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Doing 'Conservation': Effects of Different Interpretations at an Ecuadorian Volunteer Tourism Project

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Abstract

As more people volunteer in the name of 'conservation,' a careful analysis of 'conservation' and the actors' underlying ideologies becomes pressing. Volunteers work on the seemingly similar goal of 'conservation,' but differences in interpretations can have on-the-ground impacts. In this paper, I use interviews and participant interactions to: (1) analyse how volunteers, reserve managers, and volunteer coordinators at an Ecuadorian reserve articulated 'conservation' in their discourse; and (2) examine how different conservation ideologies affected interactions among actors and with the environment. Using political ecology and a modified version of ideological and cluster criticism to analyse discourse, I found actors interpreted 'conservation' differently. I identified three ideologies presented by volunteers: Type I (preservation-oriented), Type-II (mixed), and Type-III (sustainable use-oriented); managers and coordinators held similar views as each other. Different 'conservation' ideologies among actors affected the project (e.g., acceptability of sustainable logging), interactions, perceptions of locals, and general attitudes towards conservation work.

Keywords: conservation, volunteer tourism, political ecology, environmental discourse, ideology, Ecuador

Conservation work is protecting future generations, and if you have to take the resource from the land to protect them, ultimately, it's okay, because it's still done in a sustainable fashion. (Volunteer Female 10)

I thought we were here to do **conservation** and aren't we just planting these trees so they can chop [them] down and sell them. (Volunteer Female 14)

We don't realize [**conservation is**] done by people and people need to live—I don't see any bad in... making **conservation**... something [like] a business. (Reserve Manager Male)

INTRODUCTION

The above quotes by international volunteer tourists and an Ecuadorian conservation project manager all reference 'conservation,' but close examination reveals unexpected differences and similarities. Although both these volunteers are Canadian, the first volunteer offered a view that included sustainability, profit, and people, which was more closely aligned with the Ecuadorian manager than with her fellow volunteer who criticised profit generation. Despite differences in interpretations, 'conservation' is central to the volunteer tourism experience and is invoked at many levels. Promotional material advertises the concept to attract volunteers; projects are titled "conservation projects;" volunteers admit being attracted by buzzwords such as 'conservation;' and volunteers and managers on site regularly talk about and "do conservation" (Coghlan 2007; Cousins et al. 2009; Grimm and Needham 2012a, b).

Many participants involved in these projects likely do not interrogate 'conservation' or understand nuanced differences such as conservation vs. preservation (e.g., Adger et al. 2001; Durand and Vasquez 2011). This has also not been the focus

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of most conservation volunteer tourism research. What are the sociocultural impacts when people work for the common goal of 'conservation' but interpret the term differently? Given that discourse is "a constructed system of arguments, ideologies and interpretations that shapes social practices, affecting the way we see things and talk about them" (Hay 2000: 187), differences and similarities in how actors discursively articulate 'conservation' can have material, on-the-ground impacts on conservation volunteer tourism projects. As volunteering in the name of 'conservation' increases and gains more proponents, a careful analysis of 'conservation' and the actors' underlying ideologies—i.e. pattern or set of ideas, assumptions, beliefs, values, or interpretations of the world by which a culture or group operates (Foss 1996)—is important for understanding how differences in ideologies affect relationships with other actors and the environment.

Conservation volunteer tourism

Before exploring the impacts of 'conservation' on volunteer tourism, it is useful to know about this growing phenomena and related research. In recent years, given the lack of funding and need for labour, many conservation and scientific research projects have turned to travelling volunteers to help them accomplish goals and generate revenue (Brightsmith et al. 2008). These tourists "volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment" (Wearing 2001: 1). Conservation volunteer tourism projects involve multiple actors (e.g., international volunteer tourists, community members, etc.) in close human-environment contexts for extended periods of time. It can be considered an extreme example of ecotourism, because these tourists not only want to see nature and monetarily support conservation, but also to personally work for conservation (Cousins et al. 2009).

Proponents of conservation volunteer tourism have suggested that it is the best practice of tourism and an 'ideal' form of ecotourism (e.g., Wearing 2004). Wearing (2001, 2004) claimed that unlike traditional forms of tourism where differential power exists, volunteer tourism takes into account cross-cultural issues, can lead to community participation, and promote sustainability. Other benefits can include helping projects, contributing new insights, and spreading knowledge (e.g., Foster-Smith and Evans 2003). Wearing et al. (2005) contended that volunteer tourism, especially projects organised by NGOs, does not prioritise profit and instead decentralises power by focusing on development approaches that include host communities.

However, volunteer tourism has not gone without criticism. Simpson (2004) suggested that negative impacts on communities and projects could occur due to imperialistic attitudes of Westerners with pre-set notions about helping "developing" countries. Volunteers might also impose views of an expert (Wearing 2004). Callanan and Thomas (2005) claimed

that many volunteers and projects are "shallow," providing little contribution to locals. Gray and Campbell (2007) questioned Wearing et al.'s (2005) contention that volunteer tourism is a decommodified activity. By interviewing multiple actors, including volunteers, organisation members, project staff, local *cabiñeros*, Gray and Campbell (2007) discovered that participants held different conservation ideologies. *Cabiñeros* believed that conservation and community benefits such as profit were linked, whereas volunteers worried that locals would be motivated to protect turtles for economic rather than environmental reasons.

