'The myth of integrating local knowledge': Living and ideological landscapes on Palawan Island, the Philippines

Dario Novellino[1]

University College London, UK

Abstract

The integration of Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives into landscape protection and management schemes has now become one of the key mainstream approaches in political ecology of conservation, often referred to as 'decolonizing conservation.' Within the regional context of Palawan (the Philippines), this article looks at the play of power and knowledge that is deeply embedded in current discourses aiming at 'integrating local knowledge' into landscape governance. More importantly, it argues that such an 'integration', often builds upon a series of misunderstandings which arise spontaneously – or are intentionally fostered – between community members and project planners, due to different cognitive structures, background knowledge, languages, events and attitudes. In framing my argument, I introduce the analytical notion of 'ideological' landscape' to refer to those contrasting views of nature/society relations, which are being negotiated and strategically deployed, if and when needed. The final contention here is that one should move away and beyond simplistic approaches based on the 'integration of local knowledge' and focus, instead, to the analysis of people's counterstrategies to hegemonic nature conservation discourses.

Key words: decolonizing conservation, 'ideological landscape', landscape approaches, local knowledge, conservation policies, critical habitat, Batak, Palawan, the Philippines

Résumé

L'intégration des connaissances et des perspectives autochtones dans les plans de protection et de gestion du paysage est devenue l'une des principales approches de l'écologie politique de la conservation, souvent appelée 'décolonisation de la conservation.' Dans le contexte régional de Palawan (Philippines), cet article examine les enjeux de pouvoir et de connaissances profondément ancrés dans les discours actuels visant à « intégrer les connaissances locales » dans la gouvernance du paysage. Plus important encore, il soutient qu'une telle 'intégration' s'appuie souvent sur une série de malentendus qui soulèvent spontanément – ou sont intentionnellement favorisés – entre les membres de la communauté et les planificateurs du projet, en raison de structures cognitives différentes, de connaissances de base, langues, événements et attitudes. En formulant mon argument, j'introduis la notion analytique de paysage 'idéologique' pour faire référence à ces points de vue contrastés sur les relations nature/société, qui sont négociés et déployés stratégiquement, au besoin. Le dernier argument est qu'il faut s'éloigner et dépasser les approches simplistes fondées sur 'l'intégration des connaissances locales' et se concentrer plutôt sur l'analyse des contre-stratégies des peuples aux discours hégémoniques sur la conservation de la nature.

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[1] Dr. Dario Novellino, Senior Research Fellow, UCL Anthropology, and Honorary Research Fellow, Centre for Biocultural Diversity (CBCD), School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, UK. Email: pastoralistsvoices.cbcdkent@gmail.com. Over the past 36 years, as an advocate for indigenous peoples' rights, Dario has sustained the struggle for self-determination and ancestral domain claims in Palawan (Philippines). For his outstanding contribution to the practice of commons governance he received the 2021 Elinor Ostrom Award. This research is based on fieldwork carried out while he was a Visiting Research Associate of the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) of the Ateneo de Manila, as well on successive field appraisals in 2014, 2015, 2018 and online interviews between 2019 and 2023. An initial version of this article was first presented at the online conference on 'Conservation and Anthropology' (25-29 October 2021) by the Royal Anthropological Institute. Invaluable support is acknowledged from the US based Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research (Laura W. R. & George N. Appell Research Grant on Oral Literature and Traditional Ecological Knowledge). Dario is thankful to Jevgeniy Bluwstein and Gretchen Walters for their constructive criticisms of this article.

Mots-clés: décoloniser la conservation, 'paysage idéologique', approches paysagères, connaissance locale, politiques de conservation, habitat essentiel, Batak, Palawan, les Philippines

Resumen

La integración de los conocimientos y perspectivas indígenas en los planes de protección y ordenamiento del paisaje se ha convertido en uno de los principales enfoques de la ecología política de la conservación, a menudo denominada 'descolonización de la conservación.' En el contexto regional de Palawan (Filipinas), este artículo analiza el juego de poder y conocimiento que está profundamente arraigado en los discursos actuales dirigidos a 'integrar el conocimiento local' en la gobernabilidad del paisaje. Más importante aún, argumenta que tal 'integración', a menudo se basa en una serie de malentendidos que surgen espontáneamente – o se fomentan intencionalmente – entre los miembros de la comunidad y los planificadores de proyectos, debido a las diferentes estructuras cognitivas, conocimientos previos, idiomas, eventos y actitudes. Al enmarcar mi argumento, introduzco la noción analítica del paisaje 'ideológico' para referirme a esas visiones contrastantes de las relaciones naturaleza/sociedad, que están siendo negociadas y desplegadas estratégicamente, cuando sea necesario. El argumento final, aquí, es que uno debe alejarse y, más allá de los enfoques simplistas basados en la 'integración del conocimiento local', centrarse, en cambio, en el análisis de las contraestrategias de la gente a los discursos hegemónicos de conservación de la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: Descolonizar la conservación, paisaje ideológico, enfoques de paisajes, conocimiento local, políticas de conservación, hábitat critico, Batak, Palawan, las Filipinas.

1. Introduction

There is now a wide global consensus amongst several environmental groups, CGIAR[2] partners and academicians on how biodiversity conservation can be best achieved if the livelihood, values, institutions – and even perceptions – of local indigenous populations are taken into due account. Implicit in this view, is the awareness that traditional knowledge and indigenous land management practices can provide important clues for addressing contemporary issues such as climate change, poverty and food security (Esmail *et al.*, 2023). Within this context, since the late nineties, so called 'landscape approaches to conservation' have arisen as the most popular and comprehensive tool for dealing concurrently with the needs to protect the environment, while respecting and acknowledging the practices and aspirations of local populations (Arts, 2017; Blomley & Walters, 2019; DeFries & Rosenzweig, 2010; Farina, 2000; Görg, 2007; Milder *et al.*, 2014; Noss, 1983; Sayer *et al.*, 2013; Sayer *et al.*, 2014; Selman, 2009; Velázquez *et al.*, 2009; Zanzanaini *et al.*, 2017). Overall, these approaches are said to have facilitated "the simultaneous framing of development and conservation goals" (Sayer *et al.*, 2013, p. 8352) while addressing "the priorities of people who live and work within, and ultimately shape" their landscapes (*ibid*, p. 8350). As a result, the integration/incorporation of indigenous knowledge and perspectives into conservation projects has now become the key mainstream approach in political ecology of conservation. This approach is widely recognized not only as a necessity, but as the *sine qua non* condition for countering 'top-down fortress-style conservation' (Büscher, 2016; Luoma, 2022; Trisos *et al*., 2021). However, as this article tries to demonstrate, there is still a tendency to underestimate the role of several factors, which might inhibit a genuine integration/incorporation of 'local knowledge'[3] into nature conservation and landscape management discourses.

A degree of doubt should then be maintained as to whether, to what extent and under which circumstances, the pursuit of people-centered approaches to environmental management and the consequent 'incorporation of local knowledge' into conservation projects/schemes does truly translate into tangible and beneficial actions for the communities on the ground.

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[2] CGIAR is a global partnership that unites international organizations engaged in research about food security. CGIAR research aims to reduce rural poverty, increase food security, improve human health and nutrition and sustainable management of natural resources.

[3] When I use the term 'local knowledge', I am not only referring to its most obvious meaning (e.g. empirical knowledge of plants, animals and of the environment, in general). I am also encompassing people's ideologies, moral values, norms of conduct and all the knowledge on which people rely in the course of socio-ecological adaptation.

Within the regional context of Palawan island[4] (the Philippines), this article aims at examining different landscape-related ideologies and discourses, as well as some of the underlying strategies deployed by government agencies and the proponents of 'landscape approaches' or 'ecosystem based conservation' seeking to achieve win–win outcomes in economic development and conservations goals (Walter & Hamilton, 2014) through the implementation of land categories and 'genuine' consultation procedures (cf. Arts *et al*., 2017; Clay, 2019; Zimmerer *et al*., 2004).

Implicit in this article is the suggestion that, in Palawan (Figure 1), both government agencies (e.g. the Department of Environment and Natural Resources – DENR, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development – PCSD, etc.) and conservation organizations tend to share a colonial approach through which 'superior interests' (be it agricultural expansion, mining development, nature protection, etc.) are all placed above local interests (e.g. especially those of indigenous peoples and here specifically the Batak). Such agencies perceive their interventions as the ultimate solution to reestablishing the ecological balance that, they assume, had existed 'before.' Moreover, as this article is attempting to show, forest protection and landscape management schemes which claim to acknowledge community needs might still operate according to colonial and patronizing ideologies based on imparting information and tutoring others, while encouraging people to position themselves within the framework of existing legislation and of a highly bureaucratized government apparatus. This is also because decision-making, as of now, remains the realm of so-called 'experts' who rely on techno-scientific procedures of knowledge generation and management (Clay, 2019; Goldman, 2009). In this context, the integration of western and non-western ontologies is never neutral and objective; it requires project proponents to subject indigenous knowledge to additional screening processes, to separate practices that are regarded as 'environmentally friendly' from those that, instead, are perceived as 'environmentally threatening.'

