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Changing natures: a perspective on youth and conservation futures

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Conservation has been a largely exclusionary and exploitative process that has its roots in western colonial expansion. This paper offers a perspective on the relationship between the conservation apparatus and young adults who live in and around Protected Areas and have grown up within a conservation regime. Following Feminist Political Ecology's call to better understand the situated and heterogeneous relationships to nature within communities, I bring attention to the lives of Soliga tribal youth in a Tiger Reserve in South India. I challenge mainstream perceptions that youth inevitably want to leave their forest homes, arguing that the difficult choices youth must make today, are informed by decades of life under restrictive laws that alienate communities from the forest over generations. Young people's lives and aspirations are contradictory and nuanced, and their relationships to the forest remain strong and should not be discounted. This research contributes to a significant gap in the literature, and illustrates the need to include the experiences of youth as a central tenet of unfolding dialogues on inclusive and decolonial approaches to conservation.

KEYWORDS

conservation, youth, feminist political ecology, Soliga, coloniality, protected areas

1 Introduction

Conservation has long been critiqued for its discursive and material roots in colonialism. Political ecologists, among others, have traced the role of conservation in territorial control (Peluso, 1993; Neumann, 2004), as well as its discursive power in shaping specific imaginaries about nature and wilderness (Cronon, 1996; Neumann, 1998). Dominant conservation goals reproduce the notion that nature and society must be separated to ensure the protection of a fictitious "pristine, untouched" nature from the past (Fairhead and Melissa, 1995). In this paradigm, conservation futures foreclose and make invisible some ways of being and knowing, while privileging others. Who are these futures for, and what of the many millions of indigenous and local communities (ILCs) who live within conservation spaces in the present and shaped them in the past? The post-2020 Global biodiversity framework (GBF) makes significant strides toward including ILCs and historically underrepresented voices and perspectives in conservation governance, including gender and youth. Yet it continues to rely on a Protected Area (PA) model which has been widely critiqued for being exclusionary (Kashwan et al., 2021). How can conservation futures effectively include and center diverse perspectives in decision making?

In this piece, I examine this question by drawing attention to ILC youth who live in a PAin India, arguing that this is the generation with the highest stakes in discussions of conservation futures. The GBF mentions youth, yet how this will translate on the ground is unclear, as they are a demographic that is rarely consulted, hired or researched. Assumptions about youth wanting to move to urban spaces (Girisha., 2020;

Dattatri, 2023) or generational change meaning a loss of 'sustainable values' are often mobilized within public narratives to justify the "voluntary relocation" of communities from PAs (Bathija and Sylvander, 2023). Yet the actual experiences of youth as related to these spaces remain largely undocumented and I argue that on the contrary, their lives are complex and precarious, and they are often forced into making decisions to stay in or leave their forest homes.

While young adults are often present in our research as interlocuters, local consultants,[1] and friends along the way, their perspectives and experiences are rarely given center stage within critical conservation scholarship. As this special issue suggests, decolonizing conservation requires an examination of the ongoing and emergent effects of exclusionary conservation practices alongside negotiations for self-determination at the margins, and I believe that ILC youth in India offer significant insight into these questions. I attempt to provide an important and critical *perspective* on why youth are relevant to the topic of decolonizing conservation, and why their lives deserve to be given more attention within academia and conservation practice. A lack of engagement with youth allows for negative tropes about them to be used to justify their dispossession. Young people need to be empowered to make choices for their own lives and their landscapes, and to benefit from the unique position of having access to the outside world while still living in their forests. I hope to offer a window into what research with ILC youth can reveal - both for long-term impacts of conservation practice, and for efforts to decolonize conservation.

2 Challenging mainstream conservation

Conservation has been examined extensively within the literature, and challenges to the PA model have come in different guises: from those who challenge the practical implications for PAs (West et al., 2006; Adams and Hutton, 2007; Agrawal and Redford, 2009), to alternative visions for conservation that go beyond PAs such as convivial conservation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2019, p. 283) or inclusive and regenerative environmentalism (Kashwan et al., 2021), to more ontological arguments about decolonizing binary framings of the relationships between nature and society - simplistic understandings of life and death (Parreñas, 2018), or wild and domestic (Goldman, 2020) that then inform exploitative and violent conservation policy and governance. Dispossession from conservation has been a dominant theme of work in political ecology (Springate-Baginski and Blaikie, 2013), with many studies on the impacts of conservation displacements and restrictions on communities (Kabra, 2009; Rai et al., 2018).