Political ecology: Tool for evaluating sociocultural impacts of volunteer tourism projects

Despite extensive research examining conservation volunteer tourism in the past decade (e.g., Wearing 2001; Guttentag 2009), Benson and Wearing (2011: 251) claimed that "systematic academic research [on volunteer tourism] is still in its infancy" and that tools are needed to evaluate sociocultural impacts in assessing outcomes of volunteer tourism projects. One possible tool could be a political ecology framework, which has been applied to numerous studies examining conservation projects, and more recently ecotourism. Campbell et al. (2007: 201) contended that political ecology could reveal that ecotourism is a "phenomena both reflecting and reinforcing human-environment relations and tied to larger economic, political, and social processes." Political ecology is useful for studying conservation volunteer tourism because, similar to Wearing's (2004) comment about volunteers, many political ecologists (e.g., Bryant and Bailey 1997) warn that spreading knowledge can impose certain knowledges onto others due to hegemonic power. Political ecologists have also highlighted problems that can be encountered with community participation; projects may impose an imported Western project and not include local participants in the entire process, even if generated by an NGO (e.g., Sundberg 1998; West 2006). In this article, I examine issues that can arise due to actors from different cultures interacting in conservation volunteer tourism, as well as demonstrate how political ecology helps uncover these impacts.

A discursive political ecology analysis, which almost no one has explicitly applied to conservation volunteer tourism (e.g., Gray 2003), can also evaluate sociocultural impacts by expanding understandings of how 'conservation' functions in volunteer tourism. Drawing from Foucault, discursive political ecology recognises that there is not one truth, but rather a plurality of views (Peet and Watts 1996). By recognising plurality, discursive political ecology opens the door for questioning ontological givens, truisms, and dominant ideologies disseminated in discourse that pertain to concepts such as community, conservation, nature, and sustainability (e.g., Escobar 1996; Nygren 1998; Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Campbell 2002). Given that environmental concerns are not only material struggles, but also discursive struggles over ideas and meanings, discursive

Sustainability [sic]" (e.g., sustainable wood production, organic agriculture); and (c) "Social Development" (e.g., teaching). I selected this site because: (a) Ecuador offers numerous conservation volunteer opportunities (Callanan and Thomas 2005; Cousins 2007); (b) many volunteers selected the reserve, allowing for diverse opinions, thus reducing the chance of a small sample, which can be common with onsite investigations of this nature (e.g., Lepp 2008); and (c) I had volunteered at the reserve in 2005, affording credibility to gain participant trust.²

Data collection

To collect data, I conducted on-site fieldwork for nine weeks between June and August 2008. I used participant observation, formal interviews, and informal conversations to gather and triangulate information (Bernard 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). I recorded semi-structured interviews with 36 volunteer tourists, 2 Ecuadorian reserve managers, and 3 Ecuadorian volunteer coordinators (1 from the reserve, 2 from an NGO working with the reserve³). I interviewed all volunteers who were present during the nine weeks, except six who arrived at the end of my stay and one who declined to participate. Interviews were conducted in English, as all interviewees were either fluent in English or native English speakers. By conducting interviews during the summer months, which according to research by the NGO are popular months for volunteering, I interviewed volunteers from several subgroups (e.g., students on summer break, career break adults, etc.). Consistent with past research (e.g., Campbell and Smith 2006), I interviewed volunteers after they had been at the reserve for at least two weeks to ensure they felt settled.⁴ Interviews ranged from 1-4 hours, with most lasting 1.5-2.5 hours. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, I assigned a code to each participant (e.g., VF12=volunteer female 12, RMM=reserve manager male, RMF=reserve manager female, VC1=volunteer coordinator 1).

When formulating initial interview questions, I relied on existing literature and my exploratory study, which suggested that 'conservation' was used to advertise and guide the volunteer project, and that actors interpreted the term differently. In the current study, I did not ask participants how they defined 'conservation,' but instead analysed how they used the word throughout the interview. At the end of the interview, they participated in a free-listing exercise (Paolisso and Maloney 2000) in which they had a minute to list words and phrases that came to mind when they heard the term 'conservation.' This provided additional discourse to analyse. Although the interview may have influenced words and phrases listed, by triangulating this data with the views presented in interviews and participant observation, I gained an understanding of interviewees' ideology of 'conservation'.

Engaging in participant observation allowed me to observe and appreciate the volunteer experience, the reserve, interactions between actors, and how conservation was practised. I lived, ate, and spent free time with volunteers, as well as completed daily tasks and chatted informally with

volunteers and managers. I attended, recorded, and transcribed volunteer orientation talks and weekly educational lectures. This information supplemented and supported semi-structured interviews, revealed changing opinions, and provided additional discourse to analyse.

Discourse analysis: ideological and cluster criticism

To understand how 'conservation' was interpreted by participants, I adapted ideological criticism (McGee 1980) and combined it with cluster criticism (Burke 1941) to analyse transcripts of interviews, lectures, and reserve orientation sessions, as well as participant observation notes⁵. In ideological criticism, a researcher selects and analyses an ideograph (e.g., conservation), which is an ordinary word or phrase that summarises and inspires "identification with key social commitments" (McGee 1980: 3). Although ideographs appear to unify all groups under the same ideology (Clarke 2002), an ideograph can have multiple meanings for different groups, imbue power dynamics through use by dominant groups, and impact interactions between people (McGee 1980; Moore 1993; Clarke 2002; Cloud 2004).

I located and highlighted each instance of 'conservation.' Modifying Foss's (1996) guidelines for ideological criticism, I identified the nature of ideology that was dominant in the discourse by analysing how the ideograph was used, determining arguments made, and exploring values and conceptions of what was acceptable and unacceptable. I then examined whose interests were represented and neglected, and identified how rhetorical strategies, such as characterisations, supported the actor's ideology. Characterisations are "labels attached to agents, acts, agencies, or purposes in the public vocabulary, and integrate cultural connotations and denotations while ascribing a typical and pervasive nature to the entity described" (Lucaites and Condit 1990: 7). Characterising other people and objects allows individuals to name, classify, and orient themselves toward the other, and in turn justify their behaviour and attitudes towards others.

