relations and scales of governing nature have been reconfigured. In doing so it has also served to entrench state sovereignty over nature (Corson 2010; MacDonald 2010a). As the CBD has become a source of material support and legitimacy for conservation organisations, it has also created an incentive for conservation organisations to align their activities with the interests of parties to the CBD and the programme of work developed through the Convention; and to articulate their practices and objectives with those of the CBD.

In this chapter I link the translocal spaces and actors involved in a seemingly simple conservation project in northern Pakistan to stress that a focus on the scalar dimensions of power relations is integral to understanding the role of agency in the ideological

production of nature and the material practices that derive from it. Central to understanding these relations is a process of longitudinal ethnographic research that relies on multi-sited and multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1998). As people and environments, localised in space, become increasingly subject to the demands of so-called global organisations, like the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and as the practice of these organisations is structured by institutions like the CBD, it becomes necessary to understand a great deal more about the politics, processes and practices that shape the agenda of these institutions. To be focused, this must start from a long-term engagement with communities subject to such institutional processes and work outward to comprehend how the 'globalisation of everyday life' – taken to mean the subjectivities and material effects produced through willing or unwilling participation in ever-expanding socio-spatial relations – in such places is tied to the political discursive resources, social relations and material practices housed in 'global' organisations and institutions (Boli and Thomas 1999). An understanding of this relation demands that an ethnographic lens be turned on these sites and mechanisms (Watts 2001; West 2001). From this position it becomes possible to witness, comprehend and translate the relations and mechanisms that imaginatively bring into being the communities and environments upon which they act. It is through this multi-sited work – the locating of ethnographic practice in the para sites and meta sites¹ of conservation policy, planning and practice – that it becomes possible to situate case study analyses in a fuller understanding of the systemic conditions of biodiversity conservation that increasingly define biodiversity in terms of 'natural capital' and structure conservation practice in terms of the capacity to realise capital gains (Brockington et al. 2008; Buscher et al. 2012; Sullivan in press).

In what follows, I use an example of the interventionist practices of a 'global' conservation organisation – the IUCN – in northern Pakistan to illustrate how the material ecological relations shaped by that intervention are structured in relation to the dynamic history and politics of an institution, the CBD. These practices configure transnational institutional space, but they also reflect how diverse interests in nature bring relations and sites of power into being and it is, I think, these relations and sites that must be identified, accessed and studied *in relation* to better understand how the contemporary ideological production of nature and possibilities of intervention are bound to a simultaneous production of scale. Even though the

spaces of the CBD are far removed from those sites in northern Pakistan, their capacity to act across space is a function of how the transnational quality of constructs of 'the environment' and 'global environmental governance' produce ecological relations that are decidedly 'trans-local'.

THE SITE: PRODUCING TRANS-LOCAL ECOLOGIES

The term trans-local implies a relation of scale. By trans-local ecologies I refer to material human-environment relations that emerge through the spatial reach of transnational institutions, organisations and capital into the everyday social and ecological relations of communities previously removed, to varying degrees, from those forces. For something to be trans-local is for an object or set of relations to have moved beyond or transcended boundaries, real or imagined, that define it as local. To some extent, this is an illusion. Few hard and fast boundaries separate one locale from another. Perhaps some of the most durable, however, are social boundaries that delimit who may or may not belong to a community (Barth 2000; Cohen 2000). Though these have, to some extent, become more permeable within the socio-economic relations of late capitalist societies, they still resonate strongly in small-scale agricultural societies around the world where survival continues to depend upon gaining access to resources that exist beyond the reach of state control. Such is the case in northern Pakistan, where I first began thinking about the concept of trans-local ecologies. The Karakoram mountain communities that I have worked in are very much 'local' in the sense that I have outlined above. Membership is typically through marriage or birth and, while infrequent out-migration occurs, in-migration does not. Land throughout the mountain range is strictly delimited as belonging to particular communities, and few non-community members (exceptions include state representatives, local political elites and military personnel) can gain access to 'local' community-controlled resources. Human-environmental relations historically have been beyond the regularised influence of extra-local organisations such as state departments of forestry, wildlife or agriculture. Certainly these relations have been historically structured by institutional concerns – say the need to pay taxes or tribute, or the resource demands of political elites or colonial officials – but direct intervention on the part of these institutional actors was rare and where it did occur was based on exacting what could be claimed out of the productivity

