Title: BINGOs & Environmental Defenders: NGO complicity in atmospheres of violence and the possibilities for decolonial solidarity with defenders

Affiliations: Mary Menton, Research Fellow in Environmental Justice, Sussex Sustainability Research Programme, University of Sussex; Paul Gilbert, Senior Lecturer in International Development, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex

Corresponding author: Mary Menton, M.Menton@Sussex.ac.uk

Abstract: Over the past decade, several big international non-governmental organisations (BINGOs) have been instrumental in increasing the attention brought to the lived experiences of environmental and land defenders and the atmospheres of violence they face. Among the many BINGOs who frame themselves as ‘supporters’ or ‘protectors’ of environmental and land defenders, several have been complicit in violence perpetrated by park guards and oil companies. In this paper, we unpack the multifaceted nature of the role BINGOs play in shaping the atmospheres of violence with which environmental defenders contend. While BINGOs have acted as whistle-blowers and advocates providing legal assistance to at-risk defenders, they have also been complicit in ‘green violence’ perpetrated in the name of conservation, and more subtle relationships of ‘partnership’ with industries and specific corporations engaged in neo-colonial forms of extraction and violence against defenders. BINGO complicity with the violence against defenders replays the historical entanglement of some organizations with displacement and violence enacted in the name of colonial era conservation. We argue that BINGOs can, and must, work towards more radical forms of decolonial solidarity with environmental and land defenders who contend with atmospheres of violence shaped, in many cases, by conservation efforts and resource extraction activities with which BINGOs may be complicit, either directly, or through various forms of ‘partnership.’

Keywords: BINGOs, environmental defenders, necropolitical ecology, partnership
Introduction

As highlighted in other chapters in this book, environmental and land defenders face a myriad of forms of violence. It is this very context, of unfolding ‘slow violence’, threats of violence, forced displacement, criminalisation and even direct physical violence that we focus this paper. It is here that international actors are often complicit in violence against defenders and that there are many opportunities for decolonial solidarity. While national trends are important, most cases of violence against defenders are localised and related to conflicts over a particular mine, an area of forest, or a specific piece of land, for example. As such, it is important to look at atmospheres of violence operating at the local and subnational levels, but also to understand these violent environments as the product of specific corporations’ involvement in particular extractive enterprises. In this paper, it is not our intention to ‘throw stones from the sidelines’ and occupy the ‘comfortably radical’ role of a priori critiquing partnerships between extractive industry corporations and environmental BINGOs. Rather, we draw attention to the ways in which environmental BINGOs – through their own efforts to scale up conservation, and through partnership with extractive industry firms who help to fund and facilitate the scaling up of conservation through offsetting – are complicit in a ‘necropolitical ecology’ whereby some environmental defenders are systematically exposed to more risk of harm, violence and death. We argue that partnerships between BINGOs and extractive industry firms can lead to a ‘greenwashing of violence’ that is perpetrated by extractive companies. At the same time, attempts BINGOs make to maintain a ‘Thin Green Line’ and militarise conservation creates a dangerous double-standard by valuing some lives while cultivating silence about the complicity of park guards in the deaths of others.

The remainder of this paper proceeds by first outlining our analytical approach to ‘necropolitical ecology’ and the ‘Thin Green Line’. We then introduce in more detail the BINGOs (Big International Non-Governmental Organisations) and GONGO (Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation) that are the focus of our analysis here: CI, TNC, WWF (BINGOs) and IUCN (GONGO). We have chosen these organizations because of their size, influence, partnerships with large extractive firms, and recent deployment (or in some cases cooptation) of the language of ‘environmental defenders’. The main body of the paper focuses firstly on the complicity of some BINGOs in ‘green violence’ perpetrated towards defenders, and secondly on the partnerships maintained by environmental BINGOs and GONGOs with extractive industry firms associated with contributing to atmospheres of
violence and shaping necropolitical ecologies. We conclude by reflecting on the possibilities for moving towards cultivating decolonial forms of solidarity with ‘environmental defenders’.