I also employed cluster criticism, which can aid in uncovering the worldview of actors, determining their meaning of the ideograph, and identifying the nature of ideology. I charted terms frequently clustered or used with great intensity near 'conservation' (e.g., protect, use, etc.) to discover patterns that illuminated participants' ideologies (Figure 1.1; Foss 1996). These terms could be the same words, synonyms, or similar concepts (e.g., money, economic). I considered words in proximity if they were within an interviewee's response to a question. I examined how these words were used and related to underlying ideologies, characterisations, and actions/beliefs toward the environment and other people. These terms (e.g., preservation, use) served as major themes, or "labels for assigning units of meaning to... information compiled during a study" (Miles and Huberman 1994: 56). The final themes denote general trends and do not represent all volunteers. In addition, to identifying how interpretations of 'conservation' affected both actions towards and beliefs of

You can see... people are **living** in **poorer** conditions and they need to make a **living** off the land, so how they go about doing that—they are probably more interested in making a living and **surviving** than **conserving**. (VF2)

People still maybe don't have enough **money** to **live**, don't think of nature **conservation**, or about stuff like that, if they [are] think[ing] about how my children get enough food. (VF9)

Note: Yellow=ideograph; blue=clustered terms

Figure 1
Example of cluster analysis

the volunteer project and other people, I also examined other words (i.e. not only clustered terms) surrounding ‘conservation.’ I then organised data by thematic categories to allow easy retrieval of relevant quotes (Berg 2004). Verbatim quotes illustrate representative examples of themes; I altered quotes only when removing unnecessary words to improve readability. Keeping in line with the methods used for this analysis, I present data in the following order: conservation ideology, characterisations, and resulting behaviour and attitudes.

RESULTS

Volunteer ‘conservation’ ideology

Volunteers, primarily aged under 25, were from “developed” countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, England; Table 1). Volunteers had attended, were attending, or planned to attend college, and 21 out of 36 had studied or were planning to study environmental science or a related science (e.g., biology). Most chose to volunteer at the reserve to “do conservation,” which they believed was an extremely important, if not the reserve’s main, goal.

Volunteers may have emphasised the preservation, pro-park mentality, or sustainable-use mentality, but most ranged across a spectrum, at times mixing ideologies in the same sentence. However, by examining words clustered near ‘conservation,’ I gained insight into volunteers’ interpretations of ‘conservation’ and created a volunteer typology (Tables 2 and 3): Type-I (preservation-oriented), Type-II (both preservation and sustainable-use oriented), and Type-III (sustainable use-oriented), referred to as T-I, T-II, and T-III for the remainder of the paper. T-I mentioned ‘preservation’ and ‘protect.’ In contrast, T-III did not often mention ‘preservation’ or related terms, instead focusing on ‘sustainable,’ ‘use,’ ‘future generations,’ and ‘profit.’ T-II illustrated elements of both T-I and T-III, tending to discuss all terms and concepts equally. For example, whereas eight T-I and T-II volunteers interchanged ‘conservation’ and ‘preservation’ or defined ‘conservation’ with ‘preservation,’ VF10, a T-III volunteer, exemplified the sustainable-use ideology when discussing wood harvesting:

Conservation work is protecting future generations, and if you have to take the resource from the land to protect them, ultimately, it’s okay, because it’s still done in a sustainable fashion.

Table 1
Volunteer typology demographics

Volunteer	Study/Work	Age
Type I		
VF1	Physical geography	24
VF3	N/A	17
VF4	Environment, development, policy	23
VF7	N/A	17
VF8	Environmental hazards*	19
VF12	Economics*	18
VF22	Bank	23
VF23	Biology (pre-med)	21
VM2	Cultural geography*	18
VM6	Chemistry, physics, engineering (high school)	17
VM7	Sociology, criminology	22
VM8	Photography	20
VM11	Physics, art, psychology, music	19
VM13	Horticulture	43
Type II		
VF6	Ecology and conservation biology	20
VF9	Renewable energy, sustainability, environmental management	25
VF13	Environmental science*	18
VF14	Environmental biology	19
VF17	Geography, biogeography	21
VM1	Theatre	26
VM3	Art history, environmental studies	20
VM4	Renewable energy, sustainability, environmental management	25
VM5	Environmental studies/teacher	24
VM10	Conservation and wildlife management	20
VM12	Geography	20
Type III		
VF2	Environmental science	29
VF5	Biology (pre-med)	20
VF10	Soils science	21
VF11	Political science, Spanish/teacher	23
VF15	Psychology	23
VF16	Urban planning/teacher	25
VF18	Geology, physics	20
VF19	Public health	26
VF20	Earth atmospheric science, biology	22
VF21	Tourism	27
VM9	Tourism	33

*Volunteer planned to begin university in fall after volunteering

By examining terms clustered near ‘conservation,’ I identified whose interests volunteers included in their ideologies. All volunteers believed that conservation included non-human components (e.g., plants, animals, environment, land). However, this led 17 T-I and T-II volunteers to focus on protecting, saving, and restoring the environment; T-I volunteers never mentioned ‘conservation’ being linked to people or human needs. For instance, VF7 believed that the reforestation project “was going to be a little bit more like saving the rainforest. I thought we were going to be more like conserving the trees.” In contrast, T-II and T-III volunteers believed that ‘conservation’ involved and affected ‘people’ and ‘communities.’ VF13 emphasised, “There always has

Table 2
Clustered terms/concepts around 'conservation'

