

The Global Evolution of Conservation and the Lasting Impact of National Parks

A very real question we need to address in Aotearoa today is do we want to see our conservation estates become large game reserves for the elite and wealthy?

In both cases, the concept of conservation was framed as a noble mission to preserve 'pristine' nature. Yet in practice, it was a way for colonial governments and settler societies to seize land, restrict access to natural resources, and exert control over Indigenous populations. The legacy of these conservation practices continues to impact Indigenous communities today, as they fight to reclaim their lands and reinstate their roles as caretakers of the environments they had managed long before the arrival of colonisers.

The History of Conservation outside of Aotearoa follows a similar pattern on land acquisition, control and exclusion, often driven by colonial expansion and resource extraction. One of the most prominent global examples of this is the creation of national parks.



While these parks are now celebrated as havens of biodiversity and natural beauty, their origins are rooted in the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of land for the benefit of settler economies.

In the United States, for example, the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 is often hailed as the birth of the modern conservation movement. However, this narrative overlooks the fact that the park was created on the ancestral lands of Indigenous tribes (nations), who were forcibly removed to make way for the park.



Photo: Mountain Journal

For Indigenous peoples, these lands were not 'wild' but carefully managed ecosystems that had sustained their communities for millennia.

Similar patterns can be seen in Africa, where colonial governments established national parks and game reserves, often under the guise of protecting wildlife. These parks frequently became tools of resource control, with local Indigenous communities being evicted and barred from accessing traditional hunting and grazing lands. In East Africa, the creation of parks such as the Serengeti and Kruger displaced Maasai, San, and other Indigenous peoples, pushing them to the margins of society while settlers and colonial elites benefited from tourism and hunting industries



The issue of conservation dispossession and human rights violations extends beyond the establishment of national parks. Even in more recent history, some international conservation organisations have been implicated in serious abuses. A notable example is the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), which has faced allegations of supporting anti-poaching units that committed human rights violations against communities in regions like Central Africa and South Asia. Investigative reports revealed that WWF-funded rangers in some areas had been involved in violence, including beatings, torture and killings of local people accused of poaching. While WWF has since vowed to investigate and address these allegations, the incidents highlight that dangers of exclusionary conservation models that prioritise wildlife protection at the expense of indigenous rights.



Globally, these examples reveal the darker side of conservations history - a story of dispossession, exclusion, and the erasure of Indigenous Knowledge. As we confront the biodiversity crises of the present, these historical injustices must be acknowledged, and Indigenous peoples must be restored to their rightful roles as guardians of the natural world.