

The Conservation-Extraction Conundrum: The commodification of nature across vertical boundaries

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Abstract:

A growing body of de-growth literature recognizes the futility of business as usual national economic strategies in the West based on growth measured by GDP (gross domestic product). Instead a path towards planned economic de-growth is suggested. Greater importance is given to both broad socio-ecological systems that can encompass the entire planet to local productive systems based on voluntary livelihood simplicity than to strict growth-based economic systems bounded by the nation state and the separation of the natural from the human. A number of policy recommendations have emerged, of which one is an emphasis on reconfiguring the hegemonic nature of private property regimes towards those of common property regimes. Logic suggests that productive foci in a society which adopts these measures would shift from one of an unquestioned growth imperative to one of sustainable resource management and ecological stewardship. Historical research, both theoretical and empirical, in political science, economics, and political ecology is leveraged to lend validity to the argument. On one hand, to suggest that capitalist based institutions of private property in land are a principal driver of ecological degradation is nothing new, yet on the other hand the de-growth literature begins to broach the difficult conversation of how property regimes might be re-evaluated, re-conceptualized, re-structured, and so on in Western societies. While this conversation is important, an observable lacuna is that little is considered on how such a move in the West might affect social relations of property in developing countries. Claims are made that de-growth in the West will open space for growth in developing countries allowing for a more equal income distribution at a global level, but few theorists are considering what this will look like on the ground. This paper contributes to this conversation by considering how property regimes and the conservation of biodiversity are currently articulated in Peru and how policies of de-growth in the West may affect conservation outcomes in this country considered as a hotspot for both biodiversity and mineral investment.

Since the advent of modern capitalism the creation of private property is recognized as the institutional basis for the growth imperative in capitalist economies. More recently, private property institutions designed to enable market exchange are increasingly promoted as mechanisms to solve biodiversity conservation problems. Logic suggests that growth in the biodiversity conservation sector follows and this approach has led to global successes in terms of area designated as protected and productive flows of capital, yet difficult questions arise as to their longevity in the context of mounting political and economic pressure which drives extractive activities. Resource extraction also relies on private property institutions to function and growth in this sector often eclipses growth in the conservation sector. Furthermore greater economic value is often attributed to mineral resources than those of biodiversity or flows of ecosystem services. Nevertheless, at one end of the spectrum of conservation practice is a triage based approach which allocates limited financial and human resources to best salvage the

remaining biological diversity and intact ecosystem functionality and at the other end is a complete partnership with the extractive economy whereby growth in the conservation sector benefits from growth in the extractive sector. Conservation based on institutions of private property and market exchange tends to fall towards the latter side of this spectrum.

In the context of de-growth in the West, how will recently emerged institutions of “private” conservation fare in regions that are rich in both mineral reserves and biodiversity? This paper speculatively explores this question through a nested case study of private conservation in the Cordillera Huayhuash of the Central Andes. The Huayhuash example is situated in the broader case of PC in the mineral rich and mega-diverse country of Peru where this novel approach to biodiversity conservation recently emerged in the context of neoliberal reform. Mixed theoretical and methodological approaches are used to analyze and problematize how conservation and extraction share private property as an institution to govern resource allocation and resource conservation simultaneously. The paper develops theoretical insights into the relationships between natural resource conservation and extraction within the scholarship on the commodification of nature. Findings show that the persuasive power that lies with the “knowledge” of nature articulate extraction and conservation through institutions of private property. Findings also show that preference for private property regimes not only exist in the extractive sector, but also within rural agricultural producers. These findings is relevant to practitioners and policy makers interested in private conservation on extractive landscapes, particularly where policies of de-growth are unlikely in the near future.

Keywords: private conservation, Peru, extraction, property institutions, de-growth