One of the primary fallacies that I intend to challenge here is the commonly shared assumption that traditional knowledge and indigenous peoples' perceptions of landscape can be 'extracted', elicited and understood through resource inventories, interviews and by documenting and memorizing all that the eyes can grasp. The second related fallacy has to do with the question of authority, and it challenges the assumption that an external actor can lead processes of 'integration' and 'inclusion' of other peoples' knowledge into conservation-development schemes. This, in turn, raises some fundamental questions: what is the kind of knowledge at stake and how is this being incorporated into conservation/development projects? Who has the authority to decide which 'bits and pieces' of such knowledge should be incorporated, rejected or set aside? To what extent, and under what circumstances, can indigenous peoples and technical staff can work together and make joint decisions on truly equal grounds? 'Decolonizing conservation' should then start by asking and answering these fundamental questions and, more importantly, by analyzing the conditions under which people may decide to 'disclose' or 'omit' their knowledge and make their local perspectives explicit.

I argue that mutual interaction between community members and project planners (e.g. government institutions, conservation agencies, etc.) seldom leads to mutual comprehension (cf. Goldman, 2020). In most cases, the whole negotiation between project proponents and so-called 'beneficiaries' builds on a few misunderstandings, which are intentionally fostered or raise spontaneously because of different cognitive structures, background knowledge, languages, attitudes and also resulting from particular events (Novellino, 2003a). Also from an epistemological perspective, Batak perceptions of the environment pose a major challenge to the objective of integrating local knowledge into project design.

It follows that knowledge claims, rather than being assessed and understood within their socio-political milieu, are taken as instances of 'local knowledge' and used, instrumentally, to foster a system of power and domination. To put it bluntly, what is now being incorporated into nature conservation and other land and resources management schemes, is seldom 'local knowledge' but, most often, the experts' interpretation of people's own accounts of themselves. This, in turn, has important implications on the way in which 'traditional

[4] Palawan, also known has the last ecological frontier of the Philippines, is the largest island of the province of Palawan and the fifth largest by area in the country. It has the highest percentage of forest cover nationwide, hosting 49 animal and 56 botanical species found in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. In 1990, the UNESCO declared the entire Province a 'Man and Biosphere Reserve.'

knowledge' and 'local perspectives' are integrated into environmental protection. Moreover, it also challenges some of the premises on which 'decolonizing conservation' is based. By examining these processes at work, one might be tempted to move away from and beyond simplistic, and often rhetorical efforts of incorporating 'local knowledge' *into* conservation projects and try, instead, to focus more deeply on the understanding of people's responses and counterstrategies to hegemonic nature conservation approaches, i.e. on the politics of knowledge.

Figure 1: Palawan Island within the Philippines' archipelago. Open Web source.

Concepts and definitions: Introducing the notion of 'Ideological Landscape'

In this article, landscapes are not only viewed as geographical spaces imbued with cultural attributes, histories and memories of the past. I also wish to place emphasis on the ideological divergences influencing the way in which landscapes are represented and conveyed, and their notions deployed, to justify rights and make claims over contested territories and natural resources. I introduce the 'ideological landscape' as a concept that is more appropriate for the subject matter that I discuss. Especially in the field of political science, 'ideological landscape' is used to refer to a set of political beliefs, positions and opinions held by people within a specific group, region or nation (e.g. see Nevitte & Bilodeau, 2003; Voinea, 2016). Elsewhere, in the context of historical analysis, this notion has also been employed to denote the "cultural and ideological rendering of local physical landscapes" (Lawi, 1999). I use this terminology to refer not only to this but, more specifically, to layered, overlapping and often contrasting views of landscape and nature-society relations, that are constantly being reworked and negotiated. 'Ideological landscapes' are characterized by flexible boundaries allowing the inclusion of new elements and the exclusion of others. In this sense, they are not only *ways of seeing* (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1989) or scenes to be viewed. They cannot simply be associated with discourses about how a subjective and ego-centered gaze is projected on places being perceived as objective realities. Rather, ideological landscapes are about the way in which we construct depictions of people-place relationships to suppress the landscapes and the identity "of those being viewed" (Bender 2001,

p.3), while mystifying and distorting the reality on the ground (cf. Wylie 2007, p. 69).[5] I maintain that these depictions of peoples and landscapes turn into 'ideological landscapes' when the former are intentionally fitted into specific paradigms and thus becomes loaded with political, governmental and sociological externalities. In this respect, 'ideological landscapes' are containers for ideas, where multiple and contested notions become stratified and are constantly rethought to fit the necessities of the moment. Such landscapes can be highly politicized (Bender, 1993; Debarbieux, 2011; Dressler & Guieb, 2015), because they embody and represent specific concepts related to: identity, self-determination, territoriality (McCall, 2016), justice (Martin *et al.*, 2016), inequality (West, 2016), environmental governance (Brondizio & Le Tourneau, 2016), top-down conservation (Dressler, 2009; Toomey, 2020) and wilderness (Fletcher *et al*., 2021). In the following sections, through the analysis of three intersecting 'ideological landscapes', I will show how environmental governance approaches in the Philippines are still grounded on colonial and patronizing ideologies and have introduced a kind of relativism that neglects local epistemologies.

Conversely, I use the definition of 'living landscape' to refer to those landscapes where personal histories, ceremonies, memories of the past, spiritual values, world views, people's 'know how' and people's 'direct engagement with the environment' (Ingold, 2000) are all engraved into everyday and site-based practices. Of course, 'living landscapes' also include the way in which people, such as the Batak, construct descriptions of themselves and of their homeland and, overall, picture the way in which they would like others to look at them.

For the sake of clarity, I use the notion 'perception' in the phenomenological sense of the word and, specifically, as 'the background of experience which guides every conscious action' (Merleau Ponty, 1962). Perceptions of landscape are always locally situated and inter-generationally shaped by social relations, political transformations (Clay, 2016) and environmental changes and, hence, are subject to constant processes of negotiation, reaffirmation, revitalization and even rejection. It follows that there is no single body of indigenous knowledge or a unitary emic perspective of landscape that can be captured and integrated into conservation practices and policies (Goldman, 2009) as a 'one go solution', even when the most sophisticated participatory methodologies are rigorously put in place (Fletcher *at al.*, 2021).

2. The Batak of Palawan

I first visited the Batak in 1986 and, since then, have returned to Palawan twenty times, spending a total period of about eight years with them. The, people scattered in the north-central portion of Palawan Island, have a heterogeneous mode of food procurement, mainly centered on swidden cultivation integrated with hunting, gathering, commercial collection of non-timber forest products and, occasionally, wage-labor. Eder estimated their population to be about 600-700 individuals in 1900, but his complete census in 1972 located only 272 with two Batak parents and 374 with one Batak parent (Eder, 1987, p. 110). My provisional census in 2005 indicates that there are only 155 individuals with two Batak parents within a population of less than 300 people. In contrast to neighboring Pälawan and Tagbanua indigenous groups, the Batak do not originate from those ancient Mongoloid populations that reached the island around 5,000 BP. Rather, they are believed to have descended from the first wave of Australoid populations which crossed the land bridges connecting the Philippine Archipelago with the mainland of Asia, and who are generically labeled as 'Negritos.' These populations appear to be genetically distinct from the Austronesian–speaking cultivators who live surrounding them (Headland & Reid, 1989), and were present in the Philippines prior to their arrival (Headland & Reid,1989, p. 46, see also Bellwood 1985, p. 113).

It is difficult to establish at which point in time the Batak, or their ancestors, moved from an economy solely devoted to hunting and gathering to a diversified livelihood strategy that also included agriculture. Eder, drawing on previous ethnographic material (Marche, 1883; Miller, 1905; Venturello, 1907; Warren, 1964) believes that by the end of the nineteenth century, the Batak had a mainly hunting and gathering economy,

[5] By using the notion of 'ideological landscape', I am not assuming that there is 'ideology' and there is 'reality', both being at odds with each other. In fact, to various degrees, all ways of conceiving and thinking about landscape are, somehow, ideological but some are more powerful than others and tend to alienate emic perspectives.

integrated with other peripheral activities. Elsewhere, I have argued that Batak engagement with agriculture might be much older than that (Novellino, 2014b). External migration to the Batak territory seems to have begun around the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Figure 2: Year 2000 – Puerto Princesa City: glamorized representation of Batak people by the organizers of the 'Barakatan' Puerto Princesa City Festival. Here, Filipino non-indigenous students impersonated the 'Batak tribe.' Source: author

According to Eder, by this time, many Cuyonon people (a distinct ethno-linguistic group) had left their home island of Cuyo (Northern Palawan) in search of fertile lands for rice cultivation (1987, p. 46). These migrations did not have a major impact on the Batak lifestyle. However, it was during the early sixties that, due to the increasing immigrant pressure in the coastal areas, Batak were forced to abandon their lowland settlements and retreat into the interior. The fragmentation of the Batak population has been one of the major elements causing the progressive decline of social networks between local groups, leading to intermarriages with the Tagbanua (a dominant ethnic group, originating from central Palawan). Today, because of the lack of suitable partners, Batak are, often, forced to intermarry with non-Batak; overall, physical proximity with lowland Filipino settlers is increasing. In addition to this, the objectification of indigenous culture and 'exoticization' of 'indigeneity' by evangelical missionaries and, more importantly, by government agencies, such as the City Tourism Office, is transforming Batak into a readily available commodity for 'foreigners' seeking 'authentic cultural experiences', as well as for new pastoral candidates pursuing the ultimate experience of 'preaching to the heathens.' Tourists are either guided to Batak settlements in Kalakwasan and Tagnaya or, directly, to the so-called government sponsored 'Batak Center', in Barangay Conception. Here, people perform their dances and make artifacts, wearing modified 'traditional attires' that have been designed by the organizers of such 'performances' (Figure 2). This situation does not lead to ‘cultural revitalization' but rather to 'social bereavement' (Appell, 1988). The latter has been described as "a combination of both social and psychological reactions exacerbating role conflicts, feeling of inferiority, an erosion of one's self esteem, a reconsideration of assumptions about the world, being matched by a sense of loss and grief" (cf. Appell, 1988, p. 278).

