

## The Politics of Conservation: Sonaha, Riverscape in the Bardia National Park and Buffer Zone, Nepal

Sudeep Jana Thing<sup>a, #</sup>, Roy Jones<sup>a</sup>, and Christina Birdsall Jones<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Planning and Geography, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

<sup>c</sup>John Curtin Institute of Public Policy, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

<sup>#</sup>Corresponding author. E-mail: [Sudeep.Janathing@curtin.edu.au](mailto:Sudeep.Janathing@curtin.edu.au)

### Abstract

This paper problematises the recent participatory turn in nature conservation policy and practices through an ethnographic investigation of the experiences of the marginalised *Sonaha* (indigenous people of the region of Bardia where the national park is located) in relation to the conservation discourses, policies and practices of the Bardia National Park authorities in the Nepalese lowland. Since the mid-1990s, the country's conservation thinking and policy paradigms have shifted away from an earlier protectionist and fortress conservation focus towards more participatory approaches. However, for the *Sonaha* who are historically and culturally embedded in and derive their livelihoods from the riverscape in and around the Park, the pre-existing discourses and practices of strict nature conservation still impact adversely on their everyday lives. The paper argues that participatory reform, despite its strengths, has nevertheless reinforced the old conservation paradigm and hegemonic conservation discourses that normalised conservation violence and the marginalisation of the *Sonaha*. Based on critical ethnographic work with the *Sonaha*, we present a political ecology critique of conservation approaches. A case for rethinking contestations between indigenous peoples and national park managements is postulated.

**Keywords:** Bardia National Park, conflicts, indigenous peoples, *Sonaha*, discourse, Nepal, political ecology, protected area, riverscape

### INTRODUCTION

In the global conservation domain, Nepal has been portrayed as a country with progressive conservation policies and practices (Heinen and Kattel 1992; Heinen and Shrestha 2006) but in recent years these have attracted strong criticism (Anaya 2009; Paudel et al. 2012; Stevens 2009, 2010, 2013a,b). Since the mid-1990s, the country's conservation thinking and policy paradigms have shifted away from its earlier protectionist

and fortress conservation focus towards more community-based and people oriented conservation of ecosystems and landscapes. But these shifts only represent a partial adoption of the 'new paradigm' principles and standards advocated by the IUCN in an attempt to fully meet the treaty obligations under ILO 169 and the standards of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In its lowland national parks at least, the Nepalese government continues to maintain exclusionary 'old paradigm' policies and practices that displace Indigenous peoples and local communities (Stevens 2013a, 2014b,c) such as the *Sonaha* indigenous minority groups in the lower Karnali River delta, in the Midwestern lowland Nepal.

This case study documents and examines the experiences of the *Sonaha* in the context of the conservation practices operating in and around the Bardia National Park (BNP), the largest lowland protected area in Nepal. The riverscape and the research subjects under inquiry are situated in the spatial and

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policy contexts of a techno-bureaucratic and military controlled national park and of participatory regimes of conservation in its designated buffer zone. The *Sonaha* with their long-standing occupancy and relationships with the riverscape are still confronted and governed by an exclusionary national park regime and discourse notwithstanding recent shifts towards participatory conservation. The paper argues, participatory reform has failed to address the *Sonaha*'s worldviews and consequent resistance, rather it has perpetuated the old conservation paradigm and hegemonic conservation discourses that normalise conservation violence and marginalisation of the *Sonaha*.

In this paper, we first discuss the framework and theoretical perspectives that inform our inquiry and analysis of this case. We then briefly present the methodological approach for this study, and provide background information on the park and the policy context. We then explore the *Sonaha*'s unique ways of life and livelihoods; examine their contestations with the Park management and interrogate the dominant conservation discourses within which these take place. We then outline the implications of our analysis and its contribution to the reframing of park and people contestations more generally.

## POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF CONSERVATION

Our theoretical framework is informed by the political ecology of conservation (Vaccaro, Beltran and Paquet 2013). Political ecology broadly defines the relations of power and difference in interactions between human groups and their biophysical environments (Gezon and Paulson 2005). Early works in the field of political ecology constituted the relationships between social, political and environmental processes using a framework of structural relations of power and domination over environmental resources (Scoones 1999). Some of the important topics of concern to political ecology are: the nexus between environmental change and degradation and peoples' marginalisation and poverty; struggles over the use of, access to and control over natural resources among social groups; and environmental identity and its role in the creation of social movements (Robbins 2012). Since the 1990s, increased attention has been paid to the post-structural concerns of discourse, power and knowledge (Escobar 1996; Bryant 2000; Peet and Watts 2004).

The terrain of the political ecology of conservation is diverse. It encompasses: the examination of state control and the exercise of power upon communities; the colonial and post-colonial contexts of protected area designation and management; the role of conservation NGOs and the influence of conservation science in the understanding of nature; the socio-cultural impacts of conservation practices on social groups; and policy reforms and neo liberal thinking on conservation among others (e.g., Adams and Hutton 2007; Brockington et al. 2008; Vaccaro et al. 2013; Stevens 2013a, 2014c). The political ecology of conservation therefore seeks to inform both sound environmental management (conservation) and 'empowerment of disadvantaged social groups' (Zimmerer 2000: 357).