Necropolitical Ecology & the Thin Green line

The term ‘necropolitics’ was introduced by Mbembe (2003) as a way to understand how certain sovereign authorities exercise the right to expose people (in colonies, plantations and militarized zones) to death, or the risk of death. Building on this concept, Banerjee (2008) introduced the notion of ‘necrocapitalism,’ or a system of organizing and managing economic activity that subordinates life to the power of death, all in the pursuit of capital accumulation and growth. Banerjee (2018) notes numerous cases in which companies (including those in high-profile partnerships with environmental BINGOs) have used a combination of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and philanthropy, and the co-optation of police violence to quash opposition, to deal with conflicts between local communities and corporations seeking to extract natural resources from their lands. More recently, political ecologists have taken up Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, noting its resonance with colonial ‘shoot on sight’ responses to poaching (Cavanagh and Himmelfarb, 2014: 59). Notably, two of the organizations discussed here (WWF and IUCN) had among their founders members of the Society for the Protection of Wild Fauna of Empire, an organization explicitly concerned with criminalizing ‘poaching’ along racialized lines while maintaining license for colonists to hunt for ‘sport’. Here, as with more contemporary shoot on sight responses to poaching, sovereign authority is clearly exercised to expose certain people – often subsistence hunters criminalized as ‘poachers’ – to the risk of death.

In this paper, we examine the ‘necropolitical ecology’ of the spaces in which environmental BINGOs conduct conservation activities, as well as the extractive zones in which their corporate partners operate. In both cases, we identify a reproduction of ‘deathly spaces, where certain people are more systematically assured of exposure to greater risk of bodily harm and death’ (Margulies 2019, 152). We do not, therefore, make claims about the intent of either environmental BINGOs or their corporate partners, but instead highlight their complicity in creating atmospheres of violence: zones where certain deaths are more likely, and only certain deaths are mourned. In particular, we stress the significance of the notion of the ‘Thin Green Line’ in policing the deathly spaces of conservation and the role that corporate partnerships play in greenwashing violence by providing kudos to corporations who are linked to atmospheres of violence.
Methodology & Focus:
This paper builds on an analysis of the way the ‘Big Three’ conservation organisations - WWF, TNC and CI - and one GONGO that is often identified as an NGO (IUCN) position themselves in relation to ‘environmental defenders’. We focus equally on the complicity of environmental BINGOs in ‘green violence’ associated with militarized conservation, and on BINGO partnerships with extractive industry corporations, some of which are implicated in producing atmospheres of violence and of violence against defenders. The focus is on extractive industry corporations in particular for several reasons. Firstly, extractive industries positioned themselves as ‘first movers’ in the turn to Corporate Social Responsibility and partnerships with NGOs from the turn of the 21st century, and have developed sustained and longstanding partnerships with environmental BINGOs (Adams, 2017; Gilbert, 2015; Rajak, 2011; also Rainey et al. 2015). Secondly, several of the extractive industry corporations with whom environmental BINGOs maintain significant partnerships have been identified by the Climate Accountability Institute (2019; Licker et al. 2019) as among the top twenty fossil fuel emitters collectively responsible for 35% of emissions (1965-2017) and 51% of ocean acidification (1965-2015). This raises important questions about the degree to which environmental BINGOs can achieve conservation gains by working with ‘nature’s enemies’ (see below). Finally, we focus on partnerships with extractive industries because extractives are among the industries from which environmental defenders are at the most risk (Global Witness 2018).

Based on 303 attempts that the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2015) made to contact UK-listed corporations over allegations of human rights abuses, 47% of approaches pertained to extractive industry firms, of which 54% pertained to environmental abuses and 35% to land rights and displacement. Likewise the Corporations and Human Rights Database trial for Latin America has drawn on Business & Human Rights Resource Centre data to examine 1,308 allegations for 916 firms (2000-2014), of which natural resource firms account for 36% of allegations (Bernal-Bermudez et al. 2016). While our analysis of environmental BINGOs’ complicity in green violence draws on press coverage and responses from BINGOs themselves, our analysis of BINGOs’ complicity with extractive industry firms subject to allegations of human rights abuse follows Bernal-Bermudez et al. (2016) by drawing on the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre database of allegations and company responses. We also draw on a review of the academic and grey literature.