There is little clarity on how effective relocation and restriction have been for biodiversity conservation (Brockington and Igoe, 2006; Agrawal and Redford, 2009). Reports indicate that 80% of remaining biodiversity falls within ILC lands (Sobrevila, 2008), and that biodiversity loss and deforestation are lowest on ILC lands (Reyes-García et al., 2022). Rethinking dominant conservation models, therefore, has become increasingly prescient. Conservation's coloniality (Adams and Mulligan, 2012) and the often failed attempts at redistributive justice (Ribot et al., 2006; Li, 2010), point to a need to center decolonial frameworks that think seriously about non-western, non-dualistic models (Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016; Radcliffe, 2017; Goldman, 2020), and to go beyond addressing dispossession merely through forms of repossession (Simpson, 2017) or "rights" (Li, 2010). This is especially so for young adults today, whose dispossession is shaped by a confluence of "multiple structures of dominance rather than… a single form of oppression" (Jeffrey, 2012, 246).

3 Why youth?

This paper draws on feminist political ecology (FPE), which emphasizes the diverse, intersectional and situated (Haraway, 2013; Sultana, 2020b) elements of socio-ecological relationships (Gururani, 2002; Nightingale, 2010; Singh, 2018). It pays attention to social location and relational elements of subject formation and knowledge production (Nightingale, 2017; Sundberg, 2017), allowing one to think about the workings of power at multiple spatial and temporal scales (Truelove, 2011), from the global to the intimate, embodied experiences of everyday life (Sultana, 2020a). Although FPE has not explicitly engaged with age as a marker of difference, it offers an important set of tools through which to think about the differentiated yet unique experiences of youth living in PAs.

Scholarship on youth reveals an urgent need for more sustained research on their lives given the unique challenges and experiences of the present day (Jeffrey, 2012; Smith and Mills, 2019), where young people are finding it harder to attain traditional markers of 'adulthood' such as financial independence (Jeffrey, 2009). Young people have been disproportionately impacted by global economic, social and political transformations of the last 50 years, and yet their voices have traditionally not been represented within academic and policy spaces (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2008). They are often dismissed as "adults-in-the-making rather than persons in their own right" (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2008, p. viii). Geographies of youth in India (Dyson, 2008; Jeffrey, 2010; Smith, 2020) and elsewhere (Katz, 2004) show us that although youth experiences are changing and certainly not homogenous across societies or even communities, they are an invaluable lens through which to understand the role of global and local processes in remaking place over time (Cole and Durham, 2008), as well as to gain perspective on a unique slice of society. As I illustrate below, forest-dwelling youth living in a South Indian tiger reserve are uniquely situated in relation to the conservation apparatus and offer insight into both of the above.

4 Insights from BR hills temple tiger reserve

The Protected Area model in India is shaped by both colonial era laws (Rangarajan, 1996) that brought forest lands under state control, and the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, which criminalizes most non-conservation related activities within PAs. These laws mandate the creation of "inviolate" conservation spaces devoid of forest-dwelling peoples, who are considered a

1 For choice of local consultant rather than field/research assistant, see: https://science.thewire.in/politics/rights/call-to-decolonise-ecology-conservation-field-research/.

threat to biodiversity within this model (Lasgorceix and Kothari, 2009; Rangarajan and Ghazala, 2009). These ideological and legal structures have resulted in the dispossession of millions of people across the country. In reaction, many forest-dwelling peoples, allies and Civil Society groups, came together to demand that traditional rights to the forest be recognized (Asher, 2019). This resulted in the enactment of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA), which gives traditional forest-dwellers inalienable land titles, access to forest resources and management rights.

BRT falls within both the South Indian Western Ghats and the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, and is part of an important tiger and conservation landscape. Located in Karnataka, it is known both for its rich biodiversity and for a temple located on the highest peak, which is a large tourist attraction. It is also home to a Scheduled tribe (official term for legally designated tribes in India), Soligas, who have lived in this region for over 2000 years (Madegowda, 2009) and have deep spiritual ties to the land. In 1974 the forests of BRT were declared a wildlife Sanctuary, and the sedentarization of Soliga families into "colonies," initiated during British rule, intensified. In the years following this designation, hundreds of Soliga families were displaced from their homes inside the forest into "villages" closer to the game/main roads that run through the forest and even to the forest fringes at the base of the hills, where they continue to live. Traditional practices of shifting cultivation, hunting, gathering, and management of the forest with ground fires were banned (Madegowda and Rao, 2017). The area was declared a Tiger Reserve in 2011, leading to further restrictions of access to the forest. By 2012, several of the villages within the tiger reserve received a recognition of rights under the FRA for habitation, cultivation, resource use and management, making it the first tiger reserve within which a community's rights under the FRA were recognized.