Globally, the experiences of protected area designation as a geographical strategy for biodiversity conservation have been mixed. While there is evidence of the benefits and diverse values of protected areas (Secretariat of the CBD 2008), strict and exclusionary paradigms and practices of protected area administrations have produced adverse impacts on local inhabitants and indigenous peoples (e.g., West and Brechin 1991; Ghimire and Pimbert 1997; Brechin et al. 2003; Colchester 2003; Stevens 2014c; West et al. 2006). The relationships between indigenous peoples, state instrumentalities and major conservation organisations have frequently been strained (Chapin 2004; Dowie 2009) and indigenous peoples and local communities have resisted protected area initiatives (Neumann 1992; Norgrove and Hulme 2006; Holmes 2007; Stevens 2014c). However, recent thinking on conservation and protected areas has undergone a major shift with increasing attention being given to human rights, social justice, equity, culture, democratic governance (e.g., Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004; Brosius 2004; Campese et al. 2007; Stevens 2014c,d) and to the roles and contribution of indigenous and local communities (Borrini-Feyerabend 2010) leading to 'a new protected area paradigm' (Stevens 2014d).

## Power and discourse

Our analyses are informed by the discourse-power nexus (Foucault 1980) since the relations of power and differences among social groups are central to political ecology (Wilshusen 2003; Gezon and Paulson 2005). We pay particular attention to the material and structural dimensions of conservation politics and conflicts as well as to their implicit symbolic and discursive aspects (Escobar 1996; Nygren 2004).

As noted by Foucault (1982: 790), power relationships must be sought in the mode of action of *government*, and in the ways that the "conduct of individuals or of groups" are directed and governed beyond the domains of violence, struggle, or consent. Several scholars have examined the concept of 'governmentality' in relation to conservation (e.g., Agrawal 2005; Campbell 2007; Fletcher 2010; Robbins 2012; Caruso 2014). Equally important, in the operation of power, is the idea of 'subjectivity' (Foucault 1982), the process whereby human beings are made subjects, both through self-subjection and through being made subject to others (Neumann 2001; Agrawal 2005, Caruso 2014). We also appreciate that the operation of power can be subtle, indirect and invisible. In our view, both these concepts resonate with a radical conception of power (Lukes 2005).

We understand discourse as: "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer 1995: 44). In this paper, particular attention is given to the hegemonic power of the nature conservation discourse as it influences the management of the Park and its buffer zone. In particular we consider the issue of the conservation of the riverscape which is controlled and mediated by conservation

*Sketch map (not to scale) of the river delta and the customary riverine territory of the Sonaha. Only Sonaha settlements with corresponding ward numbers are marked. Credit: Sudeep Jana Thing*



**Table 1**  
**Chronology of key events in the BNP**

Time/period	Events
<b>Pre 1816</b>	The region was settled by Indigenous peoples such as <i>Tharu</i> and <i>Sonaha</i>
<b>1816-1861</b>	Bardia under British India control
<b>1876</b>	Prince of Wales, Albert Edward and his hunting team, on a hunting trip organised by Rana rulers, killed at least 17 tigers in about a month in the jungles of the western Tarai.
<b>1923</b>	Under prime minister Chandra Shamsheer Rana, clearing of Bardia forests occurred for timber extraction and export to India.
<b>Pre 1956</b>	Bardia as a <i>Birta</i> forest for Jung Bahadur Rana and a prime site for big game hunting.
<b>1964/65</b>	King Mahendra's hunt.
<b>1969</b>	Part of the area was designated as Royal Hunting Reserve. Two villages were relocated before the reserve's creation.
<b>1973</b>	Proposed status of wildlife reserve.
<b>1974</b>	Warden appointed for the wildlife reserve.
<b>1976</b>	Royal Karnali Wildlife Reserve gazetted over 386 square kilometres after relocation of the village of Chisapani in the east. Palace hunt of King Birendra.
<b>1984</b>	Reserve area extended to the east (including the Babai valley) taking in a total area of 968 square kilometres. 9500 people were resettled in the Taratal area, further south in the region.
<b>1986</b>	13 one horned rhinoceros were translocated to the western section of the Park, in the Karnali Flood Plain.
<b>1988</b>	The reserve was upgraded to National Park status.
<b>1989</b>	In February 1989, two game scouts were killed following an encounter with local people who had illegally entered the Park.
<b>1992</b>	20 Gharial crocodiles released in Karnali River and 26 Black Buck released in the Bagaura grassland, in the western section of the Park.
<b>1995</b>	Bardia Integrated Conservation Project (WWF Nepal) initiated. UNDP Park and People Project (PPP) launched.
<b>1996</b>	BNP Regulation and Buffer Zone Management Regulation enacted. Creation of a buffer zone area covering 327 square kilometres (17 Village Development Committees).
<b>2001</b>	PPP ended. Beginning of Tarai Arc Landscape (TAL) Project (collaboration of government, WWF Nepal, donor and other organisations).
<b>2002</b>	Participatory Conservation Program extension of PPP runs to 2004.
<b>2005</b>	Western Terai Arc Landscape Complex Project (WTLCP) launched (government, UNDP and other agencies).
<b>2007</b>	31 rhinoceros counted in the Karnali Flood Plain.
<b>2008</b>	<i>Sonaha</i> granted fishing licences. <i>Sonaha</i> from Manau were held on a charge of poaching a rhino horn.
<b>2009</b>	Water level in the Geruwa River declines but the Karnali River (outside the Park) maintains its level.
<b>2010</b>	180 sq.km extension of the Buffer zone to the north. On March 10, extrajudicial killing of three Dalit women including one minor in the Park (OHCHR-Nepal 2010)
<b>2012</b>	Tiger population doubles (37) in the Park. Tiger spotted in the Karnali Flood Plain and in grasslands in the Park.