of human-environment interactions rather than altering those interactions. Where alteration was attempted (e.g. state sanctions on subsistence hunting) these were, more often than not, ignored locally as the reach of state surveillance did not breach the social boundaries of 'the village'. These same communities, however, have long been trans-local in a number of ways. For over a century they have supplied porter labour for mountaineering expeditions, and have come to acquire significance within the global mountaineering and mountain tourism 'community' as that 'community' has invested stakes of identity and capital in 'conquering' high peaks (MacDonald 1998). This significance and the interaction it entails impact localised ecological relations in a number of ways, but again this is indirect and unplanned 'intervention'. More recently, however, localised environmental knowledge and practice have become the object of action for transnational development and conservation organisations, which explicitly strive to alter them in ways that satisfy institutional agendas. Particular among these actors are IUCN and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Hushe, a small community of about 100 households at the head of one of the outermost valleys of mountainous northeast Pakistan, is one site where the 'global' reach of these organisations and their objectives is made apparent through their project-based interventions. As part of an agro-pastoral society Hushe controls access to lands and resources in much of the uninhabited regions that extend northeast from the village toward the Chinese and Indian borders. In 1994, IUCN approached leaders in Hushe with a plan meant to conserve the officially endangered stock of Himalayan Ibex (*capra ibex sibirica*), a wild mountain goat that is native to the region. The plan, in line with the market ideology of many contemporary conservation initiatives, was essentially a 'cash for wildlife' swap. Based on ill-grounded assumptions that village-based hunting was responsible for an assumed but undemonstrated decline in ibex numbers, IUCN offered to generate cash for the village by selling a limited number of hunting permits to foreign hunters in exchange for an agreement from village leaders that villagers would discontinue hunting ibex for subsistence purposes. The project, accepted by village leaders, carried with it a number of unexpected, or at least unstated, outcomes. The effective capitalisation of ibex set in motion a new shift in the localised meaning of 'nature' (MacDonald 2004). It redefined what had been an important symbolic and social activity (hunting) into, at least on the part of some proponents of the project, a crime against the community

rather than the state. It also inserted tensions within an admittedly fragmenting social structure; allowed some villagers – those with access to capital resources – to capture and distribute the benefits of the project in particularised ways; strained long-standing reciprocal relations between Hushe and neighbouring villages; and created the incentive for directing changes in ecological practice that would encourage the containment of what is essentially a fugitive resource, ibex (MacDonald 2005).

While these localised outcomes can partially be explained through an absence of careful social and ecological research by the institutional and organisational proponents of the project, much more of the explanation can be read through the texts of project documents that, at least superficially, provide insight into the conceptual apparatus used in project formulation. Read as a map of social relations and the ideological representations that influence them, the project proposal navigates away from the particularised and localised context of Hushe to include actors drawn together as part of a wider \$6 million Global Environment Facility (GEF) initiative entitled 'Maintaining Biodiversity in Pakistan with Rural Development'. This initiative provided the impetus for the project in Hushe and linked the government of Pakistan with three transnational non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – the GEF, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the implementing agency, the IUCN (Ahmed and Hussain 1998; Government of Pakistan n.d.).

THE PARA-SITE: BIODIVERSITY, ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PRODUCTION OF SCALE

The goal of biodiversity protection and the role of the IUCN – 'the world's oldest and largest global conservation body' – rely on an appeal to a global image of an interconnected web of life. It is this appeal, and the assertion that transnational organisations know best how to coordinate responses to an environment understood as such, that are used to claim wildlife, like the Himalayan Ibex, as global property and increasingly subject their protection to market devices. In effect, it is the appeal to the 'global' significance of individual species and localised environments that is used to deterritorialise those species and their habitats from their historical interaction with human communities (Jamison 1996). It is also this appeal that legitimates the intervention of transnational conservation organisations that set about restructuring human-environment

relations and reterritorialising them in modified, but 'planned', forms (Luke 1999).

In the case of environmental decision-making, including 'policy-making', 'planning' and implementation, a realm or regime of distanced practice has developed over the past 150 or so years emerging out of colonial-era administrations or private elite organisations which have subsequently evolved into contemporary transnational environmental organisations (Adams 2004; Goldman 2003, 2005; Vogler 2003; Young 1994). The ability of organisations to exercise this spatial and governmental 'sphere of authority' has much to do with the rise of environmentalism as a political force over the same time period. However, as the emergence of the field of environmental (in)justice has taught us, a concern with the environmental consequences of action has never been divorced from the subject positionality of those acting. Value judgements regarding the knowledge and capacity of actors have always factored into considerations of the source and significance of environmental impact.²

Certainly in the case of Hushe, the representation of an incapable local population is used to try to legitimate the intervention of the IUCN, an organisation that effectively uses a discourse of global ecology to accumulate political authority within the network of state and trans-state actors and institutions that constitute 'global environmental governance' (Flitner 1999; MacDonald 2003, 2010a). But, at root, access to Hushe is structured through inequity: a desire on the part of at least some villagers for cash to satisfy the wish for the long-promised benefits of 'development', and the ability of the organisation to provide access to this cash. Absent this leverage of 'booty', it is unclear how intervention would have been facilitated in Hushe. Similar relations of inequity can be seen to facilitate state sanction of IUCN activities. Given that the government of Pakistan assumes sovereign jurisdiction over all environmental resources contained within its borders, the IUCN cannot operate in Pakistan without the sanction of the state. But in many cases the government is pleased to have the IUCN assume responsibility for implementing environmental programmes. Indeed, the *Pakistan National Conservation Policy*, a document that guides internal environmental research and policy formation, was written largely by representatives of, or consultants hired, by the IUCN, WWF and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (Government of Pakistan and IUCN – The World Conservation Union 1992). Some of the reasons for this willingness to cede authority are fairly

straightforward. It allows a fiscally beleaguered state to shift a financial burden onto an NGO, which in turn contributes to its ability, for example, to meet the public spending reduction demands of International Monetary Fund dictates and help satisfy the cost of debt servicing, or devote fiscal resources to more immediate concerns of the state (see Steinberg 2003). All of this can be accomplished without ceding the legal authority to curtail NGO activities where they are seen to contradict or conflict with state interests.