	Volunteers	Managers and volunteer coordinators
Ideological view		
	Preservation	Preservation
	Protect, Save, Don't destroy	Protect, Save
	Non-humans (plants, nature, animals, land)	Non-humans (plants, nature, animals, land)
	Human, social, community	Human, social, community
	Profit, economic	Profit, economic
	Sustainable	Sustainable
	Use	Use
	Future Generations	Future Generations
		Shared responsibility
Characterization		
	Local people at fault	
	Poor, living, surviving	
	Challenge, difficult in South America	Infrastructure problems
	Education (for Ecuadorians)	Education (for Ecuadorians)
	Education (for all, including me)	Education (volunteers act as expert)
Actions/Interactions		
	Government	Government
	Private Organisation	Private Organisation
	Not waste	Not waste
	Not consumption	Not consumption
	Takes time, long term	Takes time, long term
	Profit	Profit

Table 3
Volunteer typology based on clustered words describing conservation

Type I	Type II	Type III
Preservation	Preservation	
Protect, Save, Do not destroy	Protect, Save, Do not destroy	
Involves non-humans (e.g., nature, plants, animals)	Involves non-humans (e.g., nature, plants, animals)	Involves non-humans (e.g., nature, plants, animals)
Does not involve profit	Does not involve profit	
	Sustainable	Sustainable
	Use	Use
	Future generations	Future generations
	Involve people, social issue	Involve people, social issue
	Profit, economic	Profit, economic

to be a human aspect involved... you can't just say we're going to plant trees if it's not helpful to anyone. You have to do... conservation that is still practical to normal day life."

In a similar vein, volunteers had different views on whether conservation should involve 'profit.' All T-III and some T-II volunteers believed that conservation needed to

connect 'social' issues with 'economic profit.' VF11 liked that the reserve was trying to become an "effective model of conservation and profit." In discussing what could be done for conservation efforts, VM1 mentioned growing coffee would be a good way to make money while supporting conservation efforts. In contrast, T-I and some T-II volunteers did not connect conservation with generating profits from resources. Most often, this was seen in their omission of mentioning 'money' and 'profit.' Others, however, emphasised that 'conservation' should not include 'profit.' For example, VF9 said, "[conservation is] important in the whole world, and you don't get money from it... conservation is not part of the money world." RMF recounted a conversation with VM2, in which the volunteer stated that if conservation involved 'profit' he would not volunteer but rather expect to be paid. When volunteers with these views mentioned 'money,' it often included purchasing and setting aside land as a conservation measure.

Characterisations by volunteers

Stating that nature needed to be 'protected' and 'saved' implied it is at risk from something. Few volunteers stated directly whom they blamed, but when discussing 'conservation,' some volunteers, primarily T-I and T-II, characterised people as a danger and asserted that areas should be protected from human activities. For example, VF6 articulated:

Conserving the forest is really good in terms of not overusing the land and not destroying habitat... because Ecuador is so biodiverse, it would be really terrible to see it all get chopped down to produce bananas or something.

Other volunteers (T-II and T-III) characterised 'poor' people in "developing" countries as not able to prioritise conservation because they need to 'survive' and make a 'living.' These volunteers believed that local people could not be blamed for lacking a conservation mindset. VF2 stated, "You can see where forests have been cleared... people are living in poorer conditions... they are probably more interested in making a living and surviving than conserving." VM4 hoped that if Ecuadorians' standard of living rose, the desire to conserve their environment would also increase. Several volunteers mentioned that they had been taught these ideas in school, thereby highlighting how representations are transmitted and perpetuated through hegemonic discourse; for some volunteers, the image of Ecuadorians and their conservation efforts was created even before visiting Ecuador.

T-II and T-III volunteers appeared to be sympathetic to Ecuador's plight by characterising a "developing country" as a place where it is more 'challenging' to do 'conservation.' VF17 explained, "It's a completely different place... You have to accept things aren't going to run the same." VF2 and VF10 discussed with each other how other volunteers did not recognise that it was easier to do conservation in the "first world." VF2 said that in the "first world" a reserve manager

could go to a nursery and buy trees, whereas in Ecuador, managers had to grow saplings from seeds collected from the forest. VF10 admitted that she had been frustrated with VM2 when he said that he had looked forward to seeing how challenging conservation was in a “developing country;” she explained to me that although this was a vacation for him, people had to deal with conservation ‘challenges’ on a daily basis.

Characterisations could also be seen by examining the clustered terms ‘education,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘learn,’ or ‘teach.’ Fourteen volunteers indicated these terms were critical for effective conservation. T-II and T-III volunteers sometimes discussed this generally in that all people needed to understand conservation. VF17 emphasised, “Education’s a big part of conservation. You want to make sure people know and care and have seen what it is that they’re protecting.” T-I volunteers tended to describe Ecuadorians as less knowledgeable about conservation and needing to learn, such as in school. VM11 explained:

Maybe [Ecuadorians] are going to leave school and work on a farm... you don’t learn about conservation by doing that. You learn about conservation by having resources to go to school and having... leisure time... to do the research.

This statement could have resulted from his ‘conservation’ ideology, which restricted his ability to see other conservation methods (e.g., environmentally-friendly farming). It might also represent an imperialistic ideology that privileges Western environmental knowledge. VF17 acknowledged, “some people have this preconceived notion that because [they know] the popular discussion of conservation, they’re experts.”

Manager and volunteer coordinator ‘conservation’ ideology

Managers and volunteer coordinators were Ecuadorian, had attended university, and studied diverse topics (e.g., administration and marketing, environmental science). The reserve had been in RMM and VC3’s family since 1970, but only started receiving volunteers in 2003. Although the family had been involved since the project’s inception, NGO volunteer coordinators were relatively new (eight months to one year).