Portions of the current area under state protection were originally inhabited by indigenous peoples such as the *Tharu* and the *Sonaha*, and later by other migrant settlers. King Mahendra, who had hunted in Bardia in the early 1960s (Bhatt 2003), later supported the foundation of the state conservation movement. While Nepal's forests were nationalised in the 1950s, state-bureaucratic control in the 1960s in Bardia also took the form of setting aside forested areas between Babai and Thakurdwara under the wildlife management division of the government (Upreti 1994), see Figure 1.

In 1969 the Park area was closed to locals and became the exclusive hunting reserve of the ruling monarch. Armed forest guards were deployed. Later, after it was designated as an official wildlife reserve in 1976, grazing and forest access by local people were increasingly restricted with military deployment for this purpose occurring from the mid-1970s (Bolton 1976). This strict management of the Park was institutionalised by national legislation and strongly supported by the state bureaucracy, the ruling monarch and the royal family<sup>2</sup>. During both the Park's creation and the later expansion of its boundaries, local inhabitants were displaced in the late 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s. Some 9600 people were resettled outside the Park in 1984 (see Table 1).

### The Discursive Creation of the Park

The idea of a protected area in Bardia was inspired by the field experiences and encounters of conservation experts in the scenic and wildlife rich River Karnali and its surrounding forests, especially in the western section of the present Park<sup>3</sup> (see Figure 1). In the early 1960s, the British naturalist, Gee (1963: 74) recommended that areas north and south of the Chisapani Gorge along the Karnali River as well as "...any other such area found suitable for the purpose, be constituted as national parks or wild life sanctuaries for the preservation of the country's low elevation fauna".

At that time, a national discourse of wildlife protection was triggered by narratives of an ecological crisis in the lowland Tarai. In-migration and forest destruction in the 1960s were endangering the one horned rhinoceros and this led to designation of the country's first National Park in Chitwan. The preservation ethic and the interest of the powerful monarchy and royal family in wildlife, together with the international techno-scientific discourse of wildlife conservation, and the provision of international aid, crucially influenced the state imposition of protected areas during the 1970s. The discourse of tiger conservation in particular was instrumental in the inception of the Park in Bardia (Blower 1973; Bolton 1976) which was also aided by discourses of the Yellowstone model (Stevens 2014c), the idea of fortress conservation (Brockington 2002), and the 'old paradigm' of protected areas (Stevens 2014b,c).

### Policy Evolution for Protected Areas in Nepal

Nearly two decades of exclusionary and top-down management of protected areas by the state backed by the 1973 National

Parks and Wildlife Conservation (NPWC) Act, resulted in conflicts and tensions with the local populations. Subsequently, the global thrust towards participatory development, advocated participatory approaches in conservation which were reflected in major state policy documents in the 1980s and early 1990s (Ojha et al. 2014). Important provisions about local participation in the management of Buffer Zones, peripheral areas or enclaves with human habitation in different types of protected areas, were incorporated in legislation in the 1990s<sup>4</sup>. These were landmark shifts in conservation policy and thinking and saw participatory conservation at least partially accepted in the management of protected areas in Nepal.

Several buffer zones have been declared since the mid-1990s. In Bardia, a buffer zone was declared and demarcated in 1997 (see Figure 1). Participatory conservation was institutionalised through the creation of local institutions<sup>5</sup> for the co-management of the buffer zone. This reflects the evolution of Park management and governance (see Table 1). It is worth noting that the buffer zone populations do not have a significant role and authority in the decision making and policies of the park management. Park warden has supreme power and authority in the management of the buffer zones. Therefore, buffer zone policies and practices have also come under criticism (Paudel et al. 2012).

### THE SONAHA CUSTOMARY RIVERINE TERRITORY AND WAYS OF LIFE

The lower Karnali River delta is bordered by the main Karnali River channel and a branch known as the Geruwa River that forms the western boundary of the Park today. Much of the delta falls in the western buffer zone of the Park (see Figure 1). The *Sonaha* consider themselves as a distinct ethnic group indigenous to the delta. In recent times, they have been seeking recognition as one of the officially designated indigenous peoples of Nepal<sup>6</sup>. Oral accounts by the *Sonaha* elders suggest that they were present in the delta as far back as the pre-unification period of modern Nepal in the eighteenth century. The *Sonaha* elders claim a history and interaction with the riverscape in the delta that predates the arrival of the *Dangaura Tharu*, a sub-group of *Tharu* originally from Dang valley, which now constitute the majority population in the delta (Chetri 2005).

