The Politics of Visibility in Community-based Conservation: Insights from a Village Forest in West Kalimantan, Indonesia

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Abstract

Conservation organisations play a key role in portraying rural people and places to external audiences, driven by sectoral, political, and technological developments. While aiming to improve social and ecological outcomes, these policies and practices have been criticised for oversimplifying local realities to make them legible, ultimately exacerbating social inequality. However, critiques of legibility often focus on how conservation represents places to outsiders, neglecting the local power dynamics entangled with these representations. This paper shows how conservationist representations are co-produced by and, to varying extents, become visible to local communities. Through ethnographic engagement with the Manjau Village Forest in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, I elaborate on a political understanding of visibility. The politics of visibility is not just an imposition but the product of collaboration and contestation between local and external actors. As such, critiques of visibility can help illustrate the ambivalent relationships that exist between conservation and local communities, clarifying the micro-political risks and opportunities associated with community-based conservation.

Keywords: Borneo, social forestry, REDD+, invisibility, community forestry, anthropology of conservation

INTRODUCTION

The Village Forest is one of the answers
One hope, even if just a dream[i]
Manjau, a sub-village or hamlet of Laman Satong village in West Kalimantan, is well known among Indonesian conservationists. NGO and media reports portray Manjau as a beacon of hope in times of environmental crisis (Fachrizal 2015; Perry 2016; Kusters 2019, 2021). Manjau's location, uniquely close to the coast for a settlement of Indigenous Dayak people, conveniently accessible from the district capital Ketapang, and next to Gunung Palung National Park, has enabled a proliferation of conservation and development schemes (cf. Collins and Alloy 2004). Within the borders of the hamlet are a Village Forest, areas of High Conservation Value within an oil palm plantation, and part of a National Park, which attract recurring projects of ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, non-timber forest product enterprises, reforestation, sustainable landscape planning, and a carbon offset scheme known as REDD+ (Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), supported by a variety of NGOs, government agencies, private corporations, and other stakeholders. The respected environmental activist and poet Yohanes Terang contributed significantly to the regional fame of Manjau. Yohanes served as village head for 20 years, became a key advocate for the Village Forest, and continued to live and work in Manjau until his untimely death in 2020 (Terang 2015; Meijaard 2020).

Despite this status as a flagship conservation site, conservationists I interviewed in West Kalimantan between 2017 and 2020 expressed concerns. These professionals, many

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of whom had visited or worked in Manjau, said conservation wasn't going as smoothly as it appeared to. There were concerns that the inhabitants of Manjau treated conservation projects as recurring aid handouts and lacked the commitment necessary to achieve lasting impacts. Some suggested that most of the benefits were being captured by village elites. One conservationist speculated that the local community was confused due to the different methods introduced by the different conservation organisations.

I cite these concerns to pick up on the broader theoretical question that they raise. As these conservationists suggested, if there was a disconnect between conservationist representations and actual social dynamics in Manjau, then how do these two realms interact, and what does sustain this incongruity?

To answer this question, I integrate two fields of social science on conservation. The first critiques conservation discourse, showing how conservation creates simplified representations to make complex, culturally diverse realities legible to a broad audience. Consequently, the contents of these representations are in many ways disconnected from the realities they represent, even as they enable external interventions into them (Li 2007; Carrier and West 2009; Büscher 2021). Additionally, the sector creates financial incentives for organisations to produce success narratives (Sayer and Wells 2004; Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2017; Milne 2022).

While powerfully explaining the disconnect between representation and social reality, these critiques often overlook how local residents engage with conservationist representations. This oversight is especially unsatisfying when analysing projects where local residents play a key role. Therefore, as a second starting point, I turn to anthropological studies on relations between local communities and conservation. These relations range from communities completely rejecting or being excluded from conservation efforts to communities fully embracing and leading conservation efforts. In many cases, however, an ambivalent relationship exists, in which people cultivate their relations with visiting conservationists in ways that are simultaneously strategic, personal, and prone to disappointment (West 2006; Hathaway 2013; Oakley 2020; Toomey 2020; Chua et al. 2021).

Integrating the latter, anthropological appreciation of ambivalent local community-conservation relations into the former critique of conservationist discourse, enables a critique of visibility that better captures the ground-level power dynamics of community-based conservation. By analysing micro-political acts of collaboration, contestation, and negotiation, the research article shows how conservationist representations are entangled with social context. Visibility, I will argue, is not just an imposition but an actively managed aspect of relationships between local and external actors.