NGOs, however, do not have the fiscal resources that governments command and need to develop not only dependable sources of funding but also cross-sector legitimacy to take on work that was historically the province of the state. And it has become increasingly clear that both of these needs came to be satisfied through a gradual embrace of the commodification of nature under neoliberalism (Buscher et al. 2012; MacDonald 2010a). Organisations sought to develop modes through which biodiversity could pay for its own salvation by extending the mechanisms through which nature could be 'conceived in the image of capital' into new spaces, and used this representation as the basis for the rational management of 'nature as capital' (Coronil 2000; O'Connor 1994: 131). In need of the funds that were increasingly channelled through an institutional structure in accord with neoliberalism, including the CBD, conservation organisations pursued projects that openly made conservation an instrument for the accumulation of capital and a vehicle through which capital interests could gain access to sites of 'nature as capital'. This typically occurred with the full support of relevant governments as they derived a share of revenue from what came to be known as 'market-based' incentive projects. With GEF and UNDP support, these projects quickly gained ground in the 1990s and trophy hunting, bioprospecting and ecotourism became the manifestation of a commoditised nature reoriented to serve elite and corporate interests but that would, under the rhetoric of 'community-based conservation' also provide a 'profit' for local communities (Hayden 2003; McAfee 1999; MacDonald 2004). The IUCN, then, developed as an organisation as it effectively pushed for an acceptance of the legitimacy of supra-national institutions in dealing with problems constructed as 'global' and has extended its spatial reach accordingly. Its ability to do this has been strategically facilitated by association with other transnational or supranational institutions such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNDP, the Global Environment Facility and the Secretariat for the CBD among others (MacDonald 2010a).

Through this alignment with dominant institutional actors, the IUCN, as an implementing agency, has become what Rosen (2000) calls a centre of calculation and accumulation – terms he uses to describe organisations, not simply as hierarchies but as sites (often multiple sites) where selective knowledge is accumulated and action designed. From these sites knowledge and action flow to distant places.³ This flow, while not necessarily unidirectional or dominating as some, like Escobar (1995) or Smith (2005), assert, demands a response from those distant places. We can imagine this response as taking different forms. Individuals or social groups may resist categorisation; they may accommodate, but manipulate, assigned labels (Buz 2002; Carrier and West 2009). But the demand is persistent – to rationalise and then modify situated knowledge or practice within ideological boundaries of understanding subscribed to by transnational organisations like the IUCN. This organisational demand, and the localised responses it generates, delineate a network of relations that stretch across space to connect distant organisations and their ideational underpinnings with localised and particularised social and ecological communities. Based on regular longitudinal fieldwork, it is fairly straightforward to map these power relations.

At the outset of the Hushe project, the IUCN had already established a country office in Pakistan and was in the midst of establishing regional offices in the north of the country. In 1994, I was invited to a workshop to begin structuring a nomination of the Central Karakoram mountain range as a World Natural Heritage site (MacDonald 1995). Representatives from the IUCN were present because of their advisory role in the World Heritage Convention.⁴ Notably, except for me, none of the people present at the meeting had been in the area they were proposing for World Heritage Site status. But prior to the meeting, on what he called 'a whim', the IUCN advisor took a side trip to Hushe, which bordered the proposed World Heritage Site. Thinking of possible development benefits that could be associated with World Heritage status he designated it as an appropriate project site and established contact with influential men in the village. Simultaneously contact was made with government officials in the district headquarters. Moving away from the village and into the main administrative centre of Skardu, an increasing number of actors entered the picture: connections were established between IUCN staff and local political elites. In this relationship, local IUCN staff were relatively powerless in relation to political elites (e.g. vulnerable to bureaucratic stalling, or sanctions on their activities based on differing interpretations

of cultural appropriateness). They also found themselves tied in to relations with more senior IUCN staff from the major offices in Islamabad and Karachi and with foreign consultants who had direct connections to major donors. To some extent, these sites of interface, sites where knowledge and action – as they flow from the centre of the organisation outward – can be translated or ideologically delimited, are observable, depending, of course, on issues of access. But moving away from the ostensible site of the project, the subject of observation becomes increasingly nebulous and difficult to bring into focus. This is where the invisibility of rule begins to take shape, not simply for observers, but also for people – mostly villagers – whose horizon of understanding is delimited by more circumscribed webs of power. The connections go on, of course, but it is not so easy to observe and map out power relations as ‘the village’ is brought into relation with the multiple sites of the organisation(s) and institutions responsible for conceiving and implementing the project.