The *Sonaha* population has often been unaccounted for in the national census. Although the latest census mentions 579 people with a *Sonaha* mother tongue (CBS 2011), more than twice this number (1249) were identified as *Sonaha* during the study and this total may still be understated. The *Sonaha* reside in different locations in the delta (both inside and outside the Park buffer zone, mainly closer to the rivers, see Figure 2) as well as outside Bardia in the Farwestern Nepal.

Historically, the *Sonaha* led a semi nomadic life involving artisanal fishing, the alluvial mining of gold dust, and foraging and accessing forest resources rather than a settled agrarian way of life. Their mobility and customary (temporary) shelters

called *Dera* or *Basahi* were concentrated on the river islands and river banks in and around the delta. The *Sonaha* consider this as their ancestral riverine territory (see Figure 2). The river and riparian areas also frame the *Sonaha*'s socio-cultural, spatial and livelihood practices—

Going to the river is our occupation! Fishing and gold panning! We, *Sonaha* cannot afford formal education. We take all our girls and boys to wash gold. Gold washing is our ancestral occupation. By carrying our belongings, carrying our sons and daughters, we go to the river..., gold and fish are our farming ... (Palti Sonaha, pers. comm.2012).

This English translation of the song above by a *Sonaha* woman underlines the importance attached to their customary ways of life. While artisanal gold panning technologies are still customary, the *Sonaha*'s fishing practices have undergone changes from the use of cast nets to plastic string gill nets, but they still rely on customary wooden canoes (see Figures 3 and 4). Their customary ways of life have been changing as the *Sonaha* diversify into other livelihood options including small-scale farming and seasonal daily wage labour. There has been increasing labour migration to the cities, to neighbouring India and recently to the Middle East. Despite these changes, their customary occupations are still the main source of subsistence, since most are landless or have minimal land holdings (see Tables 2 and 3)<sup>7</sup>. During the fieldwork period, many *Sonaha* regularly travelled through the delta away from their village settlements for fishing and gold panning purposes (see Figure 5). These practices still hold significance in their everyday lives as expressed below—

We have been making our living from the rivers. We have everything in the river. Our future....and our lives rely heavily on the river. River is the biggest property.... (Kallu Sonaha, pers.comm.2012).

River, sand, rocks are not only a natural area. For us they are just like land under cultivation. We are deriving benefits from it. We fish in the river..... from the sand



**Figure 3**  
*Sonaha fishers returning to the Dera at the tip of the delta across the Park. Credit: Sudeep Jana Thing*

**Table 2**  
**Fish catch of Sonaha men at the tip of the delta (Feb/March 2012)**

Male fishers (place of residence)	Number of days	Fish catch in kilograms (kg)	Earnings in Nepalese Rupees (NRs)
Pair one (Rajipur)	6	98	19600
Pair two (Sarkhol and Daulatpur)	8	143.5	28700
Pair three (Gola)	12	76	15200
Pair four (Gola)	6	84	16800
Pair five (Daulatpur)	6	65	13000
Pair six (Saijana and Sarkhol)	5	48	9600
Pair seven (Saijana and Sarkhol)	5	40.5	8100
Pair eight (Rajipur)	6	40.5	8100



**Figure 4**

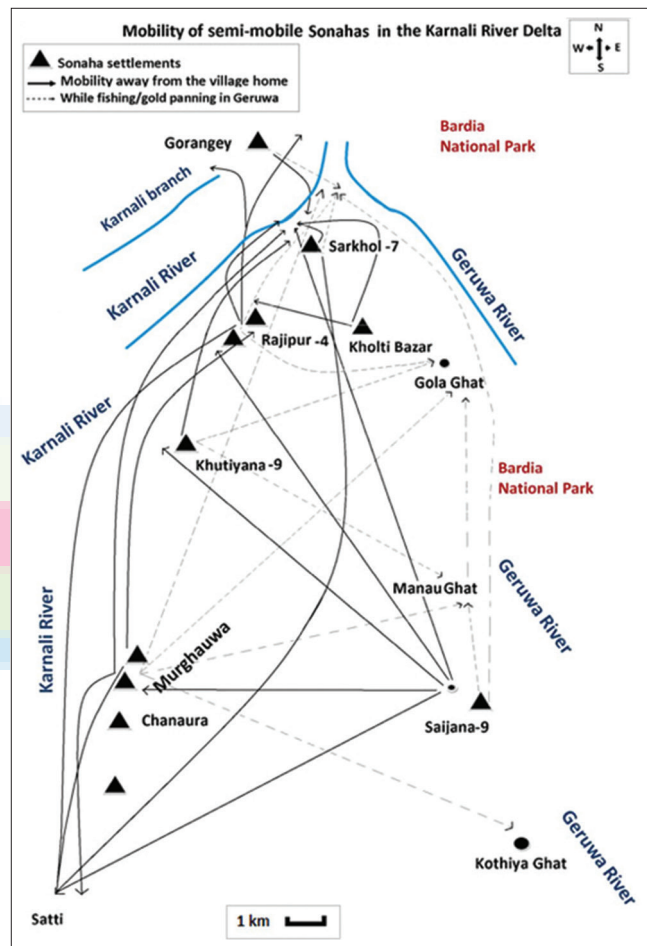
*Sonaha women from Rajipur village panning for gold in Karnali River in the delta. Credit: Sudeep Jana Thing*

we earn gold. They are just like a property [unlike a private property] just like land (Fula Ram Sonaha, pers. comm.2012, our addition).