While this research article comes out of Ph.D. research involving 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesian Borneo between 2018 and 2020, it reports primarily on three research visits to Manjau in 2020, adding up to four months of fieldwork, combined with literature review in the form of analysis of project reports, media outputs, and social science publications. Fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews with key informants and participant observation in everyday activities such as weddings and Village Forest patrols. All citations from residents of Manjau in this research article originate from this fieldwork in 2020. While it has been necessary to name Manjau to properly reference the various reports and papers that formed part of the regime of visibility, all persons (except Yohanes) have been anonymised.

The following section starts with a theoretical discussion on the politics of visibility in conservation and advances an associated critique of visibility. Section 'Making the Manjau Village Forest' sketches the environmental history of Manjau leading up to the establishment of the Village Forest, exemplifying the politics of visibility in conservation and its shortcomings. Moving beyond critiques of legibility, the subsequent sections take a closer look at how local community members see the Village Forest as well as what they make visible. The conclusion draws theoretical as well as practical implications for community-based conservation.

THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

The shift from legibility to visibility

Conservation institutions play a crucial role in portraying rural places to distant audiences, including NGO headquarters, donors, governments, and the wider public, who often lack direct knowledge of these areas (West 2006; Wahlén 2014; Igoe 2021). These representations serve to inform conservation policies, regulations, and strategies; monitor the effects of conservation; and increase awareness about and support for conservation. However, these portrayals are not uncontroversial. Following the adoption of Scott's (1998) concept "legibility" by some conservation social scientists (Brosius and Hitchner 2010; Igoe 2021; Milne 2022; Fletcher 2023), I use the term 'critique of legibility' to refer to a common concern that conservation misrepresents rural spaces (Li 2002; West and Brockington 2006). Echoing Scott's (1998) argument that many large, state-led development projects have failed because they relied on processes of discursive and material simplification, the critique of legibility contends that conservationist representations often involve "the erasure or denial of local realities" (Milne 2022: 79), as they are made to fit the categories, needs, and expectations of outside actors.

These systematic simplifications and omissions have adverse consequences for both people and nature. One prominent example is the false portrayal of rural areas as spaces of wilderness, devoid of human presence or influence, which has justified coercive conservation practices (Neumann 2002). Similarly, Massé (2019) shows how campaigns to raise funds and public support for rhino conservation focus on the violence committed by poachers. By failing to illuminate the socio-economic contexts that produce poaching and poaching-related violence, he argues, these representations divert resources away from community-based approaches trying to address the root causes of poaching towards militarised responses that exacerbate cycles of violence (Massé

2019). Others have associated legibility with the proliferation of illegal logging (Milne 2022), forced evictions (Brockington and Igoe 2006), and the consolidation of state power over resource-rich areas (Fletcher 2023). By showing how discursive erasures disempower local actors, the critique of legibility raises significant challenges to both the truth claims and the legitimacy of mainstream conservation.

To address these concerns, there have been attempts to make conservation more attentive to the complexity and variation of socio-ecological systems (Bennett and Roth 2019). In a conceptual essay on the links between biodiversity and cultural diversity, Brosius and Hitchner characterise the shift required to avoid adverse simplification and homogenisation as "a new politics of knowledge that takes us from a politics of legibility (Scott 1998) to a politics of visibility", in which visibility refers to "a whole set of potential approaches, both conceptual and practical, aimed at making multiple perspectives, multiple conceptions and multiple claims commensurable or at least able to converse across difference" (Brosius and Hitchner 2010: 155). This politics of visibility is increasingly pursued through various established and emerging approaches to just conservation (Dawson et al. 2024), including attempts to work with informal institutions (Baker et al. 2018) and calls for critical yet constructive engagement by the social sciences (Chua et al. 2020). These approaches facilitate local leadership in conservation by making visible the perspectives and claims of local communities.

A critique of visibility

Unfortunately, efforts ostensibly aimed at empowering and making local communities visible may, in effect, continue, exacerbate, and legitimise longstanding patterns of misrepresentation and injustice (cf. Fletcher 2023). Section 'Social forestry and REDD+' highlights how Indonesia's social forestry policy remains susceptible to the critique of legibility, but this is not a unique case. Community-centred approaches to conservation have long faced accusations of imposing oversimplified models of nature (Goldman 2003), community (Agrawal and Gibson 1999), and cultural practice (Osterhoudt 2018) on more complex realities.