---

1 These are Shell (TNC, CI, formerly WWF), Chevron (IUCN) and Exxon (CI)
Three of the four organizations studied in this article have not only entered into partnerships with extractive industry firms, but have explicitly engaged with discourse on environmental defenders in recent years. In 2018, IUCN worked with UN Environment and Global Witness to promote the UN Environmental Rights Initiative, and IUCN Netherlands works with defenders in five countries to provide safety, support, monitoring as well as contributing to advocacy at the UN. It is perhaps unsurprising that the IUCN has engaged most fully with environmental defenders, given its constitution as a GONGO which counts among its members states, state agencies and NGOs - as well as corporations - even if Indigenous Peoples’ Organizations were only recognised as a membership category in 2016. The Nature Conservancy (2016) has framed its partnerships with indigenous people in terms of relations with ‘nature’s first defenders’ based on a (perhaps belated) recognition that upholding forest community’s rights is associated with lower deforestation rates. ‘Defenders’ here, however, are figured as protectors of nature for humanity as a whole, rather than those subjected to atmospheres of violence for defending their land, livelihoods and environment. This framing of defenders as protectors of a global nature forms part of the ‘Thin Green Line’ discourse which we examine in more detail below.

WWF has engaged more broadly with environmental defenders discourse than the other BINGOs/GONGOs. Representatives of their Governance Practice and SDG Hub, Ganapin and Osieyo (2019), draw attention to Frontline Defenders’ figures in order to argue for the significance of SDG 16 (on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice, and building accountable institutions) for building the good governance needed for ‘protecting and restoring nature’. While this use of the defenders’ discourse most clearly echoes the now-dominant human rights-based framing of environmental defenders, at other times WWF representatives frame former ‘illegal loggers’ turned anti-poaching ‘game scouts’ as ‘forest defenders’ (Skinner et al. 2018). Yet, as we show in the next section on Green Violence, WWF in particular has demonstrated a rather different response when it comes to the deaths of eco-guards and park rangers, as compared to those who die or are assaulted at the hands of allegedly WWF-backed park guards. We argue that this reflects a form of necropolitical ecology, whereby the lives of those who died in the service of ‘protecting nature for all humanity’ are valued more than those who die at the hands of militarized conservation forces. By upholding a ‘Thin Green Line’ between park guards and those who die at the hands of park guards, environmental BINGOs distort figures on deaths of environmental defenders, render certain forms of slow violence invisible, and reproduce colonial forms of nature conservation.
that undermine prospects for decolonial solidarity with defenders. As we discuss in the subsequent section, prospects for decolonial solidarity are further undermined by Violent Partnerships with extractive industry corporations

**Green Violence**

Buscher and Ramatsindela (2016) contest the ethics behind ‘green violence’, or violence that is carried out to protect nature. As Fletcher (2018) finds, many States distinguish between green violence they deem legitimate (e.g. violence linked to anti-poaching) and ‘illegitimate’ green violence (e.g. environmentally oriented political violence in the form of sabotage by organisations like Earth First). Much of the literature around green violence focuses on the militarisation of conservation - the use of armed park guards to patrol national parks and combat poaching. It is important to note, however, that green violence also comes in the form of forced displacement of local people from protected areas (Ybarra 2017, Lunstrum and Ybarra 2018), restrictions on access to natural resources upon which local communities depend, criminalisation of traditional hunting and harvesting practices, and as well as symbolic and discursive violence. In some cases, the violence comes in the form of the use of conservation as a means of territorialisation (Bluwstein and Lund 2018). The militarisation of conversation represents a ‘war for biodiversity (Duffy 2014) or ‘green wars’ (Marjinen and Verweijen 2016). More recently, this has also transformed into a ‘war by conservation’ through alignment of conservation NGOs with global security projects that promote a ‘poachers-as-terrorists’ narrative (Duffy 2016). Many environmental NGOs and BINGOs frame conservation and anti-poaching efforts as a war with Conservation International’s film Hotspots calling it ‘the mother of all wars’ (see Buscher and Fletcher 2018).

