Conservation as Economic Imperialism

Introduction
Protected areas (PAs) have historically been viewed as a desirable (and sometimes the only) way to engage in conservation of forests and biodiversity. In 2010, the World Database on Protected Areas recorded nationally designated PAs of 17 million km² (or 12.7%) of the world’s terrestrial area, excluding Antarctica (including inland waters) around the world. A higher proportion of total area of the ‘developing’ world (13.3%), is classified as PAs than the ‘developed’ region (11.6%), with the Latin American region offering the highest level of ‘protection’ (20.4%) (Bertzky et al. 2012).

Popular perception holds that PAs act as bulwark against over-extraction by capitalists as well as the local populace.

Since European colonialism, however, the colonised and residents of dominated states, on the one hand, have been fighting against capitalist over-extraction (although this is not to suggest that they have not been incorporated into a consumer society). On the other hand, they have been resisting the imposition of conservation. Forest conservation is viewed as yet another way to control nature and the labour of the dominated population. While conservation is desirable from an ecological perspective, the specific form and nature of conservation require attention because they can mask imperialist aspirations. Conservation under these circumstances would either provide a source of capital accumulation or safeguard imperialist interests, but lead to what David Harvey refers to as accumulation-by-dispossession (Harvey 2003). The incorporation of conservation into the imperialist project forms the basis of resistance against conservation by regulation as well as conservation through market forms. In the interests of brevity, the discussion will focus on the incorporation of forest conservation into imperialism.

Fortress conservation
Early colonialism was characterised by ecological imperialism (Crosby 1993) and highly intensive extraction of valuable minerals and biological matter (e.g. Clark and Foster 2009) to profit the colonisers. This effected a change in land use across vast swathes of forestland to agricultural and mining purposes. With increasing scarcity of raw materials affecting capitalist production, colonial governments adopted ‘scientific’ management of forests that dictated land use and land management practices. In the US, while scientific management was adopted with a view to stemming unbridled laissez faire capitalism in the interests of enhanced efficiency (Guha and Gadgil, 1989), scientific management in the colonies maintained its efficiency objective but, without a thriving capitalist sector, directed its ire toward the ‘natives’. Thus, indigenous (and in British India non-indigenous but local) populations, with their seemingly bewildering and overlapping usufruct rights and incomprehensible use of forest land, were viewed as anathema to advancing planned use and were often removed through the threat or actual use of violence. Thus, the dominant policy was to engage in fortress conservation and the forcible expropriation of the forest commons from its inhabitants.

For instance, the British in India enforced state monopoly by nationalising forests in the late 1800s. The main objective of the Indian Forest Act, 1865 and its subsequent amendment in 1878 was to establish PAs to secure a steady increase in timber production and silvicultural improvement. Forests were categorised according to their commercial value, and the degree to which local communities were excluded was determined accordingly. Images of severe scarcity, famine and environmental annihilation were invoked by colonial foresters to justify the severe social and political costs of expropriating the commons. Indian teak was used in building ships employed by the military in the Anglo-French wars in the early 19th century (ibid.). Also, timber extraction for railway sleepers, required to build an extensive rail network in India, exhausted large swathes of forests in the country. The rail network transported raw materials needed by capitalists and the British state especially during the two world wars. Forests were thus transformed into instruments of state power that allowed the imperialists to discipline the local populations, and at the same time incorporate nature into the capitalist project and aid in war efforts.

The actions of the imperial state were consistent with seeking to resolve the crisis of capitalism. The resolution was through a piece of legislation but enforcement was