The connections that I have sketched above express the physical and social distance between actors, but each set of actors exists similarly in locales that can be studied much as we study ‘the community’. If I were to work only from within a village like Hushe, I could only guess at the broader context within which an organisation like the IUCN operates, and hence the network of actors and institutions in which they invisibly situate villages like Hushe; networks that include the CBD, GEF and other actors engaged in promoting a market orientation within organised biodiversity conservation (MacDonald 2010b). From this standpoint, understanding the ramifications of organisational intervention stops at a particular point – generally the borders of the village, perhaps extending to the regional market town. But when we realise that those borders are porous, that situated individuals are connected to others across much greater reaches of time and space, the borders of the village (or the ecosystem for that matter) as the bounds of study become less helpful in understanding how local material ecological relations are increasingly shaped by agendas formed at a significant spatial and ideological distance (Campbell 2007; Giddens 1990; Rankin 2003; Sundberg 1998).

It is important in addressing the connections involved in modifying localised human–environmental practice to understand how organisational actors engage in the production of scale and appeal to the authority of acting in the ‘global’ interest as a means of gaining access to particularised spaces. If we accept Rosen’s

definition of organisations as instruments for the attainment of goals and instruments of power underlain and mediated by cultural and ideological processes, we can begin to appreciate how the concept of scale is both an instrument in that accumulation and a basis for the formulation and attainment of goals (Jones 1998; McCarthy 2005; Smith 1992). Bruno Latour’s (1987, 1999) work offers insights into understanding the effects of producing scale. These centre mostly on mechanisms of abstraction and representation used by organisational actors and the ways in which these mechanisms, derived from disciplinary knowledge, provide the possibility for re-definition and degrees of certainty. In addressing questions of scale, Latour implicitly asks what it is that allows the passage from conditions of ignorance to certainty among organisational actors. He locates one answer in the capacity of organisational actors to reference pre-existing modes of abstracting and categorising knowledge, what others might call labelling practices. In relation to the project I am dealing with in Pakistan, for example, it is clear that the IUCN has a categorical ‘map’ that guides their passage from ignorance to certainty in understanding the ‘place’ they will work upon. This is revealed in part through the apparent absence of the need to conduct local research prior to project formulation or the development of goals.⁵ Some of this ‘absence’ can be ascribed to the simple capacity of the organisation to intervene based on a history of privileged position, and often backed by the coercive power of the state. More significant, though, is their subscription to a set of ontological objects that are taken to be universal and thus not open to question (e.g. biodiversity, ecology, wildlife, community). These serve as uniform and universal labels for the organisation of information and provide a frame of certainty that allows organisations like the IUCN to design interventions with a minimum of investment in grounded research. But in doing so, often for reasons of administrative expediency, transnational organisations tend to annihilate context. ‘Community’, for example, a categorical object common to many ‘conservation-as-development’ projects, is typically treated as a monolithic entity with little attention paid to the very real tensions and divergent interests that operate to structure proximal social relations in particular ways (Brosius et al. 1998; MacDonald 2001). The organisational perspective on community, however, is delimited by the institutional agendas reflected in project goals or objectives, formed at a distance from the communities to be affected by those goals. Project documents certainly represent the village under consideration, but they do so

selectively. Only those objects of concern that are of interest to the organisational actor (according to their pre-set filters) make it into policy, project documents and implementation plans. This process of selectivity is directly related to an engagement in institutional tasks that are deeply embedded in scales of knowledge production and consequent action.

This spatial and social distance from their sites of intervention is characteristic of many transnational organisations, but this is not an accidental gap. Rather, 'distance' from the people and places directly affected by those interventions, or what is often benignly labelled as an 'objective perspective', Latour reminds us, allows the operation of a unifying 'gaze' which, rather than recognise distinct qualities of discrete sites through research or enquiry, constructs those sites by equating them with other sites in the organisational archive. And it is this facility for consultation, comparison and the construction of unity and conformity under a single organisational gaze that facilitates the emerging prevalence of dominating notions such as 'best practice' or 'capacity-building' – the application of a managerial logic that annihilates context. In the act of comparison, the observer/practitioner can disassemble the elements of observations made in a particular locale – 'the facts' – and reassemble them in ways that align with the categorical 'boxes' related to the epistemological domains of the organisation. They can turn interpretations into facts through a process of vetting and categorising. Ibex in the mountains surrounding Hushe, for example, become removed from a historical context that has 'governed' their human interaction and assume meaning structured by the epistemological metrics of taxonomic science, wildlife ecology and conservation biology. More importantly, they assume significance in relation to the mandate of a transnational institution and the objectives of organisations that secure funding and institutional legitimacy by aligning with that mandate. All of this amounts to what Latour (1999) calls oversight – which he defines as domination by sight – at once looking at things from above and selectively accommodating or ignoring elements of what is observed. The capacity for oversight, of course, implies the ability to 'look' from a distance that allows the observer to take in a wide view.

Under such a gaze, as 'integrated conservation and development' projects are imagined into being and implemented, situated communities often find themselves and their ecological practices detached, separated, preserved (if we take preservation to imply an interpreted condition of stasis), classified and tagged (for certain

ends) by organisational practices. They are represented in terms of their relevance to criteria set by the organisation and subsequently classified as a particular type of community relative to the goals of the project (Li 2007; West 2006). People and the situated environments that surround them are described and re-assembled in organisational reports, and in the imagination of those who produce and consume those texts, according to the principles and goals of the observer/practitioner and the organisation they represent. And just as two-dimensional representations of place sacrifice detail for area, so too are the details of 'community' sacrificed in processes of abstraction that allow comparability between communities and facilitate the application of a managerial logic.