3. Ontological underpinnings of Batak perceptions of landscape

It is not the aim of this article to provide an in-depth ethnography of Batak ontologies and worldview, which I have already discussed elsewhere (Novellino, 2003b; 2009; 2010a; 2014b). My primary objective is to summarize some key metaphysical presuppositions underplaying Batak perceptions of landscape.

From an early age, children begin to experience the landscape by following their parents to the forest and, discursively, also through hunting stories and the narration of memorable events. The unexpressed potency of the landscape comes into being as people move within it (Figure 3), revealing the 'affordances' of its features (Ingold, 1996). Moving along a path always involves the gaining of new perspectives and vistas: "it brings forth possibilities for repeated actions within prescribed confines" (Tilley, 1994, p. 30).

Figure 3: 2015 – Tanabag river: Batak moving within their forest landscape. Source: author

According to Batak, irrefutable proof of people's original occupancy lay in the legend of *Esa'*, the mythical ancestor who named the landscape during a hunting journey. He gave names to all places while following his dogs running after wild pigs. So the landscape, as it is known today, was created through the movement of *Esa'* and, until now, provides people with physical and emotional orientation. Batak envisage a kind of cyclical system in which the seasonal production of honey and rice depends upon the movement of bees and of 'rice souls' or 'life-forces of rice' (*kiaruwá it paray*) from *gunay gunay*, a mythical location found at the edge of the universe. The annual *Lambay* rite, in fact, centers on the idea that through magical practices – involving the use of ritual objects, bodily movements, words and musical sounds – bees and rice are dispersed from the cosmological location in which they are concentrated and thus become accessible to Batak population (Figure 4). Such resources (and this applies also to wild pigs and all game, in general) are perceived as finite and prone to exhaustion (Novellino, 2003b). After being smoked, swarms are believed to rebuild their hives on different branches and, at the end of the honey season, bees will return to *gunay gunay*: that is, to the same cosmological location where rice seeds are also stored. The life-forces of all varieties of rice will migrate to *gunay gunay*, after harvesting time (Novellino, 2009). To better understand how these resources become available, it is necessary to explore Batak notions related to the construction of personhood. The latter, in fact, has practical bearing on Batak perceived relationship between humans, animals and plants and, more generally, for the way in which the environment is apprehended. Aside from humans, the qualification *taw* (person) is attributed to various superhuman agents (e.g. the Master of Bees, the Master of Rice, the Master of Monitor

Lizards, etc.) that are being addressed by Batak in their rituals; these and other benevolent beings, such as the shamans' spirit-guides, are also collectively referred as *Diwata*. On other occasions, they are addressed as 'grandpa' (*Apo*) and 'grandma' (*Bayi'*). For instance, the name of the Master of Honey is *Ungaw*, however he is commonly addressed as *Apota* (our Grandfather). Batak also use the inclusive term *panya'en* to define powerful non-human beings, both those which are malevolent and aggressive and those perceived as benevolent and helpful. All entities classified by Batak as *taw* (masters of animals and plants and spirit-guides) are said to possess a life-force (*kiaruwá)* endowed with human consciousness and, thus, with the ability of interpreting peoples' actions and respond to them accordingly (Novellino, 2009; 2014b).

Figure 4: 1993 – Tarabanan: Batak shamans dancing to disperse bees from *gunay gunay.* Source: author

Consciousness, indeed, is a quality of the human *kiaruwá*, which also holds the attributes of sentience, volition and speech. Batak emic theories suggest that, behind physical appearance (the body) and – at the level of the *kiaruwá* – humans and certain non-human agents (as long as they are persons, *taw*) – can simultaneously apprehend different realms, and thus share similar points of view on what each realm affords. The way in which Batak view environmental management has to do, mainly, with the idea that natural resources need to be constantly negotiated with those super-human beings (i.e. masters of animals and plants) who have control over them. Batak do not necessarily attribute the exhaustion of certain resources to climatic or other external factors. Emphasis is placed, instead, on the social dynamics that have led to environmental damage. This is blamed not so much on people's inadequate technologies or destructive subsistence practices, but rather on their incapacity to maintain appropriate relationships with non-human agents (cf. Whyte, 2013; 2018), as well as with fellow community members (Novellino, 2009).

In Batak cosmology the landscape is modeled after an idea of society which is itself based on the notion that humans and the majority of non-human beings, through their distinctive *kiaruwa*' (souls/life-forces), are all endowed with the capacity to act as autonomous subjects with particular points of view. During shamanic séances, when *kiaruwa'* is separated from the body, possibilities for co-apprehension increase, and humans can

move and enter into dialogue with the Masters of Animals and other benevolent *panya'en* across a landscape made of different and overlapping ontological realms. More importantly, Batak do not postulate humans, and the rest of the cosmos, as one undifferentiated set of mind and matter and they do not regard themselves as elements of an ecological chain, but rather as participants in a complex network of social relations taking place across different ontological domains (Novellino, 2003b).

4. The 'untouchable forest' ideological landscape: The perspective of the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources

Recent years have seen an exponential increase in land deals across the Philippines, with the conversion of large expanses of land with commercial crops mainly intended for export. Meanwhile traditional upland farming, implemented through swidden ('slash-and-burn') techniques, continues to be demonized and antagonized through restrictive legislation, such as the ban on shifting cultivation (Dressler *et. al* 2021; Dressler, 2015; Dressler & Pulhin, 2010; Novellino & Dressler, 2010b). The 'ideological landscape' of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), and of all agencies supporting the ban, is one where the anthropogenic influence on the composition of old forest (e.g. Fairhead & Leach, 1998; Dressler, Smith *et al.* 2021; Martin *et al*. 2023) is simply denied. The role of fire and fallow periods in contributing to the creation of highly diverse and biologically valuable ecosystems (see Brosius, 1981; Rai, 1982) is dismissed from the outset. Any threat and alteration (either real or perceived) to so-called 'pristine' and 'untouched' forest is automatically followed by DENR with the adoption of 'ecological fixes' (Clay, 2019) and punitive approaches, such as fines and arrests.

On the other hand, shifting cultivation in Palawan (also known as *uma* or *kaingin)* continues to foster local self-sufficiency and plays a fundamental role in the livelihood and worldview of indigenous societies (Figure 5). A Batak legend, in fact, attributes the origin of rice to a human sacrifice. Each year, before planting rice, the people practice a number of ceremonies to call back the *kiaruwa'* (life-force) of the child who was killed by his father in legendary times. Germination and health of rice seeds is said to depend on the action of the 'child's life-force.' Each year, the Batak welcome the return of the *kiaruwa'* of rice, also referred as *kiaruwa'* of the child. For this purpose, they perform a number of ritual activities in the center of the swidden field, and rice is regarded as *taw* (a person/human).

Figure 5: 2008 – Kalakwasan: Batak girls harvesting upland rice. Source: author

To avoid stigmatization as illegal *kaingineros* (shifting cultivators) or as 'naïve believers' in esoteric ideas, Batak may refrain from sharing information on their agricultural practices and related beliefs. As a result, when they disclose verbally their 'local knowledge' to foresters of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), as well as to other actors, they omit important cultural information. Ultimately, people's account of their 'local knowledge' is simplified to such an extent that it places excessive emphasis on specific

activities (e.g. gathering of non-timber forest products – NTFPs) at the exclusion of others (e.g. swidden cultivation). This attitude, as we shall see, has the ultimate effect of confirming rather than contradicting those 'ideological landscapes' in which Batak are portrayed as people having low levels of technology and poor farming knowledge.