Given that the Ecuadorian managers and volunteer coordinators had similar ideological views of ‘conservation,’ I did not create a typology. They used many terms similar to those used by volunteers, and they also illustrated a mix of ideologies (Table 2). Managers and volunteer coordinators at times interchanged ‘conservation’ and ‘preservation.’ To describe conservation efforts, they also mentioned terms such as ‘protect’. For example, VC2 said, “In Ecuador, we try to take care of our ecosystems... protect all specific areas where we live and the environment, especially the forests [and] all the species that live in there.” Despite this,

their ideology was more in line with T-III volunteers. RMF also mentioned ‘preservation’ of cultures, thereby not limiting ‘protection’ to non-human inhabitants. In addition, although the reserve appeared to distinguish between ‘conservation’ and ‘sustainability’ by offering seemingly distinct programs addressing each concept (“In the way to sustainability” and “Conservation in the cloud forest”), volunteers noted no clear separation actually existed. The managers’ approach was more in line with a pro-people, sustainable use ideology of conservation, in which ‘conservation’ and ‘sustainability’ are not disparate concepts. RMF stated people increasingly saw that ‘sustainable’ agriculture and ‘conservation’ were closely linked: “Now [it] is not farm [that] is the enemy of conservation, now it is sustainable agriculture, friend of conservation.”

In addition, the managers and reserve volunteer coordinator emphasised continuously that ‘conservation’ is not only an environmental issue, but also a ‘social’ and ‘economic’ issue including ‘human’ interests. RMM claimed that “There is a gap between conservation and practical life... not a lot of projects can prove that it is possible to live a more sustainable life... more respectful with the environment, and that’s what we need to prove.” Both managers stated that before tackling environmental aspects of conservation, ‘social’ and ‘economic’ issues must be resolved. RMM explained, “We don’t realize [conservation is] done by people and people need to live—I don’t see any bad in making conservation... something like a business.” The decision to receive volunteers arose because the managers had struggled to keep the reserve afloat. If volunteer tourism had not proved profitable, they would not have had initial funds to conserve and work towards self-sufficiency. To illustrate why it was necessary to generate income for people conserving land, RMM asked volunteers what they would do if they had a family member who was sick. He answered, “You would not think twice. You would cut the tree and you would do what you need to do.”

Rarely present in volunteer comments was the idea that “conservation is a shared responsibility.” For the managers and reserve volunteer coordinator, everyone worldwide must play a role in protecting resources, not only people in “developing” countries. RMF explained that one way to think about ‘conservation’ is that the world should pay for it, because everyone had a ‘responsibility’ to maintain places and resources. VC3 asked us, “Why should we conserve for you?” They struggled with the idea that those in the West, who had already reaped the benefits of development due to their resources, tell those in “developing” countries not to use their rich and comparatively untouched resources, but then offer no help.

Characterisations by managers and volunteer coordinators

Unlike volunteers who felt that Ecuadorians were not ready to conserve, VC3 stated, “Every Ecuadorian is learning how to preserve what we have.” RMF surprised volunteers when stating, “[Despite] what you hear about Ecuador—that it has

a very high rate of deforestation... we actually have 22%... protected." The difference is that in Ecuador people live inside national parks. Managers and volunteer coordinators also did not often characterise problems in terms of individual people, but instead a result of Ecuador's infrastructure, thereby taking the blame off "ignorant, poor people." For example, volunteers have wanted to dissuade littering and instill recycling in the community, but RMF explained, "We are not in that step. If you put the signs and you put the bins, then what do you do with the garbage? We don't have a garbage system in Ecuador." RMM also explained that currently in "developing countries" "there is not very much incentive for conservation."

Like volunteers, managers also mentioned 'education' in the context of 'conservation,' but they were not consistent in their characterisation of Ecuadorians. At one point, RMF seemed frustrated with other Ecuadorians, "Agriculture is not the best thing to do here... It is an education. It's hard to change how people live. In a lot of cases they don't even want to learn." However, at other points, she illustrated that volunteers can exhibit a dominant approach toward education, which impacted work at the reserve and with the community:

We had volunteers [in the school] trying to do... environmental activities that you do in your countries, but it doesn't work because... in [community members'] houses they don't produce much garbage... they don't do compost, because they have their pigs.

Behaviour and attitudes towards 'conservation' and other people

Ideological and cluster criticism, as well as identification of different 'conservation' ideologies, illuminated how varying views impacted actors' attitudes and on-the-ground behaviour (i.e. interactions) toward each other and conservation work. Three clustered terms, 'government,' 'organisations,' and 'private reserves,' illustrated beliefs about actions towards conservation in general. Contrary to the pro-park ideology, several volunteers—even some T-I volunteers—emphasised that they did not know if 'government' was the answer for conservation. For example, VF5 recognised that people often thought 'governments' should control 'conservation,' but she believed that 'conservation' was more effective beginning at the individual level. Doubting interests of 'governments,' VF22 stated, "I don't think governments are too concerned with reserves and conservation... not just in South America, but all over the place. People who take initiative to care for a large piece of land and do the best that they can to conserve [it are] really amazing!" Some T-II and T-III volunteers believed that a 'private' reserve also provided a more realistic option for 'conservation,' because it supported livelihoods. This view was more in line with managers and volunteer coordinators. RMM explained that even though it countered the popular approach to protect ecosystems, private reserves were incredibly valuable: "[People] tend to think conservation has to be done

by the government, the NGOs, but... think how much land is in private hands." In contrast, some volunteers worried about the reserve being 'private,' either because they doubted its intentions or worried about its ability to 'protect' the area in the long term. In many cases, T-I volunteers believed that the way to 'conserve' and 'protect' land was to set land aside, not allowing people to own and work it. VM11 said, "It's kind of hard to tell Ecuador, which has a preponderance of land that needs protecting, that they can't farm... International conservation organisations could perhaps buy this land and when they own it, it's safe theoretically."

Varying interpretations of 'conservation' also affected interactions among actors at the reserve, sometimes highlighting imperialistic and dominant attitudes. At times, volunteers argued they knew better methods and goals for 'conservation' than those proposed by managers. RMF stated:

If... the activities... don't match what they thought they would be doing, it's like, "Why are we doing this if that is not conservation?" They are critical because... they can't conceive another way of doing conservation as the one they have in their mind.

