

Nature, Culture, Rights

Exploring Space for Indigenous Agency in Protected Area Discourses

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Abstract

There is considerable geographical overlap between areas set aside for nature conservation or protection and Indigenous peoples' lands, and the social, economic, and political consequences of protected areas have often been extensive for Indigenous peoples. Discourses of conservation converge with discourses of Indigenous peoples, and both carry a legacy of colonial constructs and relationships. With these overlaps as a point of departure, the purpose of this thesis is to explore how the discourses that govern nature conservation and protected areas shape the conditions for Indigenous peoples' influence and participation in the governance and management of protected areas on their lands. I pursue this aim by analyzing, and critically examining the consequences of, the construction of Indigenous subject positions and conditions for agency in discourses of nature conservation and protected areas. The empirical focus of the thesis lies with international discourses of protected areas and Indigenous peoples and on local and national discourses articulated in relation to two cases of protected areas in Sápmi. My analytical framework builds on postcolonial theory and discourse theory. I use *space for agency* as a concept to describe and analyze the effects of the discursive positionings and constructions that shape the ability or capacity of individuals or group to act or to be perceived as legitimate actors.

My results show two main articulations of Indigenous subject positions in protected area discourses, which enable and restrain the space for Indigenous agency in different ways. One articulation connects Indigenous peoples to conservation through the concept of traditional knowledge, thereby positioning Indigenous subjects mainly as holders of traditional knowledge and justifying Indigenous influence by its potential contribution to conservation objectives. The other articulation focuses on the rights pertaining to Indigenous peoples as *peoples*, including land rights and the right to self-determination. These articulations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they have potentially different consequences and indicate discursive tensions that can affect the space for Indigenous agency in relation to protected areas. Moreover, my results demonstrate the hegemony of discourses that takes conservation through area protection for granted and subordinates Indigenous land use to conservation objectives, structure Indigenous agency as "participation" in specific types of arrangement, and articulate Indigenous rights in relation to hegemonic constructions of sovereignty, self-determination, and rights. These hegemonic formations silence articulations that would challenge the authority of colonizing societies over Indigenous territories, suppress radical critique of the fundamental nature of arrangements for protected area governance and management, and subdue alternatives to discourses of contemporary liberal democracy and individual property rights.

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