It is important to note that, in the Philippines, especially in the 1990s, the noble objective of placing community interests at the center of land management schemes was institutionalized through so-called CBFM (Community Based Forest Management) agreements. CBFM is a DENR policy that allows local communities to manage forests that have been converted to non-timber uses. Its ultimate objective is to develop self-sustaining production systems in the uplands by substituting indigenous swidden practices with permanent forms of agriculture. In turn, the DENR grants communities the legal rights to sell and collect forest products. In order to obtain the much-needed NTFPs license, Batak prefer not to elucidate sensitive issues (i.e. swidden cultivation); it follows that, when agreements with DENR are finalized, these are based on the partial understanding of limited information communicated by Batak to foresters during these interactions. It is exactly this partial information that, very often, is labeled as 'traditional knowledge' and later packaged into conservation projects proposals and reports. Batak frustration at being unable to communicate their worldview to outsiders is well reflected in a statement made by Pekto, a now deceased Batak member of the Tanabag community. He told me:

> How can we explain to the government that rice is human? I am sure that they cannot understand this; they would laugh at us. Exposing these issues would make things even more complicated. Because the government would ask us: do you have proof of what you say? Do you have a document to support what you say? The government is different from us. They always have a piece of paper for everything they say, but our culture is only on the tongue, we have no written papers, so we cannot challenge the government.[6]

As a result, Batak tend to omit and remain intentionally vague about certain aspects of their 'local knowledge.' They are aware that ambiguity may carry multiple potential benefits while 'clarity' and 'transparency' can hinder them. Ambiguity, in turn, leads to miscommunication, but should not always be interpreted as 'failed communication.' Conversely, it can be productive, for it allows the achievement of certain goals, but not of others. At the same time, Batak failure to engage in 'genuine' communicative actions with various stakeholders does pose a challenge to the overall objective of integrating local views, knowledge and perspectives into environmental protection and management programs.

Due to the government prohibition on burning vegetation and cutting trees in primary, secondary and fallow-forest, Batak, over the years, have witnessed the transition from an efficient, complex and sustainable shifting cultivation system to one that is currently characterized by short fallows, poor tending, low yields and little crop diversity (see Dressler, Wilson *et. al.*, 2017; Martin *et. al.*, 2023). Ironically, these characteristics are perceived by government agencies and nature conservationists as inherited features of the indigenous farming system (Novellino, 2007a; 2014b). Such perceptions, in turn, are deeply entrenched in the 'untouchable forest paradigm' or 'ideological landscape' of agencies such as the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and other institutions supporting the ban on *kaingin*.

In the Philippines, indigenous cultural practices (and this, of course, includes shifting cultivation) are recognized and respected by Republic Act no. 8371, also known as the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA law).[7] This important law has not altered DENR perspectives, which are still that indigenous peoples have no exemption for tree felling, unless they receive a special permit from the agency itself (Figure 6). A DENR official argued in an interview in 2018 that:

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[6] 'Pekto', personal communication, Community of Kalakwasan – July 30, 2001

[7] The Indigenous People's Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA), officially designated as Republic Act No. 8371, is a Philippine law that recognizes and promotes the rights of indigenous cultural communities and indigenous peoples in the Philippines.

> From our perspective, indigenous peoples' rights supported by the IPRA law, do not entail the rights to cut trees, but only the right to protect them. The forest provides benefits to all citizens – and to the nation as a whole – so no particular sector of society should have privileged or exclusive rights over it. Of course, indigenous peoples are the everyday forest users, however this does not mean they can do whatever they want with trees. We are encouraging communities to settle down in one place, choose the land they want to cultivate so there will be no additional forest clearings. We like to see healthy communities settled at the margins of forest, planting their crops and fruit trees in one location, protecting their watersheds and keeping the forest intact. Of course, they will be able to engage in the sustainable gathering of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and, to do so, they must enter into an agreement with us. Then DENR will grant them the proper authorizations but, again…this must be clear: no fire, no felling of forest trees![8]

Interestingly, the zeal of DENR and *bantay gubat* (forest guards) in strictly implementing the 'ban on *kaingin*' suddenly loses impetus around election time; during this period – 'coercion', in strictly implementing the ban, gives way to 'flexibility.' This flexibility, in turn, allows politicians to manipulate legislation to suit their own agendas. In short, the State, if it so wishes, can create avenues and opportunities for the so-called ' unauthorized users of public land' (which includes indigenous shifting cultivators) to pursue their slash-and-burn practices without being apprehended. In fact, every three years – during election time – politicians turn a blind eye to those infringing restrictions on forest clearing. Throughout this period, the promise of *libre kaingin* (unrestrained swidden practices) is a carrot on a stick that is usually dangled by politicians in front of indigenous communities. Batak take advantage of this opportunity to convert new forest and old fallows into upland rice plots. Primarily, this effort has the effect of minimizing the drastic decline in rice yields that takes place over the two years preceding the following election. What we have, here, is a farming system that, during election time, relies on the clearing of old fallows and, occasionally, of newly cleared forest. For the two successive years (after election) *kaingin* is carried out on short fallow lands, hence on soils that have not regained their nutrients and, thus, became quickly colonized by sun-loving weeds. A few weeks after the elections, DENR and City Government quickly reinstate their 'regimes of surveillance' on slash and burn practices (Novellino, 2007a).

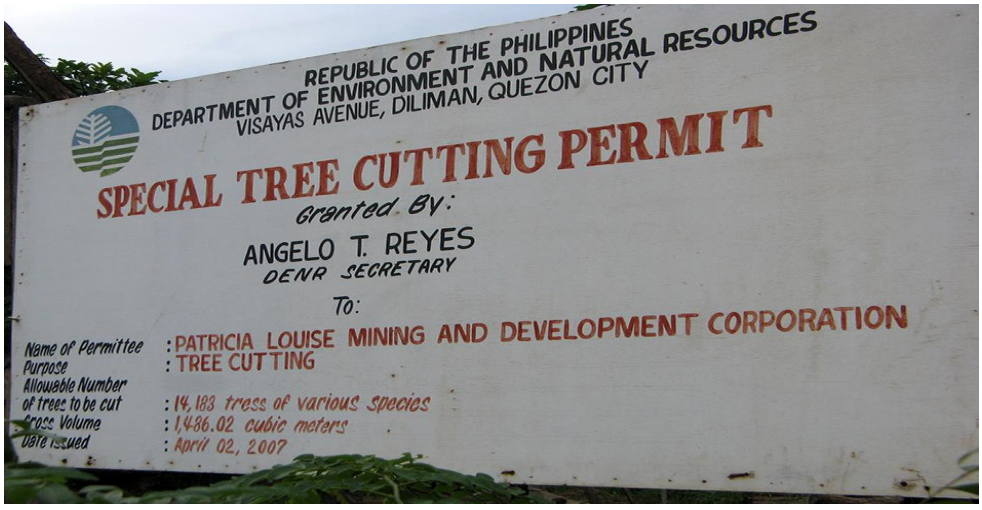


Figure 6: Too often, DENR endorses special permits to cut trees to large companies while denying the legitimate rights of indigenous peoples to fell trees for subsistence purposes, on their own ancestral lands. Source: author

[8] DENR official, personal communication, Puerto Princesa City – July 24, 2018

If, during an election, more old growth is converted into swiddens, this is not because politicians fail to implement the law. Rather, they want to show their indigenous constituents that they have the power to divert the law, as long as they receive electoral loyalty in return. As result, Batak farming practices become modified into a kind of 'dependency' to State demands and political contingencies. However, these adjustments are problematic, because the discrepancy between official requirements and actual implementation of national laws blurs the distinction between what is legal and what is not. In order to continue to plant their upland swiddens and open new ones, Batak have now learned new strategies to exploit this vagueness and miscommunication, as well as to take advantage of government institutional weakness, 'clientship' and administrative inefficiency. During election time, the opening of new forest clearings and old fallows, allows Batak (although for a limited period) to challenge and counter the DENR 'untouchable forest' paradigm and its implications. At the same time, it also contributes to maintaining a state of permanent ecological crisis in the uplands (Novellino, 2007a).

5. The ideological landscape of 'zoning' and 'land categories'

Bluwstein (2021) has argued that "rather than taking landscapes for granted as given spaces where nature and culture meet, we should begin our inquiry by paying attention to *landscapism*, how the idea of landscape is mobilized to see, know, and intervene in nature-society relations" (2021, p. 3). An instance of '*landscapism*' ideology can be easily detected in the context of the Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP), an environmental law reflecting the zonation paradigm originally proposed by the Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This law was enacted in June 1992 and establishes the legal basis for the protection and management of the environment in Palawan (SEP).[9] Protective measures proposed by the law include the demarcation of areas either as off-limits to the human population, or reserved for local 'tribal communities.' The SEP law (R.A. 7611) provides a comprehensive framework for sustainable development and contains a package of strategies on how to prevent further environmental degradation. The centerpiece of the strategy is the establishment of the Environmentally Critical Areas Network (ECAN), which places most of the province under controlled development. The areas covered by ECAN include three major components: 'Terrestrial', 'Coastal/Marine' and 'Tribal Ancestral Lands.' 'Core Zones' are defined as areas of maximum protection and consist basically of steep slopes, first growth forests, areas above 1,000 meters elevation, mountain peaks and the habitats of endemic and rare species. The law establishes that core zones "shall be fully and strictly protected and maintained free of human disruption ... exceptions, however, may be granted to traditional uses of tribal communities of these areas, for minimal and soft impact gathering of forest species for ceremonial and medicinal purposes" (R.A. 7611, 1992b, p. 101). Interestingly, the ECAN core zone coincides with significant portions of Batak hunting and gathering ground. For instance, the resin of Agathis trees is usually extracted in commercial quantities around 1,000 meters above sea level (Figure 7).