In this research article, however, I argue that the critique of legibility has two limitations when applied to contemporary conservation's politics of visibility. First, in many instances it is no longer accurate to say that conservation simplifies and homogenises reality. Classical tools of legibility could draw on very limited data and instead worked with uniform grids or models (Scott 1998) while remaining "wilfully blind" about actual local realities (Bovensiepen 2020: 298). However, technological innovations in data collection, such as satellite remote sensing, bioacoustics, camera trapping, and drones, as well as increasing capacity for data storage, transfer, and analysis, are transforming how conservation scientists and practitioners understand, represent, and engage with socio-ecological systems (Pritchard et al. 2022). Additionally, the conservation social sciences are increasingly mobilised to make social complexities visible (Miller et al. 2023). In contrast to legibility, the politics of visibility draws on empirical and intricate ways of perceiving reality, whether in the sense of visual imagery, audio fragments, social science data, or otherwise.

The second limitation of the critique of legibility is its focus on the perspective of a singular external actor. As Tania Li (2005: 384–385) has argued, classic critiques of state legibility "suggest an image of the state as a unified source of intention […] capable of devising coherent policies and plans". This analytical separation between the state as a locus of power and society as existing "outside power" is useful when critiquing centrally-planned interventions but risks essentialising state power and disregarding the practices and positionings through which the state is manifested (Li 2005: 385). Similarly, I suggest that the critique of legibility in conservation sets up a dichotomy between an external NGO/government that sees and acts and a rural place that is being seen and acted upon. This may be useful to keep big, international NGOs and centralised governments accountable. However, contemporary conservation is increasingly a diffuse field of heterogeneous groups of actors, not least as a result of an increasing number of progressive policies and practices (Montgomery et al. 2024), such that focusing on just one outsider perspective is insufficient.

Therefore, I argue, the politics of visibility needs to be critiqued on its own terms, by what I call a critique of visibility. Emerging studies on the politics of data in conservation are starting to do so by showing that visual and other data, even if increasingly complex and precise, come with distortions and biases and may have emancipatory as well as unjust effects (Pritchard et al. 2022; Brockhaus et al. 2024). However, these emerging insights still focus on what is visible to external conservation actors such as scientists, conservation practitioners, and policymakers. I take inspiration from Brighenti's theorisation of "visibility as a category for the social sciences" (Brighenti 2007: 323) to examine relations of visibility between differently positioned actors. A relational understanding of visibility leads us to ask: visible to whom? To show how we can start taking a broader array of relationships into account, I ethnographically investigate what is visible to different inhabitants of Manjau with varying levels of proximity to conservation.

Moreover, an ethnographic critique of visibility also provides insights into the micro-politics of visibility. Visibility and invisibility are not just imposed on local communities but the products of attempts by different local and external actors to manage their relationships. A key starting point for the analysis of micro-politics is that "power does not rest univocally either with visibility or with invisibility" (Brighenti 2007: 340). Instead, power lies in controlling who sees what. As we shall see, the conservationists' blind spots surrounding the Manjau Village Forest were not just an expression of marginalisation and institutional defects but also the products of wilful blindness (Kirsch and Dilley 2017) and selective concealment (Mathews 2008; Scott 2009; Rubis and Theriault 2019) as political strategies for managing relationships between conservation practitioners and (other) community members.

Unlike the critique of legibility, a critique of visibility aims not at dispelling myths or revealing hidden truths but at analysing the work of translation, negotiation and contestation through which things are made visible or invisible to different people. With that in mind, let's return to Manjau.

MAKING THE MANJAU VILLAGE FOREST

From refuge to resettlement

The making of the Manjau Village Forest reflects the shift from a politics of legibility to a politics of visibility sketched above. The first known inhabitants of Manjau valued it as a place of refuge. According to village elders, their ancestors were Javanese migrants who had settled on the coast of Kalimantan in the fourteenth century during the Majapahit empire. They subsequently fled into the hills surrounding Manjau to escape harassment by Malay Sultanates and sea pirates (*bajak laut*). The peat swamps surrounding these hills provided natural protection since they were difficult to traverse. Many of those former settlements are now preserved as areas of High Conservation Value within the oil palm plantation. There are remnants of longhouses, graveyards, and orchards till date.

In the early 1980s, this isolation ended, as the village was made legible to outsiders. The Ketapang Diocese and the NGO Catholic Relief Services collaborated to resettle the people from their scattered settlements in the hills to standardised housing along a single road in the valley (cf. Collins and Alloy 2004). At the same time, Dayak families from Sanggau, a different regency in West Kalimantan, were invited to move to Manjau and teach the locals how to live Catholic lives and engage in permanent agriculture.