In 2019, *BuzzFeed* and the *Kathmandu Post* published a series exposing the apparent involvement of WWF-trained and –funded park guards in the torture and killing of local residents and indigenous people in Nepal, Cameroon and CAR (Warren and Baker, 2019a). Specifically, WWF was said to have celebrated the acquittal of guards connected to the death and torture of a Nepalese man (Shikharam) by Chitwan National Park guards, making unsubstantiated allegations that the victim was a ‘crime convicted individual’, and either hired or handed awards to park guards and soldiers accused of this and other offenses. In Cameroon, the WWF was accused of suppressing findings that villagers in a proposed park site feared abuse by forest rangers, and elsewhere WWF-supported eco-guards were accused of numerous human rights abuses – of which WWF appears to have been aware at least one year prior to the *BuzzFeed* exposé (Baker and Warren, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Indeed, public reports of links
between the WWF and park rangers accused of human rights abuses pre-date the BuzzFeed report by some years (e.g. Corry, 2015), as do allegations that WWF had been non-responsive when presented with evidence of abuses carried out by rangers and eco-guards (Survival International, n.d.).

When WWF announced a review to be carried out by former UN Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, indigenous rights organisations expressed concern about the limitation of the review to the BuzzFeed/Kathmandu Post allegations when ‘these issues are endemic rather than isolated’, and many abuses had been ‘reported to WWF previously’ (Counsell et al. 2019). Rivalries between ‘ugly conservationists’ and indigenous rights groups appeared to be rearing their head once more. It is not our intention, however, to replay these well-worn and well-documented debates here (see Chapin 2004; Larsen 2016). Instead, we wish to draw attention to the necropolitical ecology of ‘green violence’ associated with park rangers and eco-guards, and challenge the narratives that legitimise this violence through the notion of the ‘Thin Green Line’ and neo-colonial framings of ‘poaching’.

The BuzzFeed articles reveal that WWF had prior knowledge of alleged human rights abuses and violations attributed to park rangers and eco-guards that they have funded and/or trained. The absence of prior action on these allegations sits at odds with the WWF’s concern over park rangers and eco-guards who have lost their lives in the course of their work. In partnership with the Australian Thin Green Line Foundation, WWF have compiled a database of the number of park rangers who have lost their lives in the line of duty since 2009, totalling 871 by 2018. Reporting on the 2018 survey, WWF (2018) report that ‘forty-eight rangers of the 107 lost this year were murdered at their place of work whilst protecting wildlife that we all care about.’ Narratives from friends and colleagues of murdered rangers are included along with the figures, memorialising their service in the protection of wildlife for all. Yet, read alongside the studied silence that has surrounded persistent and endemic allegations of human rights abuses on the part of rangers, their celebration by WWF and the Thin Green Line shares much with the discourse surrounding the ‘Thin Blue Line’ that has proliferated in the USA as part of a backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement.

As Wall (2019) notes, the notion of the Thin Blue Line acts as a ‘fiction of legitimate violence’ designed to ‘render state violence as always defensive in nature while marking unruly

---

2 These contribute to the problematic Global Witness figures of environmental defenders killed, as noted in the introduction
populations as not merely transgressors of positive law, but as *hostis humani generis*: “enemies of all mankind”.’ Here we see the Thin Green Line – both the organization and the concept as reflected in the memorialisation of rangers over those killed by rangers – operating as a fiction of legitimate violence that renders green violence as always defensive, and frames ‘unruly’ populations as enemies of wildlife ‘that we all care about’. This necropolitical approach to conservation dovetails with a studied silence regarding the atmospheres of violence produced by the actions of extractive industry corporations who maintain partnerships with environmental BINGOs/GONGOs.