A customary practice of managing and governing the gold panning areas as common property known as *Kafthans* existed until recently (Jana 2013). Although this practice was gradually weakened over the second half of the twentieth century, they operated up to the 1990s. The sacred gold panning plots on the river banks were allocated equally to each household willing to pan gold dust. This was regulated by the customary authority of a key person in each *Sonaha* lineage group who possessed the collective sacred shrine of the lineage and also performed rituals at the *Kafthans*. The *Sonaha* elders still recall how the riparian areas were historically allocated among various key persons across several lineage groups. The customary practices associated with the *Kafthans* were based on the *Sonaha*'s spiritual, economic and socio-cultural relations.

### The Sonaha's Lived Experiences and their Constructions of their Riverine Space

In addition to the significance of river based livelihoods noted above, the river and riparian areas in and around the Karnali delta (including those inside the Park) have deeper historical and cultural meanings, emotional connections, and relationships for the *Sonaha*. Interactions with their ancestral territory shape their collective identities and cultural practices. Although the *Sonaha* now live a more sedentary life, a number of the *Sonaha* in the delta continue to shelter in *Dera* on the



**Figure 5**

*Mobility of Sonaha in the Karnali River Delta. Apart from seasonal daily wage labour many Sonaha still maintain mobility for customary livelihoods. Credit: Sudeep Jana Thing*

river islands away from the village settlements, sometimes for up to one month at a time. Historically these have been places where intergenerational learning, skills and adaptations to the riverine way of life took place and where *Sonaha* kinship and social relations were fostered. "For us river islands are also our homes and villages" was a common sentiment expressed by the *Sonaha* during the fieldwork.

Customary *Kafthans* are also remembered by referring them as *Gaun* (village) but this has a radically different connotation than that of a *village* in popular Nepali vernacular. Although



**Table 3**  
**Gold panning income of the Sonaha at Rajipur (North Sonaha hamlet), July/August, 2011 - March 3, 2012**

Household (HH)	Income in Nepali Rupees
HH1 - Married couple	80,066
HH2 - Married couple	30,000
HH3 - Married couple	83,120
HH4 - Married couple	60,000-70,000
HH4 - Married couple	142,700-200,000
HH5 - Married couple	90,700
HH6 - Married couple	106,700
HH7 - Mother and a daughter	33,000
HH8 - Married couple	40,000
HH9 - Elderly woman	10,000
HH10 - Elderly single woman	-
HH11 - Married couple (Did not pan gold)	-

customary management of *Kafihans* and associated cultural practices have disappeared as a result of complex factors including the *Sonaha* losing access to and control over their ancestral territory as a result of state interventions and policies related to the Park, the elders still demonstrate emotional connections to those sites<sup>8</sup>. *Sonaha* adults also recollected childhood memories of these practices. Hence, this space is a lived space (Gow 1995) and not only a natural physical landscape. The riverscape in the delta, where the livelihood practices of the *Sonaha* thrive, also constitutes their knowledge and conceptions of the natural environment. It is meaningfully linked to a lived symbolic place in which their collective memories, cultural identities and meanings are embedded. However, the *Sonaha*'s meanings and close associations with the riverscape have been altered by the Park regime.

## PARK AND PEOPLE CONTESTATIONS

### The violence of nature conservation

Oral accounts and recollections by the *Sonaha* elders suggest that the creation of the Park, which some of them still refer to as *Arakshya* (a strict wildlife reserve), was forcibly imposed by the military and armed guards. Since the 1970s, with the enforcement of the strict Park laws and policies<sup>9</sup> their hitherto free mobility in the rivers around the Park has become increasingly constrained (See Table 1). As one elder lamented—

*Sonaha* had freedom over the rivers.... When it became Arakshya everything stopped, hunting, fishing and mobility. Army came to tell us, 'Do not enter the forest'. If they found us there, they would arrest us and take us away. Arakshya is for wild animal, we cannot go there (Mahangi Sonaha, pers.comm.2011).

The *Sonaha* often recall harassment by and punishments from the military and the Park authorities, and the extreme hardships they have experienced as their customary occupations were restricted and deemed as breaches of the Park regulations<sup>10</sup>. Several landless *Sonaha* families were also forced into the

exploitative bonded labour system. In the villages of Rajipur (Patabhar) and Saijana (Manau), hardships resulting from the Park restrictions and the actions of the authorities forced the *Sonaha* to migrate to India. The Park regime and its policies usurped their customary territory, curtailed their access to and mobility in the rivers and, more importantly, dismantled and altered their ties with the land and waters and their socio-cultural practices including *Kafihans* without offering them any just and lasting alternatives (Jana 2013)<sup>11</sup>. These detrimental impacts can be construed as a violence of conservation (Peluso 1993; Neumann 2001) perpetrated against the marginalised *Sonaha* by the Nepalese state.