In addition, several game animals, especially flying squirrels, are trapped for food around these altitudes (Figure 8). It is important to point out that Section 11 of R.A. 7611 includes 'Tribal Ancestral Lands' among its categories. The law specifies: "these areas, traditionally occupied by cultural minorities, comprise both land and sea areas identified in consultation with tribal communities concerned and the appropriate agencies of government" (R.A. 7611, 1992b, p. 100). It is frustrating to learn that even Tribal Ancestral Lands "shall be treated in the same graded system of control and prohibitions, except for stronger emphasis on cultural consideration" (*ibid*). At the same time, we are assured that "SEP shall define a special kind of zoning to fulfill the material and cultural needs of the tribes, using consultative processes and cultural mapping of the ancestral lands" (*ibid*).

It is clear that SEP (similarly to most landscape approaches to conservation) – with a high degree of naivety – proposes the protection of indigenous cultures, on the one hand, and the implementation of zoning criteria on the other. As it can be easily anticipated, landscape approaches to conservation based on land zoning, such as those proposed by SEP, disintegrate the unity of the indigenous country. Land categories become meaningless to Batak when cut off from the whole. In fact, as ethnography has clearly revealed, the latter do

[9] Republic Act No. 7586 (also known as NIPAS Law) https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1992/06/01/republic-act-no-7586/ Republic Act No. 7611, June 19, 1992 https://pcsd.gov.ph/republic-act-7611/

not perceive their territory as an enclosed and 'atemporal' island, but rather as a continuum of indivisible features (see Ingold, 1986), which are the repository of previous experiences, past events and social relationships (see Rosaldo, 1986). Instead, in the context of the SEP law, indigenous communities represent only one of the patchwork pieces to be placed in the most appropriate spot (Tribal Ancestral Lands), provided they continue to live in harmony with the environment. Undoubtedly, a policy such as SEP, treating both indigenous communities and wildlife as species which need protection, is far from innocent. It is rather, a political act to '*ontologize*' cultures, i.e. to assign a different existence to indigenous populations. This has the effect of removing the people from the space they occupy (Fabian, 1983), thus depriving them of agency and history (Novellino, 2003b).

Figure 7: 2009 – Kalakwasan uplands: A Batak gathering resin from Agathis philippinensis.
Source: author

To clarify, ECAN land categories are not the only 'zones' being superimposed upon the Batak living landscape. There are whole ranges of other 'conservation boundaries', which are often idle and mostly unknown to the Batak themselves. These boundaries are 'actively performed' by state and non-state actors, and yet, they still place Batak within the controlling 'gaze' and 'ruling interests' of park managers, DENR foresters and biodiversity conservation planners, hence making them subjects, once again, to 'discourses of power' (Foucault, 1979; 1988) and 'regime(s) of truth' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). Not surprisingly, Batak territory

[their ICCA (Indigenous and Community Conserved Area) in Tanabag[10], as well as their Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC) area in Kayasan] is a classic example of a 'over-mapped' and 'over-layered' landscape, crisscrossed by imaginary lines and boundaries, such as the Cleopatra Needle Critical Habitat (CNCH), of the Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park (PPSRNP)[11], as well as a Community Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA) (Figure 9 & 10).

Figure 8: A Batak with his catch of flying squirrels. Source: author

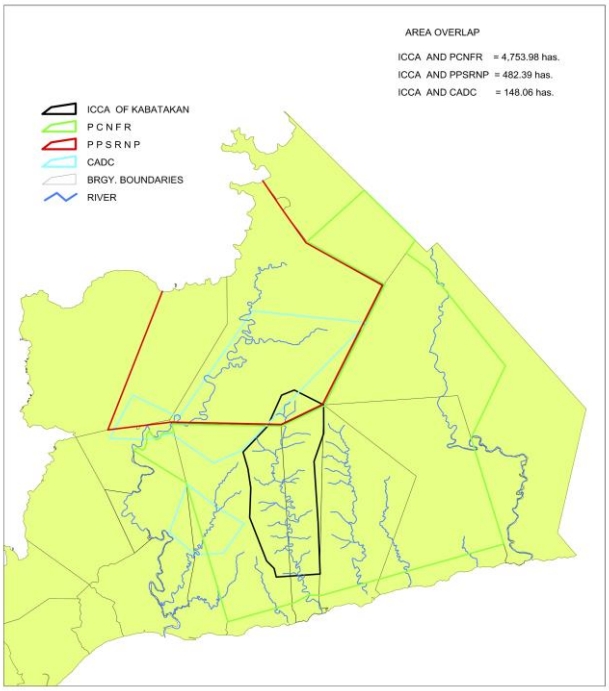
On more than one occasion, I have witnessed the way in which DENR foresters ask Batak to pinpoint their territorial boundaries on technical maps, made of straight lines and topographic symbols. During one of such instances, the DENR approach caused much indignation amongst one of the Batak participants. He stood up and said:

> We cannot understand what you say; we cannot understand your map. You only draw lines; you don't mention the names of the mountain ridges, the names of rivers, the names of trees. If you mention the mountain divides, the streams flowing into the main river, we can understand you. These are the things we know, so even when we walk in the night we know where we are going. Your map, your definitions tell us nothing![12]

[10] "The Tanabag Batak ICCA" (Indigenous and Community Conserved Area) https://www.iccaregistry.org/en/explore/Philippines/tanabag-batak

[11] "Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park". Proclamation No. 212, s. 1999 https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1999/11/12/proclamation-no-212-s-1999/

[12] 'Pekto', personal communication, Community of Kalakwasan - August 5, 2001



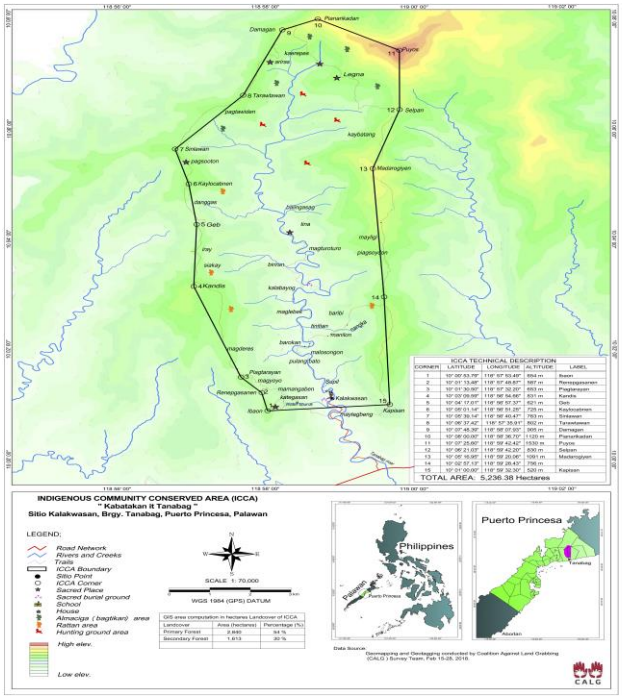


Figure 9: Both the Tanabag Batak ICCA and the Batak/Tagbanua CADC areas overlap with the Subterranean River National Park (PPSRNP) and with the former Proposed Cleopatra Needle Forest Reserve (PCNFR), currently being named as Cleopatra Needle Critical Habitat (CNCH).

Figure 10: The participatory map of the Tanabag Batak ICCA: a joint effort between the author, the Batak and the Coalition against Land Grabbing (CALG).[13] Here, the names of watercourses and old settlements are mentioned and the general locations of NTFPs reserves and sacred places are identified.

6. *Landscaping* through the lenses of 'critical habitat'

Conservation for Sustainability (CS)[14] is a Philippine-based NGO initially spearheaded by Dutch researchers. In 2014, the 'Centre for Sustainability' (CS) – in collaboration with the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD)[15] promoted the preservation of a large forest area (41,350 hectares) through the creation of the Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat (CNCH) under PCSD Resolution No. 13-481, as an amendment to Section 50 of Administrative Order No. 12, Series of 2011.[16] Funds for this conservation project was sought and obtained without first receiving acceptance by the local indigenous communities.

CS objectives and goals, as they are clearly described in their pamphlets and publications, seem to fit perfectly within those approaches generally being defined as 'landscape approaches to conservation.' In fact, with reference to the CNCH declaration, the organization claims that one of its key aims is to combine human

[13] Coalition against Land Grabbing (CALG) https://www.coalitionagainstlandgrabbing.org/

[14] Centre for Sustainability PH, INC https://centreforsustainabilityph.org/

[15] The Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) was created on September 1, 1992 through Executive Order No. 15 in order to chart environment and sustainable development (SD) initiatives in the country. https://pcsd.gov.ph/about-pcsds/

[16] PCSD Resolution 13-481 https://pcsd.gov.ph/pcsd-resolution-no-13-481-2/ Administrative Order No. 12, Series of 2011 https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2011/04apr/20110419-AO-0012-BSA.pdf

welfare with environmental protection (see McShane *et al.* 2011; Salafsky 2011; Sunderland *et al*. 2007). This goal is clearly spelled out in one of CS own documents (Van Beijnen & Hoevenaars, 2015) where it was stated that the main objective of the CNCH initiative is to "preserve the natural resources for future generations of indigenous peoples, protect the largest watershed area of Puerto Princesa City, and safeguard the existence of countless locally endemic species by creating the Cleopatra's Needle Forest Reserve as a Critical Habitat" (*ibid* 2015, p. 10).