This resettlement of people into a standardised village model took place in the context of the centralisation of forest control. Using forest maps which omitted most human settlements and local practices of forest management, the Indonesian government has since the late 1960s claimed large areas as State Forest and handed out the rights to manage and extract profits from these lands to transnational corporations (Peluso 1995). This pattern of patronage consolidated Indonesian President Suharto's "New Order" rule (1966-1998), routinely violated customary land claims and facilitated rapid deforestation (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001; Lindayati 2002; Poffenberger 2006). These forest maps could thus be described as "state maps of legibility", which "would enable much of the reality that they depicted to be remade" (Scott 1998: 3).

In Manjau, like elsewhere in Indonesia, this has triggered a series of conflicts. Residents remembered how they staged protests involving a stand-off with the national army to successfully stop a logging company from exploiting what they considered to be their customary forests. In the 2000s, an oil palm company divided the community by offering local employment and even monetary compensation for those with customary land claims. Eventually, those in favour of the company won, largely because timber stocks had been rapidly declining, and the community, who relied on (illegal) logging, needed alternative livelihoods (Haryono et al. 2020). In a familiar pattern (Li and Semedi 2021), the plantation has homogenised the landscape, turning gardens and natural forests into monocultures. Community members who had been against the plantation subsequently teamed up with conservation NGOs to "protect what remains" (Terang 2015; cf. Cubanimita 2018).

Social forestry and REDD+

This coalition between conservation NGOs and community members seized on the broader shift to a politics of visibility in conservation, as manifested in the Indonesian government's social forestry policy and an international mechanism for financing sustainable tropical forestry called REDD+. Both social forestry and REDD+ aimed to make local forest management practices visible in order to protect them.

Social forestry has been discussed as a sustainable and community-friendly alternative to industrial logging since the 1970s, but it really took off after the national political reforms (*Reformasi*) of 1998 and the growing activity of national and global social justice movements (Moeliono et al. 2017). President Joko Widodo's government has further boosted social forestry outside Java as part of his policy to develop Indonesia from the margins. His National Development Plan (RPJMN) for 2015–2019 set the ambitious target of increasing the area under a social forestry permit from 500,000 ha in 2014 to 12.7 million ha in 2019. The same target was reiterated with a new deadline of 2024 under the 2020-2024 RPJMN (Maryudi et al. 2022: 143).

REDD+ is intended for countries and companies to offset their carbon emissions by financing sustainable forestry in tropical countries (Pistorius 2012). This simple idea turned out to be complex in implementation, raising concerns about measurement, reporting, leakage, participation, distribution of benefits, perverse incentives, and more (Clements 2010; Angelsen et al. 2012; Visseren-Hamakers et al. 2012). To alleviate such concerns, conservation projects applying for REDD+ funding usually get an external certification, which involves meticulously documenting and quantifying forest carbon stocks (Leach and Scoones 2013).

To qualify for these opportunities for legal recognition and international funding, Manjau had to be made visible. First, borders were drawn around and inside the Village Forest, dividing it into two zones. The protection zone consisted of 654 ha of intact secondary forests. The rehabilitation zone consisted of lands in more intensive agricultural use. Poles with yellow stripes marked the outer boundary, poles with red stripes marked the protection zone (Plan Vivo 2015: 18). Second, carbon stocks and biodiversity were estimated based on a forest survey. Reports highlighted the environmental services of the Village Forest for the local community (Plan Vivo 2015: 19–20). Detailed monitoring plans were developed, involving community patrols and the regular analysis of satellite imagery. Third, the interests of the local residents were shown to be aligned with conservation. A community-led "Village Forest Management Body" (Lembaga

Desa Pengelolaan Hutan Desa, LDPHD[ii]) was set up, the village government issued regulations about the Village Forest, and the customary leadership signed a "customary village forest regulation" (Plan Vivo 2015: 18). Social scientific research and episodes from local history were invoked as evidence that "the community is strongly in favour" (Plan Vivo 2015: 4, 17).[iii] By 2011, the Manjau Village Forest received an official license from the Ministry of Forestry to manage a forest area of 1,040 ha, which would become the first project in the province to obtain international funding through REDD+.

Despite this success story, the Manjau Village Forest has been subject to criticism, echoing broader critiques of social forestry and REDD+. For many analysts of Indonesian social forestry, a major objection is that it imposes many responsibilities but provides only management rights for local communities (Fisher et al. 2018; Yuliani et al. 2023). Most importantly, social forestry does not acknowledge local ownership but reinforces state control, based on the constitutional notion that Indonesia's natural resources are controlled by the state for the benefit of the nation (Resosudarmo et al. 2019). This, critics say, undermines the goal of empowering local communities, as lands locally seen as privately or communally owned and managed, must be acknowledged and managed as State Forest land (Sahide et al. 2016; Siscawati et al. 2017; Maryudi et al. 2022). Similarly, REDD+ is criticised for simplifying local realities in ways that obscure local land claims and enable 'green grabs' by the state or other powerful actors (Astuti and McGregor 2017; Howson 2018; Fischer et al. 2019; Setyowati 2020). Relatedly, REDD+ is criticised for depoliticising forest governance, silencing questions about rights (Myers et al. 2018; Milne et al. 2019) and the political-economic drivers of deforestation (Moeliono et al. 2020).

