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**What role for conservation in culture? A response to  
Schneider**

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*Letter*

## **What role for conservation in culture? A response to Schneider**

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Schneider makes a much-needed case for rethinking the role of culture in conservation. Importantly, she advocates a more expansive understanding of ‘culture’ than conservationists have previously deployed: one that addresses the full complement of cultural values that shape people’s lives. To  
10 accommodate such values, she suggests, conservationists should engage more widely with the social sciences and humanities, ‘with religious and cultural institutions, and perhaps even with shamans, sorcerers, witches and wizards’ (2018:200).

As a discipline that has long engaged with such ‘magical’—and often politically and scientifically  
15 marginalized—figures, socio-cultural anthropology can bring a lot to this conversation. But more than just filling gaps in conservationists’ knowledge, anthropological insights can push conservation to reframe some basic assumptions about ‘culture’, ‘conservation’, and the relationship between them.

20 First, ‘culture’ is not only or predominantly the sum of its values. Values represent ideal models, but they cannot fully capture the material, economic, political and social realities—and inconsistencies—of people’s lives. Second, cultures are not homogenous, discrete, and unchanging, but heterogeneous, porous, and always evolving—often through interaction with other parties and cultural forms, from the state to Christianity to Western science. Moreover, cultural values and  
25 practices are not uniformly accepted or followed: they can also be contested, reworked, or rejected.

But conservation isn’t static, bounded, or homogeneous either. As anthropologists have shown, conservation ideals and policies are inevitably transformed, taken apart, and appropriated in specific contexts. Global conservation discourses and policies are often co-opted and reformulated by  
30 national or regional governments (Hathaway 2013), reimagined by local elites (Shah 2010) or scientists (Lowe 2006), and domesticated by local systems of exchange and reciprocity (e.g. West 2006).

It is thus vital to acknowledge that *both* culture and conservation are dynamic, shifting entities that  
35 produce new, sometimes unexpected, values, relations, and outcomes through their interaction.  
Conservation interventions can, for example, feed into socio-political tensions and inequalities  
(Anderson and Berglund 2003) and forge new regimes of governance, evaluation, and rights to life  
and death (Bocci 2018; Duffy 2014). They can also generate new conceptual imaginaries  
(Brightman 2012), values (Kockelman 2016), and alliances (Conklin and Graham 1995).

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It is at this third, conceptual level that conservation interventions have the greatest potential to enact  
profound, long-term change by creating new, culturally relevant possibilities for thought and action.  
For this to work, however, it is not enough to simply incorporate cultural values into conservation.  
Rather, we must also consider how *conservation* values, strategies, and priorities can be  
45 incorporated into and remoulded to fit particular socio-cultural contexts. The people with whom  
conservationists work on the ground are not blank slates that simply need education or  
incentivization. Their lives and decisions are shaped by multiple social, cultural, political and  
economic factors, of which conservation is only one. The question we thus need to ask is not only  
what role culture (qua values) can play in conservation, but what role conservation can play in the  
50 cultures it encounters.

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