In this move – this abstraction – organisational actors are not simply abstracting from the materiality of community to produce a representation of community, they are replacing a complex dynamic entity composed of continuous and multiple socio-ecological interactions with few definitive boundaries (i.e. a community as it exists) with a discrete unity locatable in space through *x/y* coordinates, and represented by fixed boundaries (i.e. a geographical community created for the purposes of interventions like the project described here). Here then, an inequitable relation which is temporally liminal and spatially marginal (i.e. the relation between organisational actors operating in centres of accumulation and calculation, and villagers) strips 'community' of context and creates a homogeneity in which individuals are conceptually removed from a social structure which is unseen or ignored by those intervening in it and inserts them en masse into a new social structure created out of the organisation's cognitive resources, which include historical, ideological representations of people and place that position local actors as incapable of effectively managing their surroundings (including wildlife) and situating them both as the source of an ecological 'problem', and, with appropriate alterations in local ideologies of nature, elements of the 'solution' (MacDonald 2005; cf. Agrawal 2005; Rosen 1991). This is neatly phrased in the proposal to the project described above:

Government agencies have a very limited capacity to enforce wildlife laws, making it virtually impossible to control rural people's use of wild resources – especially when they need these resources to meet their subsistence requirements. The problem will become more acute with increasing human population if mechanisms are not provided for rural people to acquire the

technical skills to manage wild resources. An alternative approach is needed that involves rural people in the solution rather than considering them the cause. (Government of Pakistan n.d.: 23)

My point here is that organisations like the IUCN not only engage in processes of abstraction to legitimate intervention (i.e. distant organisations act on localised environments), but that in doing so they actively work to create the 'realities' they claim only to describe. In the case of organisations that position and represent themselves as 'global', the political force of an ontology of scale works to create the institutional 'realities' it claims only to describe (Kelly, 1999), providing them with the capacity and the authority to act 'globally' on 'local' spaces. It is this increasing ability to act from a distance that highlights the importance of studying organisations as they produce the networks of interactions – the spaces of engagement (Cox 1998) – that allow them to operate trans-locally. As these transnational organisations use inequity and the emergence of globalising discourses to help them represent and gain access to 'localised' environments, and as they strive to implement normative, standardised practice, an appreciation of context, in all its complexity, is increasingly deemed irrelevant at best and as an obstruction at worst.⁶ In the case of the Hushe project, for example, no research had been done on hunting patterns or on the demographics or population dynamics of ibex, and the proponents had no knowledge of the social structure, social organisation or cosmology of the community. It did not matter that they could not use evidence to demonstrate that there was, in fact, a problem to be addressed. The point of the proposal was not to address a problem. The problem was presumed in the existence of the GEF programme for funding. The point of the proposal was to 'frame' reality – to define a problem that would satisfy the objectives of the GEF programme and secure funding (and legitimacy) for the IUCN. Through this framing, the project in practice reflected an exercise in making actors in northern Pakistan confirm with IUCN objectives structured through the CBD programme of work and the directives of its funding mechanism, the GEF. It is this process of alignment and articulation that highlights the importance of turning the observational lens to the meta-site.

THE META-SITE: ALIGNMENT AND ARTICULATION

While ethnographic methods have been used to highlight the mechanisms through which localised ecologies become subject to

global environmental governance, there is less understanding of how this occurs through the standard operating mechanisms of organisations and institutions involved in the field of environment and development. Certainly village-level ethnographic case studies can reveal the unfolding of conservation projects in and across communities, the impact on ecological dynamics and social relations, and the ways in which villagers negotiated the tensions produced by these projects. And textual analysis of project documents can highlight how ontological concepts such as wildlife, ecology and community are adopted and used rhetorically to legitimate certain practices of intervention. But the insights developed through these approaches do little to help understand the organisational processes that bring these projects into being, the knowledge upon which they are based, the everyday processes and interactions through which projects are developed, the ideological and material pressures that act upon the organisations and encourage their alignment with institutional configurations of power, and the ways in which these alignments produce new bases for justifying organisational actions and interventions.

To understand these relations and how localised communities are linked to distant institutional objectives, there is a need to observe and assess how institutions draw actors into new configurations of power and produce social relations that structure acts of alignment and articulation used to legitimate interventions. In particular, there is a need to uncover the structure, philosophies and practices of organisations; how operational concepts like biodiversity, conservation and development are conceptualised by organisational actors; how specific communities, as the targets of projects, are conceptualised within organisations; but, more importantly, how actors within organisations become ontologically complicit with the knowledge categories of the institutional field (e.g. the field configured by actors and interests associated with the CBD) that structures and provides the material resources and legitimacy needed to support the organisation's existence.