**The Violence of Partnership**

Over the last two decades, *partnership* has become the dominant rubric through which BINGOs and transnational corporations frame their relationship. As the Internet began to alter NGO engagement with business, risk analysts cautioned that it tended to be overly ‘negative’ (Bray, 1998). Yet over the last twenty years, environmental BINGOs have steered themselves away from what WWF ambassador and management guru John Elkington (1999) termed the ‘Polarizer’ role of fighting against businesses, towards engaging with business as ‘Integrators’. In the process, critical NGOs have been marginalized. They are hardly welcome at Corporate Social Responsibility and Ethical Business events, where a clear delineation is made between ‘partners of choice’ for business actors, and ‘reckless NGOs who destroy brand and reputation with unfounded accusations’ (Rajak, 2011: 17; Gilbert, 2015). Pulp and paper industry representatives, for instance, celebrate the shift from ‘NGOs attacking our corporate customers about not being “green enough” to partnering with them to achieve their goals’ (Cousin, 2014: 27). Representatives of the ‘Big Three’ environmental BINGOs – The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI) and WWF – have likewise spoken out to defend partnerships with large corporations representing extractive industries that critics depict as predicated on environmental and social harm (Benson and Kirsch 2010).

Peter Seligmann, founding CEO of CI, epitomizes this antipathy towards ‘Polarizers’ and embrace of partnership with large transnational corporations. He declared that it is ‘simply not sufficient to throw stones from the sidelines…We believe that often the biggest improvements

---

3 Conner and Epstein (2007) have worked with a similar dichotomy between ‘purity and pragmatism’ among ‘dark green’ and ‘light green’ NGOs. Hoffman (2009) however, challenges any such rigid distinction, noting that although there are ‘dark greens’ or ‘Isolates’ that have no corporate partnerships, social network analysis shows distinct clusters of environmental NGOs in the US with regard to the type and quantity of corporate partnership. In Hoffman’s analysis, the ‘mediators’ with a high diversity of corporate ties and high centrality within the network of environmental NGO-corporate partnerships included CI, TNC and WWF.
to environmental conservation and human well-being can come from effecting change amongst those who have the biggest impact’ (Seligmann 2011; see also Foster, 2014: 254). A similar inducement towards working with the largest (and perhaps the most harmful) corporations came from Peter Kareiva, Chief Scientist at TNC, following criticism about TNC’s partnership with BP in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (see also Ottaway and Stephens, 2003). Kareiva declares: ‘Look, I know that energy extraction is sometimes environmentally damaging, just as roads, ports, biofuels and even desert solar panels can be. In fact, Conservancy scientists engage with the energy industry precisely because that industry often does harm the environment’ (Kareiva, 2010). Jason Clay and Rob Soutter of WWF likewise insist that working with the largest and most impactful corporations ensures that ‘when they improve, everyone else in the sector will follow suit’, and that ‘power lies with the corporations. We can only achieve something by working with them’ (Huismann, 2014: 13-16). Reflecting the widespread legitimation of partnership with harmful industry players, and hostility to critical or oppositional modes of engagement among environmental BINGOs, IUCN Patron of Nature Jon Stryker (2018) has recently written of the need for ‘teaming up with “nature’s enemies”…[and the] need to become more pragmatic about choosing collaborators.’

This embrace of collaboration over critique on the part of environmental BINGOs also involves a highly particular approach to corporate personhood. BINGO representatives appear unwilling to attribute specific harms to corporate bodies as a whole, or comment on how operations in one jurisdiction might be more harmful than operations carried out as part of ongoing conservation partnerships (e.g. Huismann, 2014: 58). In 1997, WWF Canada nominated Shell for a British Columbia Minister’s Environmental Award. This nomination took place two years after the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 9, following their campaigning against Shell in the Niger Delta. Pegi Dover, Director of Communications for WWF Canada wrote in response to criticism that the nomination ‘is not an overall endorsement of their environmental practices…WWF has not commented on the overall environmental record of any of the [nominees] and does not anticipate doing so.’ While environmental BINGOs might be reluctant to cast their partnerships in terms of relations with (or endorsements of) entire corporations, many of the corporations they partner with are happy to present their collaborations in this way - and the ability to identify an accountable corporate person is a vital part of seeking redress for corporate human rights abuses (Grear and Weston 2015).