Studies of Soligas in the region reveal that the FRA has been a mixed blessing (Madegowda and Rao, 2017; Rai et al., 2018) as its implementation is constantly undermined and contested, especially within PAs. Rai et al. (2018) argue that Soligas in BRT experience *in situ* displacement – displacement occurring as loss of access, local labor opportunities, mobility and changing markets, rather than the physical removal of people from their land. Over time, the community is being alienated from forests that they continue to live in. What does this alienation, especially among younger generations, mean for a more democratic conservation model, and for the rights their elders fought so hard to get? In an attempt to answer this question, for a period of 3 months in 2019 I did a combination of semi-structured and informal interviews with about 100 people (60 of these youth with 28 men and 32 women) across 30 villages (see Figure 1), mental mapping exercises with youth, and participation observation of meetings with the invaluable help of two local Soliga youth. I present some findings from this data below to offer a new, critical perspective on conservation.

4.1 The contradictory lives of youth

Born after the area was declared a PA, young men and women in BRT have never lived deep within the forest and have not experienced life outside of protected area regulations. Many of them are first-generation students, and the first in their families to leave home for education or employment, experiencing the margins of post-liberalization development in India. Their lives have been uniquely affected by a confluence of ecological, socio-economic and political change in the region. Ecological studies and oral histories from BRT have shown forest change over the last few decades, due to erratic rainfall, climate change, and the widespread growth of invasive species such as Lantana camara (Sundaram et al., 2012). These changes have led to a sizeable loss of biodiversity, affecting access to the forest and the availability of forest produce, foods and medicinal plants historically used by Soligas (Agnihotri et al., 2021), who contend that the reduction in forest health is closely correlated to the banning of traditional management practices (Rai et al., 2018, and interview sources). For instance, they believe that traditional practices of burning leaf litter in ground-level fires called *taragu benki,* will help to reduce the growth of invasive plant species and regenerate the forest. Loss of soil fertility, the spread of invasive species, and the resulting increase in crop-raids by wild animals, compounded by restrictions of access to the forest are making land-based livelihoods elusive (Mundoli et al., 2016). These changes have led to more dependence on a monetary income (Madegowda and Rao, 2017), and intensified young people's ongoing alienation from forest spaces to which their access is already restricted.

Changes in income opportunities have led families that were previously dependent on small-holder agriculture, forest produce, grazing or wage work within the forest, to look for supplemental/short-term employment outside the Tiger Reserve (Mundoli et al., 2016). While the FRA has alleviated the immediate fear of relocation, I believe that it has not addressed high levels of precarity among youth. A majority of them are under- and unemployed, relying on some forest/agricultural produce, daily wage work or temporary migration for their livelihoods. Many spend 3 or 4 months a year working in coffee estates in nearby districts or frying chips in big cities. It is important to note that these processes have been experienced differently within the community along lines of gender, class and spatial distribution, with some more dependent on forest resources than others who have access to land or labor opportunities. Gender and class are important factors in shaping who has the mobility to leave their homes to look for work, and what kinds of work are available to them. It also in turn shapes knowledge of and relationships to the forest, which offer necessary perspectives for an intersectional analysis that I hope to explore more in my future work.

Education has had uneven consequences, with many Soligas leaving school and college before completing their degrees. Froerer (2011), in her work on the relationship between education, inequality and social mobility among tribal communities in Chhattisgarh, argues that education is a "contradictory resource" – one that simultaneously promises empowerment for some, while reinforcing structural inequalities for others. Studies of tribal youth across the country show high rates of "pushing out" from educational institutions (Vasavi, 2012). These trends are correlated to poor infrastructural and state support to these communities, as well as the pedagogy and content of education material itself (Vasavi, 2012). The medium of instruction is in an unfamiliar language, the mode text-based,