This critique of legibility was relevant to Manjau, as shown by previous studies and confirmed by my observations (Siregar and Surachman 2015; Sundjaya 2015; Cubanimita 2018). For one, the boundaries between individual land claims remained invisible on Village Forest maps. These, as the NGO workers explained to me, were too costly and complicated to figure out. Moreover, the Village Forest was run by a particular faction consisting primarily of descendants of local transmigrants from Sanggau. Other residents of Manjau had many quibbles about how the Village Forest was managed, but village meetings did not capture these debates and disagreements. Even though the Village Forest aimed to represent and protect local communities, in practice, it still simplified local realities, made them conform to outside categories, and marginalised vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, the rest of the research article shows there was more at play by shifting attention to what is visible to residents of Manjau, and how they manage their relations of visibility.

"WHAT IS IT, THE VILLAGE FOREST?"

Frenkie's Cassava plantation

In early 2020, Niko, a member of the LDPHD, told me that more than 10 ha of Village Forest had been cleared. An "investor" from the city had bought the land with the help of a "right hand" in the village, an immigrant from East Timor. Much of the land in the village forest is privately owned, Niko clarified, and it is allowed to buy and sell that land, so long as nobody cuts trees. However, the investor planned to plant a type of Cassava (known locally as 'ubi racun' ('Poison Cassava', or Tree Cassava (*Manihot glaziovi*i). A new factory had recently opened nearby and bought large quantities of *ubi racun*. Many villagers were experimenting with this unfamiliar crop, which was locally deemed unsuitable for human consumption. After the community patrol encountered and halted the land clearing for the plantation, Niko was in-charge of negotiating with the Timorese man about how to reforest the plot. Ubi racun was out of the question, but the LDPHD could offer seedlings for productive tree crops such as Durian (*Durio zibethinus*) or Petai Beans (*Parkia speciosa*).

Frenkie told me his version when we first met at a shop (*warung*) selling wild meat and alcoholic beverages. With the backing of a Chinese investor, Frenkie had bought 68 ha of land from several different people in the village for a total of over 300 million IDR (roughly 20,000 USD; see Figure 1). All transactions had been documented with a letter of purchase (*surat jual-beli*). Unfortunately, it turned out that some of the land was located within the boundaries of the Village Forest. Frenkie did not know that something was amiss until his application for a land certificate was rejected. Then, in the middle of clearing the land with expensive heavy machinery, people from the district government came to stop him.

Despite this, and to my surprise, Frenkie claimed to support the Village Forest. "In the future, let there not be other people that destroy the forest; it is enough that I have destroyed it," he said. He recognised the benefits of the Village Forest for people, for example, as a source of clean water: "If everybody only thinks about making instant money, there will be nothing left for our children." With apparent pride and conviction, he said he was now engaging in reforestation, planting Durian, Jengkol (*Archidendron pauciflorum*), mango, and many other fruit trees.

Nevertheless, the investor Frenkie collaborated with had lost a lot of money on buying the land and renting heavy

Figure 1
One of the plots of land Frenkie bought to cultivate Tree Cassava. This plot is located in the middle of the corporate oil palm plantation. The Manjau Village Forest is visible in the background. Note: Photo by the author, 2020

machinery to clear it. Had Frenkie known about the Village Forest, he would not have bought that land. Frenkie had asked the LDPHD for compensation but did not get it. He had confronted the man who had sold him the land, but the seller claimed also not to have known about the Village Forest. This was not an easy claim to dismiss since professions of confusion and ignorance about the Village Forest were widespread in Manjau. Frenkie's Cassava plantation, therefore, points at a bigger problem: for many villagers, the Village Forest rules and boundaries were opaque, adding uncertainty to land use decisions and devaluing existing land claims.

Devaluing land rights and "planting carbon"

When asked about the Village Forest, most residents claimed ignorance. Many had not been to the community meetings about the Village Forest because they did not know about the meetings, did not feel invited, or thought these meetings were senseless. When I asked Mateus, one of Manjau's customary leaders, he lowered his voice: "Ah, the Village Forest, that's the thing, I haven't learned it yet [*belum hafal*], why don't you ask the former Village Head?" When I insisted that I was interested in his perspective, he apologised: "Sorry. It exists, indeed. But I don't know the manner and techniques of operation."