For instance, volunteers who envisioned 'conservation' as tree planting did not always understand how weeding around saplings was conservation. RMF stated that because of these differences, "sometimes [volunteers] pressure too much. We ended up... doing projects that are not our projects [e.g., drying plants]." VC3 disclosed how hard it was to be judged by volunteers questioning the reserve's conservation efforts. She emphasised that the family had no obligation to protect its property; they conserved because they believed it was important to protect and use the forest wisely. In contrast, not seeing the connection between tasks and conservation, volunteers sometimes felt inefficient. VM1 admitted, "I almost feel [my volunteer fee] is benefiting conservation more than what I am doing here."

Problems resulting from differences in 'conservation' ideologies were most clearly seen in the reforestation and sustainable wood production project. Reforestation occurred in former pastures that had grown back to secondary forests. Volunteers often described the 10–15 foot vegetation as "trees," whereas managers described them as "weeds." To restore threatened hardwoods and supply trees for sustainable harvesting, volunteers and staff cut rows of "trees" to form openings to plant saplings. Clearing reforestation lines gave hardwoods a head start, instead of waiting decades for these species to regenerate on their own. Cutting trees contradicted T-I and some T-II volunteers' perception that 'conservation' involved 'saving' trees from deforestation. These volunteers struggled with both cutting "weedy" trees and knowing that some of the planted trees would be harvested. VF14 argued, "I thought we were here to do conservation and aren't we just planting these trees so they can chop [them] down and sell them and... we are chopping... 50 trees for one tree plant[ed]." RMM understood that volunteers were concerned about the reforestation project: "They say why [do] we plant trees for cutting trees. From a conservation mind that is a sin." He then illustrated the complexity of these

issues when asking what was better—to have sustainable wood production or to continue having cows and crops that result in clear-cuts and increased pesticide use.

Part of the reluctance to cut trees could also have resulted from volunteers' belief that 'conservation' should not be 'profitable.' VM6 said he did not agree with sustainable wood production because "it's good to have sustainable things, but... that's part of a lumber industry." Yet, many of these volunteers said they thought the reserve should be more 'sustainable;' it seemed that for these volunteers agriculture and food (e.g., coffee, jam) were acceptable sustainable, income-generating activities and products, but not trees. RMF realized that given volunteers' views on profit the reserve had to be careful with how it presented information. For instance, after one staff member had told volunteers that they planted Canelo Negro (*Ocotea heterochroma*) because it was an economic species, RMF quickly listed for concerned volunteers the other reasons for planting this species (e.g., availability).

These different views toward 'conservation' also led to tensions among volunteers. For instance, after conducting reforestation work one day, VF2 and VF10, two T-III volunteers with ecological backgrounds, tried to explain to frustrated volunteers that trees being cut were secondary growth and that 'private reserves' must generate 'profit' to succeed with conservation. VF10, who studied soils and worked with farmers in Canada, questioned other volunteers' actions: "It's really easy to just be, 'They're doing it wrong. They're going to cut down trees,' but what do you do in your day to day life back home that's so admirable compared to planting trees so your grandkids can eat a meal." Interestingly, VF2 and VF10's responses differed from those of many scientists that Campbell (2002) interviewed had an underlying preservationist ideology of conservation; this could have resulted because both these volunteers also engaged in the social side of environmental issues (e.g., land planning).

Having different ideas of 'conservation' also led most T-I and some T-II volunteers to question the reserve's effectiveness because it was not as far along as they had expected. For instance, VM11 exclaimed: "I don't know where all the money and man hours go, honestly!... I see reforestation lines over there and... up the hill and all this could have been done in the last six months... what the hell has been happening here for so long?" However, VF10 pointed out, conservation 'takes time':

People... forget that conservation is not something you can see the results of in two weeks. It's something that you'll see results of [in] 50 years... or a 100 years... conservation work is an on-going process; it's not something you can stroll into.

RMM agreed that conservation projects need continuity and a long-term plan. VM9 believed that this desire for immediate results came from volunteers imposing a Western view: "Even though in your mind you know it takes a long time... it's almost like you wish it could just go quicker. It's probably part of that Western cultural thing. You want things to happen now or yesterday." Some volunteers who believed that conservation

took time were also volunteers characterising conservation as challenging in South America.

Different 'conservation' ideologies caused mistrust toward the reserve among some T-I and T-II volunteers. For instance, VF1 doubted the reserve's conservation intentions and wondered if the goal was not just to make money: "If it would really be sustainable logging, if they are just cutting some of the trees... but how can we be sure that that is happening." After hearing that some of the volunteer fee would buy additional land for the reserve's untouched section, she felt better. Other volunteers also questioned where their volunteer fee went because they did not see it going to buying resources (e.g., seeds, tools) that they believed were necessary components for 'conservation.' In contrast, VF15 countered:

Some people see conservation as one thing and forget run[ing] a group of volunteers takes more than planting trees and building a garden and whatever else people might think conservation work is... I don't know if at this point, or at any point, people would actually give [up] what they think their definition of conservation work is.

It is worth mentioning that although almost all volunteers emphasised their desire to do 'conservation' at the reserve, 'conservation' ideologies did not greatly affect their attitudes and behaviours regarding personal environmental impacts—regardless of whether they held a preservation or a sustainable-use ideology. The most commonly recognised impact was the environmental effects of flying to plant trees, which ten volunteers, equally distributed among types, mentioned; however, some volunteers indicated they thought of this only after talking with other volunteers. Whereas some volunteers believed their net impact was positive, in extreme cases, such as VF13, volunteers wondered if the overall result was worth it: "You put out a lot of pollution in taking a plane here... [you] have to weigh whether that is as much you are going to give to conserving or whether you are just polluting more."