In recent years, the Park administration and its conservation partners have mobilised local youth groups around the Park to curb wildlife poaching and illegal logging. The *Sonaha*'s relationships with these groups, which largely consisted of *Tharu* youth but none of the *Sonaha* during the study, were tense. Leaders influential in the youth group were also affiliated to the Young Communist League (YCL), the youth wing of the Community Party of Nepal (Maoists). During fieldwork, the *Sonaha* reported resentment of the raids by the youth cadres and the Park patrols on the river shelters and their attempts to discourage them from gold panning in the rivers around the Park. The youth cadres however saw themselves as agents of conservation, and can thus be considered as conservation subjects (Agrawal 2005) supported by the Park administration. This indicates that the coercive conservation measures of the state against the marginalised *Sonaha* have been increasingly exercised by local actors under the guise of community based anti-poaching campaigns.

Despite the shift to participatory conservation and development practices in the Park buffer zone, tensions with the Park authorities have continued<sup>12</sup>. Although the *Sonaha* are occasionally intercepted in the rivers at the Park boundary, the frequency of direct encounters between the *Sonaha* and the Park guards has declined in recent years. One of the reasons is that the main river channel of the Karnali, where most of the *Sonaha* currently fish and pan gold, now flows outside the Park's jurisdiction. The Geruwa River, at the Park's boundary, has recently been running low in water. The *Sonaha* fishing and gold panning practices there have therefore lessened in recent years. But the *Sonaha* fear that tensions are likely to intensify again if the main river channel of Karnali runs low again (as has happened in the past) and the *Sonaha* resume their customary occupations on the Geruwa River.

### Interrogating the discourses and practices of conservation and development

In addition to the coercive imposition of the national park regime and its associated discourse on the *Sonaha*, their everyday lives have been increasingly influenced and impacted by a much wider and dominant conservation discourse. In the context of the *Sonaha* and the Park, this hegemonic and exclusionary discourse of the state entails characteristics which can be seen as central to the 'old paradigm' of conservation as identified by Stevens (2014b)—

(1) Preservation of the Park (including the riverscape in and around the delta) as a 'wilderness' (Cronon 1995; Spence 1999) which fails to acknowledge and appreciate the existence of the *Sonaha* and their interactions with the natural environment; thereby separating the *Sonaha* from the 'wilderness'.

(2) Depiction of the *Sonaha*'s relationships and engagement with the riverscape as purely economic; and their practices as being incompatible with nature conservation; thereby criminalising and delegitimising their customary livelihoods and cultural practices.

(3) Discounting the *Sonaha*'s meanings and ties with the land, water and forests in the riverscape, thereby marginalising *Sonaha* worldviews and counter discourses.

In the official conservation discourse, the riverscape is represented and reconstructed as an ecologically significant natural ecosystem, the Karnali Flood Plain<sup>13</sup>, a biodiversity hotspot and an ecotourism destination. It is portrayed and promoted as an important habitat of the endangered one horned rhinoceros, tiger, Gharial crocodiles and river dolphins (DNPWC/MoFSC 2001, 2007). The Park officials and conservation practitioners interviewed in the study articulated these dominant discourses of the riverscape and its conservation in relation to the Park. These respondents did not envisage *Sonaha* coexistence with the riverscape, and held views counter to *Sonaha* meanings of the riverscape, as well as, to international conservation discourse on the rights of indigenous peoples (Stevens 2014c,d). These conservationist discourses of the riverscape ignore *Sonaha* history and environmental interaction and rather reinforce the hegemonic conservation discourse outlined above.

The *Sonaha* in the delta have encountered the discourse and practice of *Madhyawarti* (buffer zone) policies since the late 1990s. Several Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) have been instrumental in promoting the Nepalese state's dominant discourse and practices of conservation in the Park buffer zone (see Table 1). These ICDPs seek to engage the local populations, the state and its conservation partners for conservation and community development, to build local institutions and support local livelihoods. Such initiatives include: management of community forests; setting up electric fences to address depredation and raids by wildlife; conservation awareness and education. The creation and existence of three tiered local institutions for the management of the buffer zone has been important in promoting and intensifying a discourse of *Samrachan* (conservation) at the grassroots level. These local institutions and ICDPs, in which the *Sonaha* have no role in decision making, played a significant role in reinforcing the dominant discourse of *Nikunja* (national park).

Until 2006, the *Sonaha* were invisible in the Park management plans and documents and, therefore, in various ecological and conservation studies in relation to the Park. They appeared for the first time in the Park management plan for 2007-2011, with

respect to their potential role in the conservation and tourism zone as noted below (DNPWC/MoFSC 2007: 26):

A tourism package will be developed in some selected areas ..... and other villages having *Sonaha* people and the *Tharu*. These Special Target Groups identified .... should be used as Special Resource Group (indigenous knowledge, skills and practices) for wildlife and aquatic fauna conservation.

Although, for the *Sonaha*, this package has yet to materialise, they gradually gained visibility through the activities of the Western Terai Landscape Project (WTLCP), 2005–2012, a government executed project funded by international donors that began engaging with the *Sonaha* from 2007 onwards. To leverage the benefits from this Project, such as micro saving and credit funds, the *Sonaha* appropriated the dominant conservation discourse already accepted by many of their fellow buffer zone residents, by associating themselves with the Project activities. In 2007, the Project and the Park administration organised the *Sonaha* at Patabhar and Manau (west of the Park in the buffer zone, see Figure 2), into an exclusive *Sonaha* community based organisation known as the *Sonaha* Conservation and Development Sub-Committee (SCDS).