In the same report, CS assures that: "under the Critical Habitat, the indigenous peoples will retain full rights to continue with their traditional and cultural practices as they have done in their forest home since time immemorial" (*ibid*, p. 12) and that the project will "respect and follow IPRA legislation and local laws at all times" (*ibid*) – "this includes that consent from the indigenous communities is requested for all activities before they can be implemented. For this, procedures set out by the National Commission on Indigenous' Peoples (NCIP)[17]are being duly followed" (*ibid*, p. 13). Hence, as CS itself clarifies, "traditional and political leaders of the indigenous communities will be involved in all project decisions"….and their consent will be "requested for all activities before they can be implemented" (*ibid*). However, as we shall see, fieldwork evidence provides a completely different picture, which bluntly contradicts CS own claims and sensible recommendations.

On June 11 2015, a team composed of CS staff and a NCIP official visited the Batak community of Kalakwasan. The key objective of this mixed team was to inform the community about the alleged positive impact of the Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat (CNCH) on indigenous communities. More importantly, another primary aim was to shed light on several doubts that the local community members had raised about the possibility of continuing their customary activities after the approval of the CNCH declaration.

It is not in scope to describe the whole interaction that took place on that occasion between Batak, NCIP and CS. I will highlight some key portions of the recorded discussion[18] to show how CS staff, with the complicity of NCIP, intentionally manipulated Batak to obtain their support for the project. In the context of such meeting, a Batak elder approached CS staff with the following words: "…we have been told by different political authorities that there are no cultural exemptions on the implementation of the *kaingin* (shifting cultivation) ban. I mean…the law is the law, a prohibited act is a prohibited act." After a short pause, the CS staff replied:

> Yes, *kaingin* is forbidden by DENR and by the City Environmental and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) but we (referring to the CNCH proponents) have our own law that they (other agencies) will have to respect, as well. Right now, there is no paper (no formal approval of the CNCH), therefore no exemption is given for you to make *kaingin* (shifting cultivation)…(and if you do it) surely you'll be apprehended. Once the paper is approved (the CNCH declaration)…you (Batak) will be able to enforce it and even to arrest outsiders encroaching into your area.

Then another Batak participant entered the conversation and asked: "so are you (CS staff) saying that, after getting the paper (CNCH declaration), we will be allowed to make *kaingin*?" Quickly the CS staff replied:

> …yes we will incorporate this (slash and burn practices) into our project: so (there will be) an exemption on *kaingin*! This is why we like this to be approved because (currently) in the law there is no exception for shifting cultivation practices made by the indigenous peoples. Even according to PCSD own law, hunting wild pigs (Figure 11) is forbidden, but (after the approval

[17] The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) is the agency of the Philippine government that is responsible for protecting the rights of the indigenous peoples and for the implementation of Republic Act 8371 or Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997.

[18] The discussion was audio-visually recorded by a member of the Coalition against Land Grabbing (CALG), a local indigenous peoples' based NGO.

> of the CNCH) indigenous people will be exempted (from this prohibition); you will not be forbidden from carrying out these activities, because PCSD knows that this has been part of your traditions, for a long time. Only people from the outside will be forbidden. (All words in parenthesis are mine).

In reality, CS staff reassurances [e.g. that indigenous peoples would retain their customary rights within the foreseen declared Critical Habitat (CH)], as well as the organization's proclaimed adherence to NCIP Free, Prior and Informed Consent principles, have never been honored. More importantly, such verbal assurances find no basis in the context of the legal framework on which the CH law (PCSD Resolution no.13-481 of 2013) is based. For instance, in Section 3.0 of the resolution we learn that "for the purpose of the guidelines, the presence of threatened species shall be the primary consideration in determining areas for establishment of critical habitats and this shall be made on the basis of best scientific data available." Moreover, one of the general considerations listed for the establishment of critical habitats (subsection 3.4) refers to the risks posed by the "presence of man-made pressure/threats such as, but not limited to logging, quarrying, mining, squatting/informal settling, mineral exploration, and swidden agriculture, tourism." Though no explicit reference is made to indigenous peoples in this section, one can easily assume that generic notions such as 'informal settling' and 'swidden agriculture' are likely to apply to indigenous communities.

One subsection (4.1.4) of the PCSD resolution also deals with "community consultation" and, here, it states: "the nominating entity shall be responsible for the conduct of a community consultation with the local stakeholders and concerned LGUs on the results of the assessment and ensure their support in case the area is found suitable for establishment as critical area." The same nominating entity "shall prepare a consultation report to include highlights of discussions, agreements reached, and recommendations generated from the community, as appropriate. Such report must be supported by attendance sheet and photographs."

Obviously, 'ensuring support' has nothing to do with real consultation. More importantly, in the PCSD resolution, there is no mention and no indication at all of the implementation of NCIP Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) procedures. Instead, it is stated in CS documents. PCSD Resolution no.13-481 even gives full authority to the nominating entity (here, CS) to conduct consultations according to their own methodologies. In the Philippines, NCIP revised FPIC procedures[19] must be duly followed every time a form of negotiation is established between a local indigenous community and a third party (e.g. researchers, video-makers, individual entrepreneurs, corporations and company managers, etc.). But instead, as clearly indicated in the PCSD Resolution (and this becomes evident in CS own dealings with Batak communities) no 'red tape' is applied to the proponents of conservation projects and programs (e.g. CS), even when their goals have direct implications for local communities.

Not surprisingly, the drafting and finalization of the critical area 'consultation report' (according to PCSD Resolution no.13-481) is left completely in the hands of the proposing conservation group, with no process put in place for the representatives of local communities to double-check and assess what others have written about them, or to add any recommendations themselves. Subsection 4.1.7 of the CH guidelines even says that PCSD is regarded as the sole entity in charge of reviewing the evaluation and recommendations of the technical staff, before the area has been declared as a Critical Habitat. In short, local communities and indigenous people are automatically excluded from this process; in so doing, they are silenced and disempowered. Moreover, CS researchers had bluntly and clearly violated people's customary rights, by collecting animal and plant specimens in 'sacred areas' (Figure 12).

[19] The Revised Guidelines on Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) and Related Processes of 2012 https://ncip12.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/the-revised-guidelines-on-free-and-prior-informed-consent-fpic-and-related-processes-of-2012.pdf

Figure 11: 1992, Tanabag river: a Batak setting out for a wild pig hunt. Source: author

Figure 12: 2015 Kalakwasan: the author collecting local testimonials about the alleged violations by CS staff. Source: author

This is how, on 15 July 2015, one Batak from Kalakwasan described the approach of CS staff:[20]

> When they arrived, they just passed through our village and walked straight to the uplands; they did not pay attention to us, like we were invisible to them. They just went straight to a site where our people was camping along the riverbed and asked them to guide them to the mountains. Only later, after so many trips back and forth from the mountains to collect animals and plants, they finally approached us and told us that they were interested in our place. They behaved exactly like those men who first make a woman pregnant and then begin to court her. This is wrong!

[20] A member of the Batak tribe, personal communication, Kalakwasan (barangay Tanabag) – 15 July, 2015

In line with a landscape approach to conservation, CS places great emphasis on the implementation of ecologically friendly 'livelihood alternatives', specifically tailored to local communities' needs (cf. Dressler, 2009). In their reports, the organization claims that "Batak hunters (will be trained to) serve as great guides for bird lovers and other nature enthusiasts"…. and would be equipped "with materials like binoculars, a first aid kit, and uniform" as well with "guidebooks and information sheets to look up flora and fauna." In this way, CS superimposes a tourist landscape on the Batak living landscape (cf. Parris-Piper *et al*., 2023; Minca, 2007). CS proposes no support to Batak farming practices. On the contrary, Batak 'slash-and-burn' agriculture is deliberately kept 'hidden', for fear of ruining the idealized version of the 'last surviving hunters and gatherers' instrumentally being construed by project proponents. During their interactions with Batak, they used specific strategies 'to extract' people's local knowledge and later reinterpreted it in a way that suited their specific conservation goals.

Such strategies, which I have witnessed and documented during several consultations between Batak and NGO staff, are very common. The key feature of these communicative strategies consists in claiming one's own 'naivety' and ignorance about indigenous local knowledge, before an audience of indigenous participants. Often, one common approach of NGO field personnel is to ask local participants to enlighten them about their own customary practices, showing a particular interest and excitement in getting to know them. I like to argue that this way of interacting with local people in order to grasp bits and pieces of their 'local knowledge' is a form of 'seduction'[21], which manifests itself through 'dissimulation' and 'simulation' strategies.