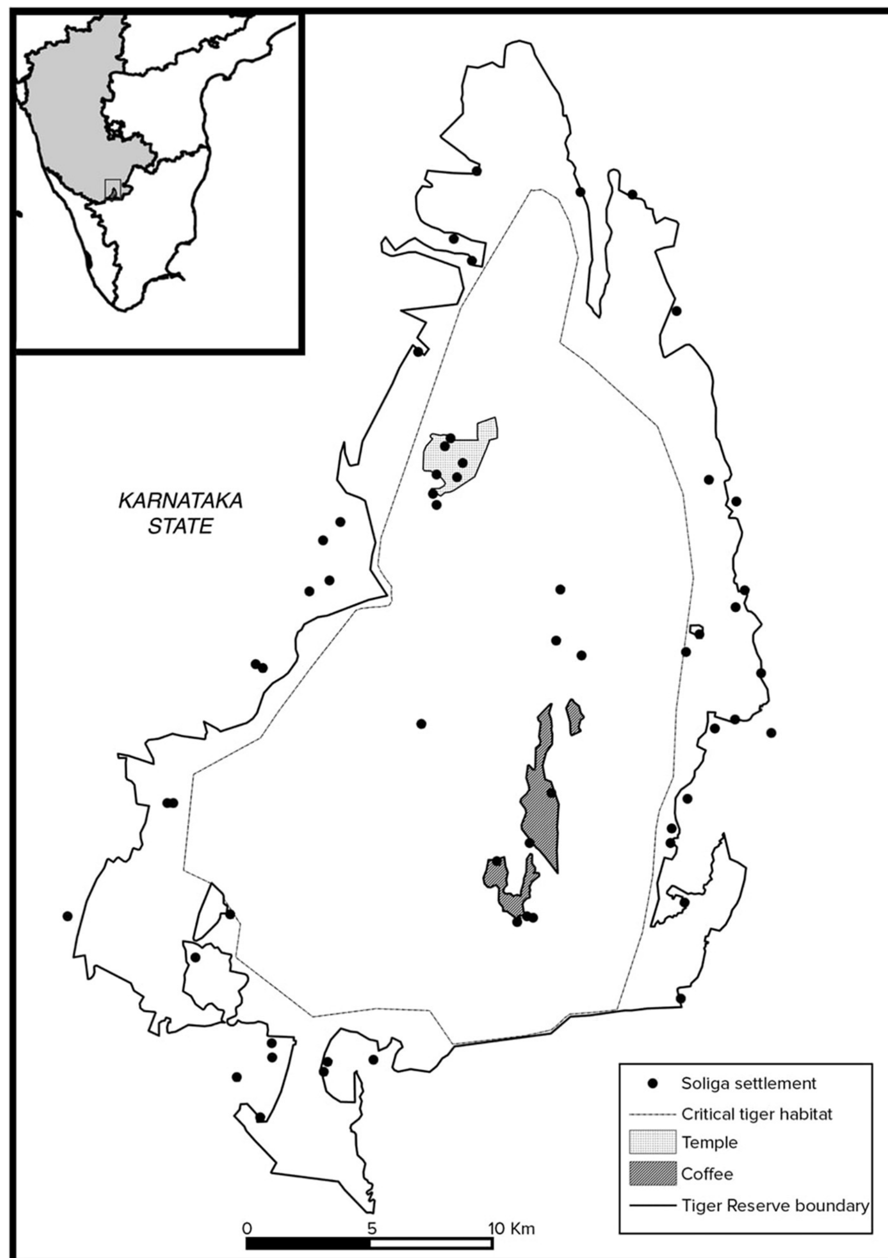

FIGURE 1
Map of BRT and Soliga settlements[a]. [a]Map republished from Goldman et al. (2021).

and more insidious, the content is largely irrelevant to their contexts, including material that often describes tribal communities as "backward" and in need of modernization (Sarangapani, 2022).

Education is still one of the few avenues that Soliga families see for their children to live a better life than their own. As one woman told me, "*We want them to go to college, go to the cities to study. We don't teach them about the forests, the schoolteacher teaches them, doesn't he?... We the parents wish that they could go far, we want them to be lawyers, teachers.*"

Yet many elders are frustrated with the contradictory results of education among youth. One elder said, "*What good is education, it is making them learn how to drink and smoke.*"

Young Soligas today have experienced a dramatic change in knowledge bases and epistemological frameworks. As first-generation students, Soliga youth have experienced a combination of government education, community oral traditions and exposure to the outside world through media and technology. They are now learning less from within the community, and knowledge about forest biodiversity and cultural traditions is slowly reducing. As Bedegowda, a Soliga leader told me:

> *"We need to grow the desire to conserve.... The forest is extremely important for everything in our lives, it gives us strength...But we are losing that understanding over the generations... we're forgetting... we need to maintain the knowledge of the value of nature, and then we can conserve."*

Young adults in BRT also have little knowledge of their rights and legal status within the tiger reserve. Soliga community leaders and elders are actively involved with community rights, development and governance, but youth rarely attend meetings and are seldom a part of committees and important decision-making processes within the community.