What was more surprising was the lack of connection between 'conservation' and their daily personal actions at the reserve. Despite mentioning 'conservation' involved being 'sustainable,' few T-II (n=2) and T-III (n=5) mentioned their or other volunteers' wasteful activities at the reserve (e.g., trash). Unexpectedly, more T-I volunteers (n=6) mentioned garbage or electricity when asked about negative environmental impacts resulting from volunteers. However, three of them referred to learning about this from a lecture given by RMF shortly before their interview. In contrast to the seven T-II and T-III volunteers who mentioned volunteer impact, only one T-I volunteer elaborated; many T-I volunteers believed that the effect was minimal. For example, VF7 answered, "Living here using electricity, but I think it's pretty reasonable." Yet, I observed several volunteers, including those who mentioned waste being a problem, engaging in wasteful actions, such as leaving on lights and taking long, gas-heated showers. Over the years, RMF has repeatedly seen evidence of this disconnect between 'conservation' in the forest and 'conservation' in the

daily personal actions of volunteers. She informed volunteers: "It doesn't matter how many trees you plant, if you let the light on, it's worse for conservation." VF17 was one of the few volunteers who recognised the tension between working for 'conservation' and volunteer consumption and waste:

The amount [of] trash produced by the volunteers is bad because we're creating this impact while we're supposed to be protecting the environment, sustainable, and not dependent on these processed global foods—and then you've got overflowing trashcans.

Ironically, when discussing some of the major environmental problems of the region, many volunteers characterised Ecuadorians as environmentally unknowledgeable because of the litter volunteers saw on the roadsides and in towns. For instance, VM3 said, "People in states don't just throw their trash out their window, but here that's just what people do... If people are having all these big environmental problems because they can't even be bothered to put their trash in a trashcan, what is the future of Ecuador?"

DISCUSSION

By analysing participants' use of the word 'conservation' and words clustering nearby, I offer a possible tool to evaluate the sociocultural impacts of volunteer tourism projects (Benson and Wearing 2011). This method allowed me to identify how differences and similarities in volunteer tourists', managers', and coordinators' interpretations of 'conservation' affected various dimensions of the project. Differing ideologies, as well as associated characterisations of people and environmental issues (e.g., locals blamed for environmental destruction), had on-the-ground implications, affecting behaviour and interactions among actors (e.g., tension about reforestation, imposition of beliefs, etc.). In some cases, volunteers with dominant conservation views resisted, to varying degrees, managers' and project goals (e.g., questioning, focusing on alternative activities). Given that Wearing (2004) proposed volunteer tourism might represent best practice tourism and Duffy (2002) claimed it can be a significant development force, this case study has several implications for conservation volunteer tourism, and international conservation projects more broadly.

As demonstrated in this paper, political ecology can be a fruitful lens for not only ecotourism studies (Campbell et al. 2007), but also for conservation volunteer tourism research. A political ecology framework allowed me to examine how "discursive struggles" over meanings and circulation of 'conservation' have material ramifications on conservation volunteer projects (Bryant 1998: 79; Campbell et al. 2007). Focusing on discourse and its resulting impacts builds on existing work examining conservation development projects and environmental concerns, in which researchers analysed meanings of loaded or ambiguous terms, such as "conservation," "nature," "sustainability" (e.g., Nygren 1998; Campbell 2002; Cadieux 2011). Despite this wider attention to how terms are understood differently, not much conservation volunteer tourism research has focused explicitly

on how participants interpret 'conservation' and other terms central to the experience (e.g., Gray and Campbell 2007). By first deciphering the different ways in which actors interpret 'conservation' (or other terms), a more complex understanding of effects occurs. If differences are not clear, real impacts can occur, such as have been seen in this and other conservation projects where interpreting 'conservation' differently impacted projects and relationships between actors (e.g., Campbell 2002; Horowitz 2008).

In addition, rather than relying on a predetermined binary to understand interactions at the reserve (e.g., international volunteers versus managers; scientists versus local communities), analysing the use of 'conservation' allowed me to differentiate multiple types based on discourse and ideological views. This unmasked the differences and similarities between and among groups; actors could not be separated into distinct categories of international volunteers and Ecuadorian managers. For instance, T-III volunteers' views were more closely aligned with managers' than with T-I volunteers. Similar to how Adger et al. (2001) described local differences in discourse, and Belsky (1999) identified dissimilar views among community members, it cannot be assumed that non-local participants necessarily agree with each other or disagree with local members. Using this approach also illustrated the complexity of conservation ideologies; T-II did not clearly subscribe to either a protectionist or sustainable-use view of conservation, but rather articulated both in their discourse.

Focused attention on 'conservation' ideologies could also have some practical implications for volunteer tourism projects, and could be useful for assessing ecological, social, and economic outcomes (Benson and Wearing 2011). For instance, T-I and T-II volunteers who leaned toward an ideology embodying 'preservation' struggled with the reforestation project, which others might consider an economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable project. This was one of the reserve's major projects and some volunteers were reluctant to help because of either economic gain or perceived negative environmental impact; this could in turn affect achieving the reserve's goals. Some volunteers' interpretations of 'conservation' countered those of the managers and the project. Even when these volunteers helped with work, managers had to justify their actions on a regular basis to volunteers who doubted the connection between sustainable wood production and 'conservation.' Part of the problem could have resulted from managers not being clear in their usage of terms (e.g., using 'preservation' although it counters their ideology), which might have led volunteers to expect their ideologies would be more closely aligned with those of the managers.