In the case of the project I've described in this chapter, for example, it is now clear from statements in the proposal, conversations with those who devised the project, and being able to track IUCN staff as they travel to policy setting venues, that the IUCN was aligning with the objectives of the CBD and seeking to produce projects that would articulate the organisation with a new source of institutional legitimacy and material resources. Indeed, the CBD, with a great deal of input from the IUCN, emerged from the 1992

Earth Summit with the sustainable use of biodiversity as one of its 'pillars'. By 1995 the parties had introduced sustainable use initiatives into the programme of work, which provides direction to GEF funding programmes. But it is significant that this only became clear after I had written and shared my analysis of the project with others and found that what I had observed in northern Pakistan was being repeated under the guise of Integrated Conservation and Development Programmes and sustainable use initiatives around the world. Clarity could only come after I began to ask a different set of questions that revolved around the interests and forms of knowledge translation responsible for mobilising projects like the one I had witnessed in Hushe, and situated myself in different 'field sites'. The first of these sites was the organisation. In turning the ethnographic lens on the organisation – the para-site – rather than the village, I gained access to a number of venues through which I could observe the ways in which organisational dynamics shifted within the IUCN. Observations during meetings, interviews with current and former staff, tracking actors and interests as they emerged within the organisation, all provided opportunities to identify how particular forms of knowledge were translated and gained legitimacy and traction, and the mechanisms through which particular interests were able to secure organisational privilege. What became clear during that time was the degree to which a conflation of nature and capital – apparent in the speed and ease with which the rhetoric of natural capital was adopted – established itself as a dominant view within the IUCN. Other signs include the organisational effort which the IUCN put into the development of new forms of coordinated production and investment that promote programmes to create markets for ecosystem services, venture capital programmes designed to facilitate the growth of small biodiversity businesses and offset programs to compensate for concentrated biodiversity impacts, among other initiatives. These shifts stem from an acceptance of eco-modernist equations of sustainable development with continued expansion in economic productivity, a recognition of the threat that environmental degradation poses to conventional modes of production, and a belief that imagining into being new markets and opportunities for accumulation is the basis for addressing these problems (MacDonald 2003, 2010a). It also became clear that these shifts were happening as the IUCN was drawn into a new configuration of power relations brought into being by the CBD.

There is a dry history of the CBD, the rehearsal of facts and figures. It goes like this. An outcome of the 1992 United Nations (UN) Earth Summit, the CBD entered into force in 1993 and has 191 party members. At its biennial Conference of the Parties (COP), these parties come together to review progress, identify priorities and establish work plans, as well as provide direction to the GEF, which is the financial mechanism of the CBD, and the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice, which provides scientific advice to the CBD. COP meetings encompass the formal plenary; two main working groups in which delegations state their positions on various decisions before the COP; break-out groups of smaller contact groups or friends-of-the-chair sessions, in which selected delegations negotiate specific text for presentation to the working groups; 'side events', or topical workshops, often organised by NGOs and intergovernmental organisations; press briefings; and high-level, closed-door meetings, open primarily to parties.

But there is a more dynamic history of the CBD. The CBD is not a monolithic institution. Rather, the 'lived reality' of the CBD is defined by a shifting network of relationships, imbued with continually changing power dynamics among parties, NGOs, intergovernmental organisations, representatives of indigenous and local communities and associated advocacy organisations, corporate representatives, trade associations, lobbyists, scientists and others (MacDonald 2010a). Even as relations among these actors are continually changing, these relations exist largely because the CBD represents an intensive institutionalisation of conservation practice and policy that was absent prior to 1992. While conservation organisations have always been articulated with institutions, the structure of the institutions of environmental governance that emerged out of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development consolidated state authority, redirecting state and donor resources away from multilateral relations with conservation organisations and aligning them with the CDB programme of work and the funding of that programme through the GEF. This consolidation of state authority under the guise of internationalism reconfigured power relations within the field of biodiversity conservation, effectively prioritising state sovereignty and drawing actors into relations structured around and within the mechanisms of the CBD (MacDonald 2010a). The CBD effectively reconfigured the funding landscape of biodiversity conservation. Building on the neoliberal-inspired cutbacks to environmental funding that led to intensified relations between conservation organisations and the private

sector (Breachin 2009; MacDonald 2010a) the CBD channelled state resources into the GEF in support of the CBD programme of work, which is defined by state parties to the Convention. The CBD then has the capacity to both direct material resources of its state members to organisations and provide a 'stamp' of legitimacy for organisations that align and articulate with that programme of work (Corson and MacDonald 2012; MacDonald 2010a). Accordingly, organisations reshape their conservation planning and practice to align with the decisions of the parties, the directives of the programme of work and the allocation of funding through the GEF. In doing so, they respond to or draw upon dominant ideologies within the CBD, and contribute to their hegemony.

This move signifies that the organisational constraints around a new institutional environment involve not only a concern with continuing access, but also the legitimacy needed to continue to secure increasingly important project-based funding. It also indicates that a significant part of gaining this legitimacy includes the willingness and capacity to develop 'working alliances'. In an institutional environment shaped by neoliberalism that increasingly accommodates and privileges the interests of business in pursuing an eco-modernist version of sustainable development, access to the resources allocated through CBD relies on an organisation visibly and legibly aligning its activities, capacities and objectives with the ideological and material interests of the dominant actors within that institutional context. Given these structural parameters, it is not surprising that many of the so-called integrated conservation and development programmes developed during the 1990s focused on the sustainable use of biodiversity and were oriented toward addressing the funding initiatives of GEF/UNDP and not based on empirically informed understandings of grounded problems in sites where they were implemented (MacDonald 2005). This shift in an external environment and the subordinate position of conservation NGOs within that environment helps to explain why 'partnerships' between conservation organisations and corporate actors and the broader involvement of conservation organisations in the promotion of business and biodiversity initiatives are growing so quickly, despite a long history of warranted distance.