Hence, the *Sonaha* have not only been subjected to the strict conservation regime but they have also been co-opted into the mainstream discourse and practices under the rubric of participatory conservation and development in the buffer zone<sup>14</sup>. The *Sonaha* residents in the buffer zone are eligible to receive the benefits of ICDPs supported livelihood activities as well as a portion of the Park revenues allocated for the buffer zone residents. Firstly, as residents and legitimate members and beneficiaries of buffer zone user groups and community forests and secondly, as members of the SCDS within the formal structure of buffer zone management<sup>15</sup>, the *Sonaha* have been transformed into conservation subjects despite suffering the costs of the Park management policies. Thus, as analysed by scholars elsewhere (e.g., Neumann 2001; Agrawal 2005; Caruso 2014; Stevens 2014a) the governmentality of conservation is thus enacted not only through coercive measures and policies but also through the construction of the *Sonaha* as conservation subjects under the surveillance of the Park administration, and through the intensification and adoption of the hegemonic conservation discourse in their everyday lives.

While the Park authority's restrictions on the *Sonaha*'s customary ways of life are still intact, the WTLCP provided support for alternative livelihoods that included skills development training, seed funding for the SCDS and micro saving and credit schemes, and some community development work in the *Sonaha* settlements. During the fieldwork, the *Sonaha*, despite leveraging resources from this Project, expressed their grievances with it because it ignored their customary occupations and rights. They perceived the Project support as insufficient to compensate for the loss of their customary livelihoods notwithstanding the claims of



the Project and its donor that they were transforming *Sonaha* lives and improving the *Sonaha*'s relationship with the Park authorities (UNDP Nepal 2008; WTLCP 2008).

The dominant discourse of conservation and the current practices of the Park in its buffer zone management, reinforce the *Sonaha*'s alienation and displacement from their ancestral territory and customary livelihoods. This discourse, we argue, also rationalises state control over the riverscape and normalises the conservation violence perpetrated against the *Sonaha*. As the hegemonic conservation discourse of the Park and the riverscape is sustained and entrenched, the *Sonaha*'s practices, and their relationships with the riverscape and its embedded complex meanings are also marginalised. In fact, the very concept of a 'buffer zone,' despite its worthy principles, has proved to be incompatible with *Sonaha* world views and riverine ways of life. For instance, the river stretch (Karnali-Geruwa) that marks the Park boundary and segregates the buffer zone (society) from the Park (nature), is also problematic for the *Sonaha* customary ways of life that are embedded in the holistic riverscape.

### **Sonaha resistance to the Park regime**

.... We go to the national park to fish.... When *Sonaha* are distressed, YCL are cheerful! We go to the national park to wash gold.... amidst fights against the park warden and threats of Army! Still deprived of licenses [for fishing & gold panning] (Janaki Sonaha pers.comm.2011, our addition).

This English translation of a song by a *Sonaha* woman, articulates the *Sonaha*'s everyday struggles. The *Sonaha* have been resisting the national park regime since the creation of the Park through silent, evasive, and usually cautious acts, what Scott (1985) calls 'everyday resistance' by contravening the Park rules, by continuing their customary occupations and by travelling along and using the rivers. Despite frequent Park patrols and vigilance, they fished and panned gold at night in the Park Rivers by dwelling on temporary shelters outside of the Park boundary. On several fieldwork occasions, *Sonaha* men were observed fishing at night from their canoes and *Sonaha* women fishing during the day with their bare hands and nets in the Park Rivers.

In recent years, *Sonaha* have also resisted overtly through collective actions against the Park regime supported by rights based NGOs and political activists (Jana 2013). Their peoples' organisation known as Nepal *Sonaha* Association (NSA) emerged in the course of their push (2006–2011) to demand collective rights to their ancestral occupations and recognition of their ethnic identity. In February 2008, after persistent collective protests, the *Sonaha* in the buffer zone negotiated nine-month concessions from the Park administration to fish in the Geruwa River at the Park boundary. However, this exemption was short lived. After three months, the Park administration unilaterally rescinded the fishing license, when three *Sonaha* youths from their settlement at Manau were

held by the Park authorities along with other locals for the alleged sale of a rhino horn. Despite their occasional protests, the *Sonaha* have failed to renegotiate the fishing license to date. The *Sonaha* perceive this as a punishment for the entire community<sup>16</sup>.

The *Sonaha*'s collective resistance to the national park regime articulates, and is also the site of counter discourses of indigenous rights. Their collective actions that were initially triggered by the hardships resulting from the Park restrictions have now also become avenues by which to assert their collective identity as a marginalised ethnic group and their ongoing struggle to gain official indigenous status from the state. As expressed by a *Sonaha* leader, "our fight is not only with the Park warden; it is with the government too for recognition of our *Jati* [ethnicity]" (Tek Sonaha, pers.comm. 2011, our addition). Ethnic consciousness and assertion among the *Sonaha* can also be attributed to the growing national discourse surrounding the politics of ethnicity and identity nationally since 1990s (Gellner 1997). Although the *Sonaha*'s collective resistance to the Park regime has ebbed since 2012<sup>17</sup>, it has stemmed from the crises resulting from the strict paradigm of nature conservation and subsequent participatory conservation reform in the buffer zone.