Mr Enjol, a neighbourhood head, highlighted more specific points of confusion:

> I sometimes also, how to say, don't get it yet. Where is it located, where are the markers, who manages it, where does the money come from, where does it go, and how much? I've only just become the Neighbourhood Head, stepping in for my brother-in-law, the former Neighbourhood Head. I've asked the Village government for clarification, but can't quite grasp it. What is it, the Village Forest? And who is [the NGO]? And does [the Village Forest] belong to the Village or [the Ministry of] Forestry?

As Frenkie's example showed, this opacity could become problematic. One source of discontent was the muddying of land rights, which reduced the benefits of land ownership for villagers. While the Village Forest officially acknowledged local ownership, it restricted what customary owners could do: you could buy and sell the land not plant Tree Cassava. Meanwhile, outsiders who did not own the land seemed to profit.

An employee of the mining company argued that this was unfair. All his land lay within the Village Forest boundaries, and he had planted ironwood and Durian trees, "but when they are large, I will not be able to cut them down because it is Village Forest." Once, after clearing a plot for swidden rice, he was summoned by the Village Head. But rather than acquiescing, the miner complained: "People are claiming our land, while all we want to do is to cultivate our own land".

Another topic of contention was carbon finance (cf. Miles 2021). The news that carbon was valuable had been announced in Village Meetings and circulated widely in conversations about the Village Forest. While many people had heard about carbon, most couldn't say what it was. For example, Mr Enjol, the neighbourhood head, sometimes received complaints from landowners that the community patrols were planting things on their land. Enjol knew that this had something to do with selling "carbon", but he couldn't explain it: "Until now, I don't understand it. What it is that they plant in there?"

This mystery was not unique to carbon or inherently problematic. When there was a sudden demand for Tree Cassava, people like Frenkie started cultivating it without understanding its use. Similarly, there was a general willingness to accept and embrace the news that now, apparently, the world wanted to pay for something called "karbon". Indeed, rural Bornean communities have often been observed to adapt remarkably quickly to new international trade opportunities (Dove 2011; Gönner 2011).

More problematic was the mystery of where the money went. The customary leaders were disappointed because they had signed a customary regulation but had not received any money. As Mr Mamet, a former Neighbourhood Head, said: "The money isn't clear. The carbon is sold for 150 million IDR, but it doesn't arrive. We don't know how it is managed." Another villager with land in the Village Forest voiced a suspicion that the rights and benefits of carbon forestry were being unfairly distributed:

> The forest is for conservation, the carbon there is still intact. But those who eat the money are the managers, the landowners don't get anything. Meanwhile, you can't open swiddens there anymore. You can't even cut trees that you have planted there yourself.

There was potential for these tensions to run high. One man said he would not accept the Village Forest even if people came to his house to give him money. He said he had never agreed to give away his land, which he had bought from or been gifted by other villagers. He stated militantly: "It is easy for them to talk, to say that it is Village Forest, with their government regulations, but if they come to me, I will apply the jungle laws [*hukum rimba*], I will draw my long knife [*parang panjang*]."

To an extent, these complaints reaffirm the critique of legibility. The simplistic image of a homogenous community that supported and benefited from the Village Forest did not sufficiently take account of local complexities such as individual land ownership within the Village Forest. Moreover, LDPHD members attributed local complaints to ignorance. The difficulty was, Niko reflected, that many community members "do not yet understand" (*belum paham*). This depoliticised challenges to the legitimacy of the Village Forest, allowing the LDPHD to design technical interventions to address the issue (cf. Li 2007), such as creating more information meetings, putting up signs and markers in the forest, and providing extra guidance and assistance to people who struggled to understand.

To most residents of Manjau, however, legibility was of less concern than the asymmetries of visibility. While the boundaries and rules of the Village Forest were simplistic, the bigger problem was that these boundaries were invisible to most community members. Similarly, the practices of

calculating carbon stocks represented value to outsiders but remained obscure to villagers (cf. Miles 2021). The village meetings held in the process of setting up the village forest created evidence of participation to satisfy project requirements but did not effectively clarify the project to local residents (Cubanimita 2018). As Bovensiepen noted in a very different context, presentations of the technical details of a project can have "the effect of obscuring rather than illuminating the reality of the project" (Bovensiepen 2020: 500).

In other words, residents of Manjau were not just subjected to an outside gaze, but their own ability to see or not see things also mattered. Moreover, as the next section shows, residents actively and strategically shaped relations of visibility.

