

# The intersection of a military culture and indigenous peoples in conservation issues

Thomas E. Marler

Western Pacific Tropical Research Center; University of Guam; UOG Station; Mangilao, Guam

**M**ilitary operations impose various positive and negative consequences on the environment. Three case studies are presented illuminating how local indigenous peoples as stakeholders may be vulnerable to being disenfranchised from important discussions concerning military activities. The study of ecological issues associated with sustaining a military footprint may be particularly useful for informing the global debate that pits strict conservation against human well-being.

## Introduction

Knowledge that accrues through ecological research is often conveyed and discussed within the context of sub-disciplines. The sub-discipline military ecology was recently proposed to assemble past and ongoing research topics that address the ecological consequences of military operations.<sup>1</sup>

When a sub-discipline has been condescended and projected as a venue for ongoing research, a full understanding of its unique facets and defining traits helps to clarify and distinguish it from other closely related disciplines. Herein I report that the interplay between military and indigenous peoples is central to many examples of how military operations uniquely influence local ecology and conservation. Much discussion has focused on the role of local peoples and how they are involved in conservation of targeted areas.<sup>2,3</sup> Considerable social conflicts result from authoritarian protectionist policies that ignore the local human element. Even though the debate is well-established, the contentious

rhetoric seems unable to move beyond extremes conveyed by conservation biologists and social scientists.<sup>4</sup> Sunderland et al.<sup>5</sup> reported that systematic comparisons of more case studies would provide a means of moving forward in the debate. I focus on three contemporary examples that shed light on how indigenous peoples are not positioned as full stakeholders in decision-making when military operations are discussed in context of the environment, a tactic that arguably debases the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>6</sup>

## Case studies

Case 1. The January 2013 damage to a Philippine reef ecosystem by a US Navy warship occurred because the ship's operators entered a World Heritage Site that was off limits to navigation without a permit, rebuffed the formal warnings to exit the protected waters, and subsequently grounded the ship on the Tubbataha Reef.<sup>1</sup> The military crew was allowed to leave the country even though their violations of various components of the Tubbataha Reefs National Park (TRNP) Act of 2009<sup>7</sup> were numerous and those violations were subject to imprisonment. Aspects of implementing the TRNP Act were delineated in the Tubbataha Protected Area Management Board Administrative Order No. 01.<sup>8</sup> The contentious discussions that ensued following this event were entirely focused on the singular issue of direct reef damage (Rule 21), but the military's failure to pay the conservation fees for the vessel (Rule 17.1), conservation fees for each crew member (Rule 17.2), the penalty for entering the protected area despite non-payment of the fees (Rule 22), the

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\*Correspondence to: Thomas Marler,  
Email: tmarler@uguam.uog.edu

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penalty for obstruction of Philippine law enforcement officers (Rule 32), and the penalty for unauthorized entry (Rule 33) were never brought into public discussion. This was peculiar since the Order<sup>8</sup> explained that the maximum fine would be imposed in any event that included aggravating circumstances of “use of force or intimidation against TRNP enforcement officers” (Rule 36).

The fisherfolk alliance known as Pamalakaya, a peasant rights group known as Anakpawis, and the Kalikasan People’s Network for the Environment were among the various local stakeholder groups that formally requested explanations for why the crew members of this foreign vessel were allowed to disregard the rights of the Philippine government to adequately enforce its natural resource conservation laws. A pertinent issue that was communicated by these groups included a double standard that emerged when a Chinese fishing boat repeated the illegal entry then reef-grounding of their vessel three months later. In contrast to the incident involving the military, the Chinese crew members were immediately incarcerated for the unlawful entry into the protected waters. The advocacy groups asserted that the failure to apply Philippine law to the US military increased the risk of further environmental damage by informing other violators that minimal risk for prosecution would follow the illegal entry into this World Heritage Site.

The lifestyle of the indigenous fisherfolk who sustainably relied on these waters for thousands of years was altered by the limitations imposed by the TRNP Act. If these indigenous fisherfolk voluntarily conform to the newly imposed conservation laws to avoid the codified consequences, then integrity would dictate that those consequences designed to protect the environment would be imposed on any violator, including the crew of a foreign military vessel.