These acts of alignment and articulation, however, require their own process of production. This is the importance of treating the CBD ethnographically, as the institution is also constituted by bundles of social relations and power dynamics that produce the mechanisms of the Convention, particularly its mandated

meetings, as active political spaces – arenas in which interests may be negotiated and new social relations configured around those negotiations (see Strathern 2000). These arenas can provide creative opportunities for new, and previously excluded, groups to gain access, but they also create a context in which privileged positions and perspectives can be consolidated and codified in ways that structure policy and practice.

The political space of the CBD, for example, has multiple locales. The most obvious are the biannual meetings of the COPs convened by the Secretariat of the CBD, and the interim meetings of a variety of committees and ad hoc working groups that are open not only to CBD signatories but also to a variety of civil society and private sector actors. The COP, however, is much more than simply a meeting of the parties. It is more apt to call it a stage – a space in which the range of interests that constitute a major element of environmental politics today perform and communicate their messages. It regularly convenes a variety of actors – indigenous peoples, individual investors and the representatives of states, private companies and NGOs among others. As it circulates and sanctions representations of nature that render new definitions of biodiversity and its conservation as acceptable and desirable, it also orchestrates a realignment of state, market and civil society actors and becomes a site for the restructuring of international conservation governance so as to enrol conservation in a variety of larger projects from state-building to the expansion of capital accumulation (Corson and MacDonald 2012).

We can think of these institutional spaces as what some management scholars refer to as field-configuring events (Lampel and Meyer 2008): events that temporarily bring actors together and construct arenas for demonstrating, displaying and promoting perspectives, mechanisms, techniques and practices, and provide the institutional context and opportunity to transform contestation into legitimated outcomes⁷, and in so doing, shape disparate organisations and individuals into a 'community' that shares a common meaning system (Scott et al., 2000).

In this context, the ratification of the CBD produced, in effect, not so much an instrument to highlight the problems of biodiversity loss, but a centre of accumulation and allocation that provided institutional spaces and mechanisms within and through which to contest, define, direct and codify the project of biodiversity conservation. It configured power relations around mechanisms for achieving biodiversity conservation; and it provided a new

source of organisational legitimisation. As a result, if conservation organisations wanted to retain the favour of state actors and secure a share of the diminishing material resources to do their work, they needed to be responsive to, and align with, the decisions of the CBD and the programme directives of its associated financing arm, the GEF. It is this pressure to align and articulate that created the project I initially started studying in northern Pakistan – a project not grounded in any empirical research or demonstrable problem, but created out of an organisational need to align with a new configuration of power brought into being by the CBD. In doing so they also reconfigure, restructure and re-articulate the scale of biodiversity conservation, articulating small villages in the mountains of northern Pakistan with the multiple sites of the CBD and bringing new social relations into being in those villages as the interests shaping the CBD programme of work become expressed through projects like the one I have described here.

CONCLUSION: SHIFTING THE EMPIRICAL LENS

Organisational and institutional ethnography, especially when motivated by a politics of field experience, implies more than simply coming to an understanding of the organisational domain. It implies knowing 'the subject' from a new geographical and epistemological standpoint – that of the distant set of agents that choose to act upon 'the subject'. This reveals a particular view of institutions and organisations as mechanisms through which the dynamic meaning assigned to ideas, values and beliefs is continually brokered (see Goldman 2001, 2005). This is what makes ethnography so suitable for the study of organisations and institutions, for it demands a standpoint from which to see beyond the conventional rationalist understanding of institutions and organisations and to apply a perspective aimed at exploring how the social meaning system of organisational actors is (re)produced (Harper 1998; Hirsch and Gellner 2001; Lewis et al. 2003).

Just as 'field researchers' would attend to who is moving through a village or a neighbourhood, paying attention to who or what is moving through an organisation, where they are from, and the purpose of their visit can provide insight into the wider context in which organisations operate. This relational understanding is significant, for it is this wider context that legitimates the aims organisations pursue and sets limits to the ways in which they operate. It is in this wider context – what has become the institutional

and organisational network that constitutes 'global environmental governance' – that we can locate a dialectical relation (among say the IUCN, WWF, UNDP, GEF) oriented toward the production of consent to believe and participate in the 'ecological realities' that are agreed upon by these 'big-picture' players (Rosen 2000). This dialectical relation, and its association with the need for funding, the demands of donors and capitalist markets, political competition for resources, the need to demonstrate results through measurable indices, all influence the ideological and practical orientations of, and tell us much about the functioning of boundaries around and within organisations.⁸

There is an empirical need to appreciate how relations of power configured around institutions like the CBD influence the formation and subsequent development of environmental policy and practice and configure new scales of biodiversity conservation (see MacDonald 2010b). Treating an organisation such as the IUCN and the CBD as a 'community' vested with 'culture' exposes how the privileging of standpoint operates to affect decisions regarding the viability of projects, the validity of information, the priority of relationships and the mechanisms of structuring localised human-environment relations.