MANAGING VISIBILITY

"Forest destruction"

> In the afternoon, we reached a modest clearing on the hillside, where a large tree had been felled. The logging process unfolded before us. The bottom four metres of tree trunk lay in two halves, sawn lengthwise. Wood shavings covered the forest floor. Planks were scattered along a towpath, waiting to be slid, thrown, and carried to the concrete road at the bottom of the hill, where a neat pile was forming. Only the logger, Efendi, was missing.
> His absence was no surprise. Efendi had texted the head of the LDPHD the night before to ask about the rumours that law enforcement was coming for him. Nobody in our 'joint patrol', consisting of the Village Forest patrol team, other members of the LDPHD, NGO staff, rangers from the neighbouring National Park, officers of the regional Forest Management Unit (FMU), and me, really expected or hoped to see Efendi. (summarised fieldnotes, July 29, 2020)

Although the joint patrol, including government law enforcement personnel, was supposed to impress fellow villagers, the patrol never meant to arrest Efendi. In that morning's briefing session, the government officials explained the importance of taking a 'soft' approach to offenders while obtaining hard evidence of these efforts, which could be shown to funders and bureaucrats evaluating the Village Forest. In line with this imperative, the joint patrol took pictures of government officers standing before the logging site. They repainted the borders of the Village Forest on trees and placed red warning signs: "*REMINDER/BASED ON THE MINISTER OF FORESTRY'S DECREE/SK 493/MENLHK-II/2011/ MANJAU VILLAGE FOREST/LAMAN SATONG VILLAGE/ AREA SIZE 1.070 HA/FORBIDDEN TO FELL TREES/TO BURN THE VILLAGE FOREST/TO DESTROY THE VILLAGE FOREST/TO HUNT WILDLIFE.*" The patrol team was further tasked with getting Efendi to sign a letter in which he promised not to break the rules again.

Nevertheless, Efendi's main offence was not cutting a tree but failing to seek prior permission. Logging for local use was officially tolerated in the Village Forest, provided the total amount did not exceed a yearly limit of 50 cu. m (Plan Vivo 2015: 29–30). Villagers practically never followed the required procedures, probably because the procedures were unclear or seen as complex. When the Village Patrol encountered an undocumented logging operation, they had to report it as "forest destruction". This failure of Efendi to properly make himself visible could lead to the government revoking the Manjau Village Forest permit or funders withholding funds. To stave off this danger, the actions of the community forest patrol described above were aimed at producing visual evidence of effective, community-based management of the protected area.

"I dropped out; it's too much talking."

Another aspect of managing visibility was the production of invisibility. For one, not all community members wanted the village forest to be visible to them. LDPHD members suspected that fellow villagers "didn't want to know" (*tidak mau tahu*) and wondered whether people forgot (*lupa*) or "intentionally forgot" (*melupakan*) the rules. This suspicion hints at the fact that invisibility and ignorance can serve social and political functions. Chua (2009: 344) has described how ignorance was useful for young Bidayuhs in Sarawak as a "shield" or "defence" against the dangers and obligations that older animistic beliefs attributed to knowledge. In a slight twist, ignorance was helpful for older Dayak residents of Manjau to avoid open confrontation with new restrictions imposed by the Village Forest.

While staying (or appearing) ignorant was one way of avoiding conflict, another was to hide one's critiques from those settings where they would become visible in a problematic way. One man claimed that when the Village Forest was first discussed in consultation meetings, he didn't "ask too many questions" because he did not want to signal distrust of the leaders. Although he didn't understand and would eventually become thoroughly disgruntled with the Village Forest, at the time, he reasoned that the leaders might know better. For Pak Seno, one of the customary leaders, not expressing doubts or criticism was a strategy for securing potential future benefits:

> They said that if we protected the forest, there would be money from carbon. Every moment there would be [mention of the] money in the original story. For example, every month you don't work, but suddenly the money is there. That is why, in the beginning, we allowed it.

Besides staying silent, villagers hid their discontent by disengaging. Neighbourhood Heads and Customary Leaders who disagreed with the rules refused to enforce them. Pak Mamet explained that because most people did not feel like they benefited from the Village Forest, he was reluctant to reprimand landowners, his friends, for opening a swidden or cutting down a tree. He also indicated that now, often, people felt "lazy" and did not want to join the meetings anymore. Pak Seno was one of those people: "After many meetings, eventually I stopped attending because there is little benefit.

And it's unclear where the 100 or 200 million IDR go. So eventually I don't believe in it anymore, I dropped out, it's too much talking."

