



When conservation research goes awry: A reply to Mascia and Mills (2018)

In recent years, conservation scientists have embraced insights from social science. We welcome this “social science turn” in conservation as a promising path for engagements with, among others, social conflict and the politics of conservation.

In “When conservation goes viral: The diffusion of innovative biodiversity conservation policies and practices,” Mascia and Mills (2018) make a case for “diffusion of innovation theory” to understand how conservation interventions spread, drawing on evidence from Tanzania and the Pacific. Based on our research on Tanzanian CBNRM, we have two points of contention. First, conceptualizing the spread of CBNRM as the uptake of innovative policy through diffusion depoliticizes CBNRM and ignores existing social science scholarship. Second, the claim of “diffusion” builds on inflated statistics on CBNRM in Tanzania.

First, rather than eager “adoption” and seamless “diffusion,” CBNRM in Tanzania has spread through top-down, donor-financed implementation of technical and bureaucratically framed interventions. Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) and Joint Forest Management (JFM), for instance, were initially implemented through pilot projects and later through donor-funded targeted government efforts (Lund, Sungusia, Mabele, & Scheba, 2017). Often, implementation required massive donor financing over several years, due to local political resistance and a technical-bureaucratic framing (Scheba & Mustalahti, 2015). Similarly, research on Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) shows that they were implemented by State and NGO actors identifying areas and “sensitizing” villages to join, often through manipulation and inflated promises (Benjaminsen, Goldman, Minwary & Maganga, 2013; Green & Adams, 2014). Mascia and Mills’ conceptualization ignores these insights from social science. In doing so, the authors evacuate politics from CBNRM by misrepresenting top-down conservation interventions as innovations that can be freely adopted.

Second, Mascia and Mills’ story about Tanzanian CBNRM relies on inflated statistics. The steeply inclining graphs in Figure 1b in their article, indicating villages “adopting” CBFM and JFM include “villages with signed agreements and plans and those who are working towards this” (URT, 2012). Thus, rather than actual adoption, this includes villages

that may only have been introduced to the idea of CBFM. Data on villages having formalized CBFM and JFM show an increase of a mere 80 CBFM villages and 22 JFM villages in 6 years (Lund et al., 2017). Thus, actual implementation stalled and the graphs in Mascia and Mills’ Figure 1b reflect developments on paper only. In reality, CBFM and JFM implementation has suffered from severe resource constraints since donor attention shifted to REDD+ in the mid-2000s (Lund et al., 2017; Pailler, Naidoo, Burgess, Freeman, & Fisher, 2015). Similarly, WMA statistics also belie on-the-ground realities, as many WMAs are plagued by lack of investments and competing land claims (Bluwstein & Lund, 2018). With a few exceptions, WMAs are “in dis-array and terminal decline” (Williams, 2017) and the initial plans to expand from 16 pilots to 38 WMAs across Tanzania remain a mirage.

We object to the notion that the spread of Tanzanian CBNRM policies can be understood through their relative advantage in the eyes of village residents and their compatibility “with local values and norms” (Mascia and Mills, 2018 p. 6). Evidence clearly demonstrates that Tanzanian CBNRM are technical-bureaucratic interventions that cannot be freely “adopted,” but whose implementation, rather, follows international donor funding priorities and often relies on manipulation and inflated promises. Thus, Mascia and Mills’ apolitical demand-driven theory of “diffusion of innovation” misrepresents the reality of CBNRM.

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