Dissimulation pretends "not to have what one has" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 167). Simulating is to feign to have what one hasn't. "One implies a presence, the other an absence" (*ibid*). Different actors (e.g. DENR foresters and CS conservationists) are all capable of displaying both attitudes, at different times, depending on the circumstances.

It is useful to offer a suitable example of 'dissimulation', by quoting a fragment of an interaction between a young Filipino researcher working for an environmental NGO and a group of Batak; this was recorded in the community of Kalakwasan on 16 June 2015. During the interaction, amongst the various questions, she asked Batak whether they were still able to yield good rice harvests. The Batak being interviewed, replied "we are opening areas with small trees and, in these fields, rice plants are frail and produce little grains. Rice does not grow healthy as before." The Batak did not try to contextualize their statement, or to explain that rice plants are frail because foresters are forcing them to use short fallows (i.e. fields that have not regained their fertility). After this statement, the researcher replied: "yes you are right, shifting cultivation does make the soil poor, this is why these areas should be reforested so that soils will become moist again."

When incomplete and 'decontextualized' explanations of cultural practices are provided to outsiders in this way, they are not regarded as a 'confession of wisdom' but as a 'confession of ignorance' (Hobart, 1993).[22] This is used as evidence that 'expert knowledge' and related 'ecological fixes' (Clay, 2019) must be put in place, in order to restore ecological balance. By showing their lack of understanding of 'traditional' practices, government, NGO personnel and researchers often succeed in persuading 'the other' (the Batak) to 'confess' their local knowledge.[23] But there is a twist to the tale: by confessing their 'local knowledge,' indigenous participants become 'weaker and weaker.' "The more they talk, the more science knows [and] the one who listens and interprets becomes a master of the truth." (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 179) [author's parenthetic addition]

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[21] According to Baudrillard (1988, p. 160) "to seduce is to divert the other from his truth" and to draw them "within your area of weakness, which will also be his or hers" (*ibid*, p. 162). It follows that to seduce is to weaken, i.e., to convince the other to withdraw out of his or her knowledge after having confessed it.

[22] Vitebsky has argued that "the very essence of 'development' is to declare an essence in someone else, in order to end their previous state of knowledge by transmuting it into ignorance, a sort of reverse alchemy. If local traditions are allowed to survive, they do so only as 'beliefs' and are encapsulated as 'folk' or 'little tradition' and put into quotation marks" (1993, p. 108).

[23] Dreyfus and Rabinow have also pointed out that, according to Foucault "the key to the technology of the self is the belief that one can, with the help of experts, tell the truth about oneself" (1982, p. 175).

7. Discussion: Making sense of 'ideological landscapes'

'Ideological landscapes' and related perceptions of nature-society relations continue to be superimposed on each other and underlay the 'modus operandi' of government and non-government organizations alike, as I have indicated.

In Palawan – as elsewhere – most agencies and institutions involved in environmental management and protection still fail to understand that indigenous landscapes are also imbued with social relationships and narratives, defining and giving meaning to each and every feature of their territory (cf. Aston, 1985). In addition to this, project activities continue to be tailored using a romanticized idea of what indigenous peoples (and here specifically, Batak) are thought to be about. However, it is inaccurate to refer to Batak perceptions of landscape as a set of unitary and cohesive ideas. Nowadays, for instance, certain cultural sites do not hold the same value and 'ideological power' for young people as for the middle aged and elderly population, and they are no longer perceived as a source or opportunity for storytelling and everyday social negotiations. Moreover, important landmarks have been recently washed-away by the so-called 'Odette typhoon'[24], as a result, certain evidence and memories of the past have all been obliterated. This is also why Batak perceptions of the environment, and their development expectations, may significantly vary across generations (see Cosgrove, 1985). These variations, in turn, might play an important role in the way in which 'cultural and ideological rendering of local physical landscapes' (Cosgrove, 2003; Lawi, 1999) are represented by Batak to outsiders.

As I have tried to show, 'ideological landscapes' – such as that of CS – view the natural environment as something that can be mapped, measured by counting and identifying animal and plant species, and other resources found within it. This approach condenses a particular Western notion of landscape that privileges a physical distance (Olwig & Mitchell, 2007) and that views space as something that, in order be valued, must be measured and inventoried. More recently, such landscape ideologies have become, apparently, even more benignant as they bring together, almost on the same level, two major concerns: nature protection and the respect for the rights of traditional communities (see Reed *et al.*, 2017).

Another 'ideological landscape' examined in this article is the one envisaged by DENR officials and City Government Forest guards (*bantay gubat*). This is a place where 'mother-nature' is uncompromisingly protected, especially from any form of slash and burn farming (Figure 13). The latter can only be allowed (through the implementation of strict guidelines) in lower elevation agricultural areas to be reserved for crop cultivation. The imagined landscape of the DENR is one where sedentary communities – each cultivating their own plots of land – live harmoniously in small traditional settlements, at the edge of forested watersheds. Instead, the SEP 'ideological landscape' is a highly engineered one of pre-set land categories and imagined lines, where strict criteria for land management and resources uses are implemented to ensure the environmental sustainability of Palawan as a whole. Local indigenous inhabitants are also part and parcel of this complex patchwork and, in fact – in accordance with the law – are allowed to occupy so-called 'tribal ancestral zones.' In this prefabricated landscape nothing is left to chance, because all the rules of what is allowed and what is forbidden are clearly established from the beginning. Clearly ECAN (Environmentally Critical Areas Network) and other similar zoning criteria are a modern and extraordinarily powerful application of post-colonial *landscaping* aiming at delocalizing indigenous presence over specific areas (cf. Dang, 2021; Bluwstein, 2018, 2021).

[24] Typhoon Rai, known in the Philippines, as Super Typhoon Odette, was the second costliest typhoon in the history of the Philippines behind Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. 'Odette' hit Central and Northern Palawan in December 2021, bringing torrential rain, flashfloods, massive forest loss, siltation of rivers and landslides.

Figure 13: year 2000 – Puerto Princesa City: DENR representation of 'Mother Nature' at the 'Barakatan' Puerto Princesa City Festival. Note the absence of any 'cultural' item, except for the dress worn by the performer and a plastic bottle left, inadvertently, at the back of the truck. Source: author

In Palawan, such contested ideological landscapes (cf. Hviding, 2003) coexist and overlap with each other while creating new layers, each one of them superimposing on the Batak 'living landscape' (cf. Lowenthal, 2007). More importantly, all these landscape ideologies and constructions have one major thing in common: they do not exist in the real world, i.e. do no match the reality on the ground. On the other hand, ideological landscapes can also serve to construct new realities while creating novel opportunities for local communities to shape responses and counterstrategies. Their opinions, development expectations and emic representation of 'local knowledge' are reframed, refined and deployed, if and when needed.

My research has also suggested that people do not view landscape as a *tabula rasa*, which can be inscribed, measured, and experienced accordingly. On the contrary, they perceive landscape as it simultaneously occurs to them and to other living beings with which humans share overlapping ontological domains. Thus, landscape is 'the point of view of the others', which also serves to define one's own position in the world. This notion, for instance, is radically in contrast with the SEP/ECAN zoning system, which creates an eco-centered and perspectival landscape of views and vistas, where it is only the expert's perspective from which seeing occurs (Bender, 1993; Novellino, 2003b). In fact, the zoning system, through its categories of protected areas (cf. Zimmerer *et al.*, 2004) introduces anonymized and *a*historical images of the ideal relationship between humanity and nature. I insist that the Batak landscape is perceived by the people as having history, but 'nature', as it is epitomized in landscapes approaches to conservation, does not.

Ethnography of the Batak has also suggested that metaphysical presuppositions underlying people's ways of apprehending the environment are grounded in culturally specific notions of the interaction between humans and non-humans, and incorporating these in landscape governance discourses would be epistemologically untenable, or at least problematic. In fact, if in conservationist discourse human societies are modeled after an idealized notion of 'nature', Batak landscape is modeled after an idea of society which is itself based on the notion that human and the majority of non-human beings (mystical owners of animal game and plant species) are all endowed with the capacity to act as autonomous agents. This is to say that Batak landscape

is mapped by a complex network of social relations, which are not imagined as different manifestations of 'nature', but rather as different expressions of *'kiaruwa'* (soul or life-force) which varies from one species to another, manifesting itself through different ways of thinking and behaving.