Finally, in informal settings, many people softened their critiques by simultaneously claiming ignorance. When asked about the Village Forest, many started by saying that they did not really understand but then moved on quickly to express frustration with this or that aspect of the Village Forest. Similarly, when people asked me to explain the Village Forest, such questions were frequently followed by complaints. For example, one evening, I tried to steer a spontaneous roadside group discussion to the Village Forest. However, whereas questions on local history had elicited a steady stream of stories about the origins of the community, conversion to Christianity, and the development of oil palm plantations, now my interlocutors professed ignorance and turned the question back on me. "Actually, where is the Village Forest," a Malay man asked, "isn't it in the gardens of people"? When I explained there was some overlap, he immediately followed up: "That's the thing! [*itulah*!]," he exclaimed, before adding: "How can the Village Forest enter gardens? In gardens, it's not possible; the people need to work there, they need that land." Despite the pathos with which he delivered this critique, he had earlier admitted that he didn't understand everything, implying that he wanted to engage in discussion rather than conflict.

In sum, residents tended not to voice their critiques in ways that were too consequential. They didn't complain in formal meetings or organise demonstrations and rarely positioned themselves directly as opponents of the Village Forest. Rather, people expressed a desire for clarity over the rules and benefit-sharing arrangements. By regulating the visibility of their critiques, they helped cover up contradictions and complexities that posed potential challenges to the Village Forest.

CONCLUSION

The Manjau Village Forest exemplifies the politics of visibility in nature conservation making complex socio-ecological systems visible to external actors in order to protect them. However, as critics of social forestry and REDD+ have highlighted, these schemes often obscure essential parts of reality and potentially exacerbate existing injustices. While I share these concerns, I argue that they only capture part of what is going on because they remain focused on what outsiders see and make visible. As Terang made clear in the fragment of the poem that opened this research article, he and other community members also had hopes and dreams for the Village Forest, and these perceptions and aspirations mattered. Advancing a critique of visibility, I have shown the importance of understanding visibility as an outcome of efforts by both local and external actors to manage their relationships. Here, power lies not in visibility or invisibility per se but in controlling who sees what. In conclusion, I will draw two implications for both scholars and practitioners of conservation.

First, since visibility is relational rather than inherent, the question is not just whether something is visible but also to whom. While attention has hitherto focused on visibility for conservation institutions, it is equally, if not more, important to understand what local communities can and can not see. For scholars studying conservation, this requires not just critiquing international discourses of conservation in terms of how they inform high-level conservation strategy and decision-making, but also studying relations of visibility between a broader range of actors. Such insights could help practitioners make conservation institutions visible to local communities. This differs from educating people about conservation principles but fundamentally requires a commitment to transparency and intelligibility in their communication with local communities.

Second, beyond the question of who sees what, scholars and practitioners also need to consider the micro-politics of visibility. As Matthews (2008: 493) has argued in the context of Mexican state forestry, "[o]fficial knowledge proceeds not by imposition alone but by entanglement, mistranslation, and concealment". Similarly, in Indonesia, visibility is the product of collaboration and contestation between various local and external actors, each aiming to manage who sees what. To better understand the ambivalent relationships between local communities and conservation actors (West 2006; Cepek 2011; Hathaway 2013; Chua et al. 2021) and the far-reaching yet contingent ways in which these play out, we therefore need to pay critical attention to the intricate strategies local communities use to navigate the associated risks and opportunities. Acknowledging that more visibility is not always better (cf. Goldstein and Nost 2022) also requires scholars and practitioners to think critically and reflexively about the political implications of their own choices to shed light on some, and not other, aspects of reality (Pienkowski et al. 2023).

In ending this research article, therefore, I emphasise that, while the Manjau Village Forest isn't perfect, I have not meant to imply that it was illegitimate. Rather, I mean to align myself with those local leaders and community members who chose not to reveal their objections in ways that cause problems but instead discussed their objections in everyday conversations, including with visiting anthropologists such as myself, Cubanimita (2018) and Sundjaya et al. (2015). As I understand it, their and my critiques aim not to undermine community-based conservation but to improve it.

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Data Availability

The data on which this paper was based is not publicly accessible due to privacy restrictions.

NOTES

i   From "Menjaga yang Tersisa [Protecting what Remains]" (Terang 2015)—my own translation.

ii   The more common name for this type of institution is Village Forest Management Body (LPHD). In Manjau, however, community leaders wanted to emphasise that the forest was locally managed by including the term "Village" twice in the name.

iii Although the research alluded to was not published, Dr Tony Rudyansjah at Universitas Indonesia sent me an unfinished 16-page manuscript (Sundjaya 2015).

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