Case 2. The Chagos Archipelago was recently designated a no-take marine protected area (MPA), making it the largest such protected area worldwide.<sup>9</sup> The background that is relevant to military ecology centers on the decision to evict the Chagossian islanders in the 1960s and 1970s to make way for a US military

base.<sup>10</sup> The various issues related to the events that led to this MPA designation were heavily discussed by environmentalists and human rights activists. The islanders have unsuccessfully fought to be allowed to return to their home, and the MPA designation was put in place while a legal decision by the European Court of Human Rights regarding their right to return to the islands was ongoing. That disingenuous tactics were at play became evident when WikiLeaks published diplomatic documents<sup>11</sup> that exposed the formal contentions that designation of the MPA would effectively end the islanders’ resettlement claims and assure that US military interests were safeguarded.

The process leading to the MPA designation deserves scrutiny in light of the Convention on Biological Diversity’s provisions on Access and Benefit Sharing,<sup>10</sup> the Convention on the Law of the Sea,<sup>12</sup> and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>6</sup> This case study illuminates an example where the military used ecology and conservation as a covert tool to maintain control over resources. Conservationists who willfully endorse political secrecy as a mechanism to achieve the goals of establishing the MPA have done little to conserve the rights and needs of the Chagossian human element.

Most indigenous cultures that have survived colonial times still retain some of their traditional ecological ethic, and this ethic can have profound utility in modern conservation decisions and sustainable use of resources.<sup>13,14</sup> But traditional knowledge cannot be sustained within any indigenous culture if the opportunities to pass on that knowledge from generation to generation are disrupted.<sup>15</sup> Removing the Chagossian peoples from their homeland for more than 40 y has not allowed them to maintain integrity with their unique approaches to sustainably managing their biological resources. Continued delays in re-connecting the Chagossians with those resources increases the risk that this traditional knowledge will become lost for perpetuity.

Case 3. The Mariana Islands of Guam and Tinian are currently experiencing an expansion of US military personnel and operations. We have described various means by which this military buildup

may threaten terrestrial resources, and mentioned other disciplines that may also be negatively impacted by expanded militarization.<sup>16</sup>

Residents of US territories are structurally disenfranchised, denied the right to vote for president and lacking any voting representation in Congress. Enigmatically, they serve at disproportionately high rates in the US armed forces. The indigenous peoples of Guam were under the supposed protection of the US for more than four decades when World War II erupted. The obligation to defend this sovereign territory was abandoned, and the result was several years of war-time atrocities perpetrated against the Chamorro people during the Japanese occupation. As the various environmental impact studies accompanying the contemporary military buildup have unfolded,<sup>16</sup> indigenous Chamorro residents submitted comments reminding the US military that decades have elapsed without settlement of World War II-era reparation claims. The comments indicated the island’s affected population could not endorse another era of expanded US militarization until these pending claims were settled. These comments were dismissed by the military as irrelevant.

### Applications

These three examples reveal that the direct influence of military activities on conservation issues are not straightforward, and the interplay between political realities, societal needs, and the roles of indigenous peoples are germane issues for research. Indeed, the contributions of traditional knowledge from and the rights of indigenous peoples are crucial in some settings for effectual biodiversity conservation.<sup>17</sup> Within the sub-discipline military ecology, those contributions and rights may not be provisioned with an adequate avenue for expression, especially when recent wrongs are fresh on the minds of the stakeholders as revealed in these three case studies.

Conservation biologists face countless moral and ethical challenges. Moreover, multiple responsibilities must be considered in decision-making while fulfilling duties to the scientific, conservation, general public, and land manager communities. Since the inception of conservation

ethics as a discipline, it has been plagued with various research-implementation gaps<sup>18</sup> and academic debates about how to position the human element in conservation biology have persisted.<sup>19</sup> Defenders

of local people's involvement in conservation<sup>20-22</sup> may find military ecology a fruitful sub-discipline for studying and comparing enlightening case studies.

#### Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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