The findings from this study also highlight the concepts discussed in literature on the political ecology of tourism consumption (Meletis and Campbell 2009). Much work examining conservation projects focuses on nature, protected areas, biodiversity, or natural resource use (e.g., Duffy 2005; Büscher and Dressler 2007); however, waste and personal actions also play a significant role in conservation projects. In examining ideographs and interactions, I found

that although volunteers espoused ‘conservation,’ many appeared disconnected from the concept in their daily personal actions (e.g., long showers). If volunteers viewed ‘conservation’ as only protecting trees and wildlife, then consumption might not seem to be a contradiction. However, this illustrates the paradox of needing resources and saving nature from being consumed for resources (Büscher and Dressler 2007). Consumption affects the environment through extraction of resources to produce objects and the eventual disposal of these consumed objects, but volunteers might be too removed from the beginning and end points of the commodity chain to recognise this connection. Meletis and Campbell (2009) explained that recent work on the political ecology of consumption has conceptualised tourists and other consumers as “individual and collective impact producers,” resulting in partial responsibility for effects of the industries catering to them. Many of the volunteers, even when recognising their responsibility, rationalised the impact or did not change their behaviour, in a sense still not accepting responsibility. Future work could examine further the relationship, and possible contradiction, between ‘conservation’ attitudes and personal actions involved in not only volunteer tourism projects, but also conservation projects more generally.

This research also supports Gray and Campbell’s (2007) and Cousins et al.’s (2009) arguments that conservation volunteer tourism may not be a decommodified form of tourism (Wearing et al. 2005). Decommodification assumes that emphasis is not on profit, which can be problematic because it implies that those involved in conservation volunteer tourism have a conservation ideology that does not involve profit (Wearing et al. 2005; Gray and Campbell 2007). Although some volunteers believed conservation projects should not be profit-generating, they still chose to pay to engage in conservation work. Cousins et al. (2009) pointed out that “organizations that provide conservation projects are not simply conservationists but capitalists seeking to generate profits, and the volunteers are simultaneously conservationists and customers.” In addition, those involved with conservation volunteer tourism may rely on profit for survival. The managers received volunteers to generate funds for continuing the reserve’s conservation efforts. In emphasising the non-profit aspect, Wearing et al. (2005) seemed to dismiss the idea that people running volunteer projects might rely on revenue to support themselves. Perhaps Wearing et al.’s (2005) comments referred to larger, for-profit intermediary and international organisations, but even the NGO relied on volunteer fees to support its conservation initiatives and cover administrative costs.

In contending that conservation must be profitable, managers and volunteer coordinators appear to commodify nature (i.e. nature must pay for itself). In discussing the neoliberalisation of nature, Duffy (2008) stated that to conserve nature, people often claim it must have market value to generate funds for locals (e.g., ecotourism). Managers and the reserve volunteer coordinator emphasised repeatedly that conservation is a social and economic problem, and it must be profitable to encourage others to engage in it. They hoped to be a model

for other Ecuadorians who wished to conserve their land while sustaining livelihoods. However, their discourse varies from what is more commonly critiqued as commodifying and neoliberalising nature. Reserve managers were not claiming that if nature had no market value it could not be protected, but rather that because conservation involved social and economic aspects, even conservation-minded individuals rarely could set aside their land, generating no income.

Benson and Wearing (2011) also believed that more research on volunteer tourism needed to examine if an absence of local involvement existed in the decision-making process. Although not specifically addressing local involvement, the findings of this study indicated that many volunteers might not be supportive of local environmental governance. Power dimensions that can ensnare environmental governance were seen in volunteers’ characterisations of local people and conservation (Lemos and Agrawal 2006). T-I volunteers more often characterised locals as a danger to protected areas, which led these volunteers to support conservation approaches that set aside land and removed it from human use. These volunteers often did not like the idea of privately-owned property unless a conservation organisation owned it. Researchers studying the neoliberalisation of nature (e.g., Duffy 2005) have found similar sentiments among conservation development proponents who support safeguarding nature through protected areas created by government regulation or privatisation of land. However, there were some differences between volunteers and these conservation proponents. T-II and T-III volunteers were more supportive of private reserves that supported both conservation and livelihoods. In addition, volunteers from all typologies expressed scepticism of government involvement in conservation.

A close connection between governance and environmental knowledge existed in volunteer responses. T-III volunteers often believed that Ecuadorians were not yet at a place where they could focus on conservation. These volunteers hoped that in time Ecuadorians would have a conservation mindset that would result in different land-use practices. Those who believed locals were not able to conserve often linked this to lack of ‘education.’ In several instances, volunteers linked environmental knowledge to school and formal education. In other cases, volunteers expressed they had learned at school that locals were not ready to conserve. This re-articulation has been noted in other work on conservation and environmental knowledge. For example, Duffy (2005: 310) stated that “scientific knowledge becomes incorporated into stories and discourses, it is framed, interpreted, and rhetorically communicated.” Future volunteer tourism research could examine the role environmental knowledge and perceptions of knowledge play in affecting and shaping conservation volunteer tourism projects.

This study does not capture all the actors in conservation volunteer tourism. Many volunteer projects also involve local staff and community members who, as political ecologists have found, may have different interpretations of ‘conservation’ and other key concepts such as biodiversity (Wilshusen 2003). If volunteer tourism projects hope to

achieve positive on-the-ground interactions, not only is it critical to interview other participants, but also to examine how participants interpret and discuss terms. Future work exploring community members' interpretations of key concepts is a necessary step towards including locals' views into volunteer projects (Benson and Wearing 2011), and possibly also towards the community participation that Wearing (2004) had hoped volunteer tourism could attain.

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NOTES

1. I do not disclose the reserve's name to protect the reserve's and the managers' identities.
2. The reserve had 49 volunteers between July and September 2007; 40 volunteers between June and August 2008.
3. I do not disclose the NGO's name to protect the volunteer coordinators' identities.
4. My last week at the reserve, I interviewed five volunteers who were at the reserve less than two weeks.
5. For detailed explanation of this method, theory, and benefits, see Grimm 2010.

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