And yet, we cannot be content simply with the assertion that Batak ontologies and perceptions of the living landscape should be deeply examined and taken, seriously, into account. Perhaps, more importantly, a urgent call should be made for park managers, conservation organizations, and government agencies alike, to put aside both their 'models of the world' and 'regime of truth' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982), so to allow Batak themselves to decolonize 'ideological landscapes', by voicing out their distinctive perspectives. Dang has rightly proposed that: "any moves towards decolonizing landscapes must center anti-colonial politics and embrace active departures from colonial hegemonies, ultimately contributing towards a common goal of reinstating indigenous sovereignty through self-determination" (2021, p. 9). However, in the Philippine context, Dang's contention would be bound to be confined to a purely 'idealistic domain', with no possibility of being turned into concrete plans of action. This is mainly because a 'colonial mentality' has not only been inherited by a privileged elite, but it already permeates all levels of society, hence influencing the way in which notions such as 'landscape' and 'indigenous people' are constructed and acted upon (cf. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The European sense of superiority and *dicta* over land and resources uses, which – during colonization – had taken the form of an entrenched racism, still prevails in present Filipino society. However old notions, such as 'assimilation'/'integration', have now taken a friendly guise, with more benevolent concepts like 'promoting partnership' and 'increasing economic opportunities' for indigenous peoples. Given the current scenario, it would be impossible to 'decolonize' and improve any particular aspect of the social chain of relations (Smith, 1999) (e.g. the unbalanced relationships between conservation project planners and local communities) without having first achieved the 'decolonization' of other levels (the patron/client relations tying Batak to lowland settlers, local politicians, NGOs, etc.). For the same reasons, emphasis on 'community based participation' (Akwah Neba, *et al.* 2018) and recent attempts to take local perspectives on board, are unlikely to generate tangible outcomes. Overall, it is unrealistic to expect that such important goals will be achieved at a pace faster than is occurring within national society.

8. Conclusions

My argument has now come full circle, and a bold step needs to be made which takes us back to the heart of my contention. Indeed, I have not argued against the fundamental importance of having local perspectives and practices truly reflected in conservation projects. In fact, one should always make the best possible effort to listen to and understand the 'multiplicity of voices' within communities, especially when some are more powerful than others (cf. Grillo, 1997). Equally, I have not attempted at jettisoning all forms of participation, community-based conservation and similar endeavors to decolonize conservation from within. On the contrary, I have tried to go at the roots of how peoples' agency manifests itself or is denied through the articulation of multiple ideological landscapes and paradigms that, on one hand, appear to celebrate the harmonious balance between culture and nature while, in actual practice, transform both elements into commodities readily available for use. Following this approach, I have encouraged the reader to take a wider political ecological perspective, in order to understand the play of power and knowledge that is deeply embedded in current discourses aiming at integrating 'local knowledge' (often being downgraded to a generalized assemblage of practices and beliefs) into landscape management and conservation. I have also argued that 'community perspectives' and 'local knowledge' are always liable to misrepresentation. This is mainly because people's presentation of their knowledge and the representation of the latter to external actors is rooted in the attitudes and stereotypes that indigenous members and outsiders have about each other, and in the stigmatization that may follow from these perceptions. As we have seen, such stereotypes are all deeply engraved into the three 'ideological landscapes' outlined in the article.

The analysis has also suggested that most interactions taking place between Batak and other external parties are 'miscommunicative.' More importantly, miscommunication – at various levels – is interactionally constituted between Batak and outsiders to construct messages and ideas of 'local knowledge' that are intentionally ambiguous, and that omit as much as they reveal (see Giles & Wiemann, 1987). Often, this ensures

the achievement of specific ends, which are desirable to each party engaged in miscommunication (for instance Batak may refrain from providing a detailed account of their swidden cultivation practices for the fear of foresters' retaliation or the withdrawal of support from environmental NGOs).

The corollary of this argument is that, under such circumstances, even the most noble attempts to integrate local practices and beliefs into conservation projects and landscape management schemes, can end up translating into a spectacular camouflage which only produces more control and manipulation of other people's knowledge. This is also because 'experts', 'project proponents', government officials, etc. – whether we like it or not – will always attempt to re-define traditional practices according to predetermined conventional criteria of sustainability and 'ecological soundness', which – as we have seen – are clearly reflected in their respective 'ideological landscapes.' In so doing, they extract, select and re–adjust meanings from indigenous 'local knowledge.' The final and most malicious stage of this process is to convince the 'Other' to admit his/her ignorance (e.g. Batak presumed incapacity to manage forests sustainably) and, instead, to make them accept 'ecological fixes' being proposed by so-called 'experts' (Figure 14).

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Figure 14: year 2000 – Puerto Princesa City: the replanting of uplands, with the inclusion of indigenous swiddens under fallow, is one of the most popular 'ecological fixes' in Palawan and throughout the Philippines.

In Palawan, as throughout the Philippines, indigenous communities have seen the speed with which mining and agribusiness company tenements have been approved, and how landscape approaches to conservation have taken precedence over the recognition and demarcation of their ancestral lands through the IPRA law.[25] Overall, government promises to protect the island's fragile ecology have not been met (Figure

[25] Since 2015, the Palawan-based Coalition against Land Grabbing (CALG) has supported Batak and Tagbanua people of seven Barangay, in Puerto Princesa Municipality, to apply for their CADT certificates over a total area of about 108,000 hectares. After 8 years, despite all major bureaucratic requirements being fulfilled, the people are still waiting for NCIP to accomplish the final boundary survey and to hand over to them the long-awaited certificate.

15). Amongst indigenous communities, there is now a growing awareness that hardline advocacy against the present political establishment and '*status quo*' might bring more adverse consequences rather than benefits. This is also because forces opposing indigenous peoples' self-determination are becoming increasingly brazen, violent and well organized (see Dressler & Guieb, 2015). These forms of 'violence' are turning out to be particularly pervasive and deeply unsettling, especially amongst peaceful small-scale societies, such as the Batak. While all this is unraveling, the power-gap between Batak, tourists, politicians, foresters, conservationists and other external actors has become "painfully incommensurate" (Gewertz & Errington 1991: 172).

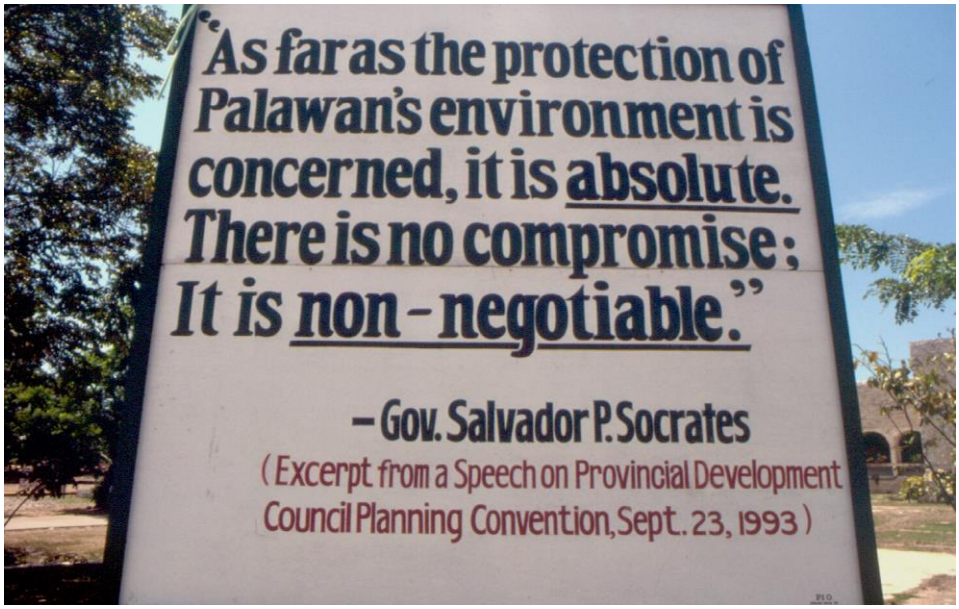

Figure 15: 1993 – Puerto Princesa City: the official promise of 'absolute environmental protection' has resulted in more restrictions and surveillance of indigenous peoples' farming practices. On the contrary, mining companies and agribusiness firms have been allowed to continue their businesses, as usual. Source: author

Batak, like other indigenous communities, have come to accept that, even where extractive industries, top-down conservation projects and tourist enterprises are basically opposing their rights, they will get a better outcome by accepting them, demanding certain benefits and mitigations rather than just being cast into opponents. This is also to say that it is not necessarily the adherence to cultural values (or the integration of 'local knowledge' into proposed conservation plans) that makes a project particularly appealing to Batak. Instead, other considerations come into being, such as the capacity to access easy cash, food and needed commodities. Nowadays, rather than taking a firm stand against certain top-down conservation projects and externally imposed tourist ventures, some take part in them opportunistically (cf. Walter & Hamilton, 2014; Hviding, 2003). It does not matter how exploitative and patronizing certain relationships may be, the Batak will engage with these, because they have no alternatives. This reinforces a 'colonizing ideology' and the deployment of current ideological landscapes "routinely perpetuate colonizing logics" (Dang 2021, p.1).

Is there any escape from such an impasse? "Reinstating indigenous sovereignty through self-determination" (Dang 2021, p. 9) might require people-driven empowerment that should culminate – in the best of all predictions – into the destabilization and demolishment of colonial structures, as well of the dominant discourses on which 'ideological landscapes' (such as those described in this article) are based. This is unlikely

to be achieved through mainstream and current landscape approaches, which naively promote the integration of 'local knowledge' into conservation practices. When indigenous communities strategically adopt hegemonic discourses and often view these as the only viable 'means' to channel their claims to State legitimacy, 'living' and 'ideological landscapes' are no longer set apart. Apparently 'progressive' paradigms, that decision makers and project managers use with 'savviness' and dexterity, re-craft so called 'best practices' for integrating local knowledge into landscape management. They are 'improved' and laid out for everyone, yet again.

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