Work on knowledge politics helps us to see the relationship between age and knowledge as dynamic, situated and partial (Haraway, 2013). Youth provide a unique perspective on forest change over their lifetimes, relationships to the forest department who governs the forests they live in, and experiences of the outside world that inform new possibilities for life in Tiger Reserves. Contrary to mainstream development and conservation expectations, an overwhelming majority of young people aspire to stay, return to, or eventually settle down in their villages (of the 60 young men and women I interviewed, 50 wanted to stay). Interestingly, many of them shared a strong desire to work with the forest department locally, as they have an intimate knowledge of the forest and will be respected in the landscape. Many spoke of the joy of being in the forest, describing the happiness they feel when climbing trees and mountains, and finding fresh fruit or honey. As one young man quipped, *"I like the forest more than the village. Outside is violent, forest is silent!"* Another woman excitedly told me:

> *"You should come and stay here sometime; we will take you up the mountain and back! It's so much fun. I was up there this morning... I don't like to just be at home, so if I'm bored, I just go off up into the forest."*

Significant attachments to home, community and the forest also tend to be accompanied by experiences with discrimination and discomfort outside of the forest. This leads many young men and women to feel excluded from urban spaces. Their experiences are similar to Smith and Mabel (2015) descriptions of urban "spaces of encounter" among youth from the margins, constantly made to feel that they belong elsewhere. As two young men told me:

> *"I spent 3 years outside in a city and I hated it. I was scared, I didn't know how to communicate. People thought I was stupid. Now I am happy here, I want to stay here and work for my community."*
>
> *"I have done jobs in six different places so I've seen my options. I would rather stay here and work here. But now with the Tiger reserve there are few options."*

For many youth, staying in their villages means embracing precarity. Their lives are characterized by a sense of limbo in uncertainty – the liminal space of not knowing what is to come. In this way, I argue that a sense of in-betweenness, reminiscent of Jeffrey's theorization of "waiting" among subaltern youth in a modern world (Jeffrey, 2008, 2010), pervades the everyday life of Soliga youth. Many young people told me that youth need the outside world for *tiluvalike* (know-how), and their homes to save their culture and their forests. That both are necessary for Soligas in the future.

What possibilities does their unique positionality within the community open up? It offers them access to the outside world through education, employment and media, creates networks beyond their homes, more confident engagement with state institutions, and new ways of looking at livelihoods. Soliga youth in BRT are finding local avenues for employment through tourism, education, nursing, and coffee cultivation, through attempts at working with the forest department, and more recently with local research and civil service organizations. Put differently, their positionality opens up to them the world outside, while they can still hold on to the rootedness of their communities. Understanding young perspectives allows us to see that *in situ* displacement within PAs has set up a false dichotomy between staying in the forests and leaving them. Instead, I contend, young people must be empowered to claim both spaces.

5 Discussion

As illustrated above, the lives of Soliga youth in BRT are characterized by challenging realities – the expectations and experiences associated with staying in or leaving their villages, the empowering and restrictive nature of formal education, and the ongoing dispossession from their lands and traditional livelihoods. Staying entails a constant hustle, living precarious lives through some measure of forest dependence, agriculture, migratory labor, and in a few cases, local employment, while leaving means encountering an outside world that is difficult, hostile, expensive and lonely.

Dominant conservation and development narratives tell us that increased access to urban spaces and "modern" lives, along with the restricted and "backward" living conditions in tribal hamlets, act as migratory pull factors for young people, who want to leave rural spaces (Karanth et al., 2018). These descriptions of young people's aspirations and desires (and the associated discursive framing of forest/rural life as undesirable) do not seem to hold true in BRT. My findings challenge these assumptions and complicate a discourse that is often used to justify ongoing attempts at reducing human presence within tiger reserves.

As stated in target 22 of the GBF (CBD., 2022, p. 13), youth must be participants in decision making and thus their perspectives and futures must be foregrounded. My findings point to a need to study young people's desires and aspirations in conservation spaces in India and globally, to truly unpack the long-term impacts of conservation policies and biodiversity planning at multiple scales. As my ongoing research is revealing, youth can offer a bridge to the outside world through their access to it from employment, education, social media, and even through their ability to codeswitch between different social spheres. They are an essential part of the task of decolonizing conservation, as they are its future.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available due to participant confidentiality and privacy. The data will be made available after consideration. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to shruthi.jagadeesh@colorado.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Institutional Review Board, University of Colorado Boulder. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin as it is culturally inappropriate to sign written materials, and considered risky. Verbal consent was taken.

Author contributions

SJ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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