My concerns regarding the study of organisations are not new, nor are my thoughts regarding the value of such study. Many of these resemble what Nader (1972) articulated when she called for anthropologists to study the 'culture of power'. By this she meant the ways in which hierarchies that govern our lives remain invisible; how their distancing mechanisms operate; the cultural constraints felt by members of organisations; and the ways in which 'clients' are manipulated. It is here that I think the value of organisational and institutional ethnography lies. It not only allows a critical examination of the institutional configurations of power that coordinate 'local' worlds and practices, but it opens to view discursive configurations that legitimate this coordination, and the mechanisms of alignment and articulation through which it is put into action. More than that, it exposes to view the relations and practices of domination that are central to an explanation of how people – differently positioned – contest the meaning of a situation, and how they use economic and institutional resources to dominate the material outcome of that contest (Asad 1979).⁹ It allows an examination of the rationalising practices used by individuals within organisations to legitimate their structures of knowledge, their actions and their favoured mechanisms and metrics, and how those

rationalisations can assume authority through processes of institutionalisation. This is fruitful ground for political ecology, for if we recognise that institutional power and agency have a direct effect on the ideological production of nature, on human-environment relations and on ecological 'reality', then we need to understand what shapes the directives flowing out of organisations to bring 'communities' within the sphere of authority of actors that are invisible to them. We need to situate the political ecological context not simply in conventional sites but in the para- and meta-sites of organisations and institutions. If we understand 'ecological reality' to be a product of the interaction across these sites (forced though it often is) surely we need to study dominant 'communities' – organisations like the IUCN and institutions like the CBD – as much and probably more than 'focal' communities.

In this sense, then, institutional and organisational ethnography is not so much a study of institutional mechanisms as it is an exploration of the cultural logics that underlie those mechanisms. For underneath the surface of seemingly objective registers of, say, 'sustainability', 'self-reliance' or 'capacity-building' that characterise the kind of project I have described in this chapter, lie meaning-laden concepts, symbols, systems of morality, and practical tasks and techniques oriented to value-based goals that operate to the disadvantage of many of the people they are intended to benefit. And these people, like many villagers in Hushe, who may well be adept at monitoring and negotiating meaning in face-to-face interaction, suffer an erosion of political entitlement when the conceptual and symbolic grounds for interaction are obscured by either the appearance of bureaucratic 'neutrality' and appeals to 'global' significance, or when those grounds retreat behind the walls of organisations like the IUCN or institutions like the CBD that operate at a distance and become simply invisible.

NOTES

1. I use 'para site' to refer to the multiple spaces of organisations like the IUCN that implement conservation projects, whereas 'meta sites' are the institutional mechanisms (like the CBD) in which actors like those organisations are brought into alignment and articulated with dominant ideologies, political projects and interests that structure what constitutes biodiversity and biodiversity conservation at any point in time. There can clearly be an overlap between para and meta sites.
2. It is in these judgements that we can locate much of the current emphasis on knowledge transfer, capacity-building and 'best practice' within environment and development institutions that operate in much of the so-called 'third world'.

3. Using the IUCN as an example, we can consider it to be a site of accumulated knowledge incorporating a diverse subject matter related to issues of conservation. Of course this material is selected and archived according to particular ideologies of environment, nature and conservation, and we must recognise that the IUCN is also subject to the 'authority' of associated institutions and their handlers such as UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, GEF, all of whom Rosen would call 'big-picture' players aimed at achieving and managing consent.
4. This includes evaluating sites nominated for World Heritage Status, monitoring the state of existing sites, implementing capacity-building initiatives, and providing technical advice to the convention.
5. In the case of IUCN's project in Hushe, for example, no research was undertaken to validate the assumed decline in ibex numbers, no research was undertaken to gain an appreciation of localised social structure or social relations, and no research was undertaken to understand the material and symbolic significance of wildlife within the community.
6. Again, these are goals established by organisations, presumably arising from the need to control and direct efforts in an efficient way and from the demand for standardisation and centralisation that makes results uniformly comprehensible by other participating institutions.
7. For example, the writing of favoured projects like 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity' (TEEB) into CBD COP decisions is a process of institutionalisation that privileges certain perspectives and encourages other actors to articulate themselves with the project due to its sanctioned and legitimating authority.
8. As Raymond Williams (1974) reminds us, cultural forms such as organisations and institutions do not stand alone. They are tools that can be used in a variety of ways. What is important is to understand how and why they are used in particular circumstances as well as to understand who uses them and under what conditions.
9. For an example of such work, see a special issue of *Conservation and Society* edited by Peter Brosius and Lisa Campbell (2010) describing the outcome of a recent collaborative event ethnography at the 2008 World Conservation Congress. The methodology applied there was refined and applied at the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in October, 2010 (see MacDonald and Corson 2012).

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