### **CONCLUSION**

The *Sonaha*'s encounters with the Nepalese state conservation interventions and policies demonstrate how the violence of conservation, both through the direct exercise of power and more subtle effects of hegemonic conservation discourse, operates in this nature conservation regime. The governmentality of conservation is enacted and sustained through direct violence and hegemonic discourse with detrimental impacts on the *Sonaha* in both cases. The ability of modern conservation to marginalise indigenous peoples and regulate their interactions with the nature emanates not only through the state power, as suggested by Colchester (2003), but also through hegemonic conservation discourses. Peluso (1993) argues that state violence in the name of conservation is legitimised by conservation discourse. This case demonstrates how dominant discourses and practices of conservation normalise state violence against the *Sonaha* and their arbitrary separation from their ancestral territory, and in turn marginalises their world views of the lived riverscape. This study contributes to scholarship on the relationships between conservation discourse and violence (e.g. Peluso 1993; Bocarejo and Ojeda 2016).

Unlike the scenario of hegemonic discourse of conservation versus counter hegemonic discourse as examined by Norgrove and Hulme (2006), this situation is much more complex than the simple binary, since the *Sonaha*, despite their resistance, have also appropriated the conservation discourse. However, the *Sonaha* resistance to the Park regime, both demonstrate the inadequacies of, and powerfully symbolise challenges to the strict and the participatory regimes of conservation. As argued by Brockington (2004) and Holmes (2013),

strict protected area regimes tend to prevail despite local resistance.

Violence against the *Sonaha* continues despite the participatory conservation reforms and interventions in the buffer zone, in contravention of the international standards of participatory conservation and the new paradigm of conservation (Stevens 2014d). Participatory conservation has not transformed violent conservation but re-entrenched it. Both strict protection of the national park and participatory conservation of the buffer zone reinforce the top-down, techno managerialist (Caruso 2014; Stevens 2014a), bureaucratic, military-centric, nature-focussed, indigenous rights violating, and globally-oriented conservation regime. The current model of buffer zone and national park management fails to accommodate *Sonaha* world views. Our critique of participatory conservation contributes to the existing scholarship in this area (e.g., Tsing et al. 2005; Dressler 2009; Caruso 2014; Stevens 2014a). Attention to the political ecology of conservation including both its material and discursive dimensions and dynamics are imperative to understand complexities of park and people contestations, to address the challenges of participatory conservation and to realise the rights of indigenous peoples.

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### NOTES

1. There is no documented evidence of customary conservation practices of the forests by indigenous peoples in the region. But, both the *Tharu* and *Sonaha* have traditionally had dependence on and interactions with the forests including hunting (Upreti 1994; Jana 2014).
2. See Bhatt 2003 on interests of the Nepalese monarch and Royal family in the conservation affairs of Nepal.
3. This overlaps with the ancestral territory of the *Sonaha*.
4. Fourth amendment to the NPWC Act in 1993 and the 1996 Buffer Zone Management Regulation.
5. Local level groups at the village level are called Buffer Zone User Groups. Their representatives compose a Buffer Zone User Committee at the level of a Village Development Committee. In turn, these are represented on an apex council called the Buffer Zone Management Council at the Buffer Zone level.
6. The Government of Nepal legally recognises 59 indigenous nationalities of Nepal. In 2010 a high-level task force of the government recommended a revision of the current list expanding the total number of indigenous nationalities to 81. Although the *Sonaha* were included in this recommendation, to date the government has not made any official decision on this matter.
7. See Thing 2014 (Chapter Six) for detailed documentation of customary livelihoods of the *Sonaha* in the delta.

8. Although factors behind the disappearance of these practices are complex and multiple; the *Sonaha* consider the Park policies and control over their ancestral territory as major factors that alienated *Sonaha* from these customary practices in the areas under the Park jurisdiction including their sacred *Kafihans*.
9. The regulation restricts entry to the Park at night, the removal of sand and stones, the construction of any form of shelters, and fishing without permits. These are offences punishable by law that includes: seizure of materials related to the offence; monetary fines and imprisonment of those apprehended. Park warden has semi-judicial authority over cases of violation of park laws (Paudel et al. 2012).
10. Although no *Sonaha* have been killed by the military, it is worth noting that the Park's army protection unit was involved in extrajudicial killing of two Dalit women and a girl who were collecting wild vegetables in the Park, which attracted the attention of human rights organizations (see OHCHR-Nepal 2010).
11. See Jana 2013, Thing 2014 on further documentation of the negative consequences of laws, policies and actions of the BNP authorities on the *Sonaha*.
12. Discussion on the critique of 'participation' can also be found in Stevens 2014a: 301–303.
13. It is located to the west of the Park and is bordered by the two main branches of the Geruwa River (see Figure1).
14. For similar critique also see Caruso 2014, Stevens 2014a.
15. The *Sonaha* are not represented in the key decision-making bodies such as the Buffer Zone Users Committee and the Buffer Zone Management Council.
16. Park officials during the interviews rationalised that the practices and presence of the *Sonaha* in the rivers are not conservation friendly. They found the use of modern gill nets for fishing problematic and strongly favoured alternative livelihoods for the *Sonaha* away from the rivers.
17. See Thing Forthcoming on a detailed analysis of the *Sonaha* resistance.

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