The partnership of environmental BINGOs with corporations who have questionable human rights and environmental records has been understood by anthropologists studying corporate
personhood and CSR to be part of a strategy whereby corporations extract brand value from highly trusted ‘super-brands’ like the WWF (Foster, 2014: 251; also Larsen, 2016: 23). This extraction of value takes place through provoking ethically-charged acts of consumption among those who hold environmental BINGOs in high regard. In theory, what environmental BINGOs get in ‘return’ (as per the statements from CI, TNC, WWF and IUCN representatives above) is both financial support, and improved environmental behaviour and industry or sector leadership from their corporate partners. Critical political ecologists, however, have framed this relation less as a reciprocal exchange of brand value for improved environmental performance, and more as a form of ‘Faustian Bargain’ whereby BINGOs accept market-based approaches to conservation and the notion that capitalism can be fundamentally sustainable (Adams, 2017). The result is a shared interest in ‘scaling up’ conservation and ‘offsetting’ extractive operations, enabled through the framing of nature as ‘natural capital’ that is fundamentally substitutable – both for other units of natural capital and for other forms of (economic, social) capital (Adams, 2017: 246; Chapin, 2004: 22; Kirsch, 2010: 91).

Nonetheless, there is little definitive evidence that corporations who partner with environmental BINGOs reduce their impact or enhance biodiversity conservation and the maintenance of ecosystem services (Robinson, 2011). While mining companies are ‘leaders’ in the setting of ‘no net loss’ or ‘net positive impact’ biodiversity conservation goals, most of these goals ‘have advanced little beyond definition’ (Rainey et al. 2015: 6). Against this absence of clear evidence that corporate-BINGO partnerships produce conservation gains serious questions need to be asked about the consequences of partnership with industries that are often complicit in producing the atmospheres of violence to which defenders are subjected.

In a review of the ‘metanarratives’ that characterise engagements with conservation BINGOs, Larsen (2016) distinguishes between ‘doing good’ narratives that emphasize conservation actors as highly moral, ‘turning ugly’ narratives that focus on blurred boundaries between states, corporations and NGOs, and the ‘Dirty Harry’ narrative which foregrounds pragmatism. Partnership may be ugly, but it is necessary. Certainly, the quotations from senior figures in CI, TNC, WWF and IUCN introduced above would suggest that partnership is undeniably seen as necessary, even when it is with industries recognised as ‘ugly’ (e.g. ‘enemies of nature’). Larsen cautions that the ‘ugly conservationist’ critique is overdone, ‘comfortably radical’ and in some cases ‘undermining potential spaces for social change prompted by NGOs’ (Larsen 2016: 25). Yet critique is not merely the crude and unproductive act of denunciation in which critics find solace (Gilbert and Sklair 2018). Rejection of criticism runs the risk of excising
from view the atmospheres of violence with which defenders must contend, and the potential complicity of environmental BINGOs and their corporate partners in the harms suffered by defenders.

Indeed, this hostility to critical approaches seems itself to reflect the ‘harmony ideology’ (Foster, 2014) which characterises partnerships between extractive industry corporations and their ‘Integrator’ partners among the environmental BINGOs, according to which concern for polite consensus replaces concern for social inequality – or, in some cases, for the rights of environmental defenders. In this article, it is not our intention to ‘throw stones from the sidelines’ and occupy the ‘comfortably radical’ role of a priori critiquing partnerships between extractive industry corporations and environmental BINGOs. Rather, we draw attention to the ways in which environmental BINGOs – through their own efforts to scale up conservation, and through partnership with extractive industry firms who help to fund and facilitate the scaling up of conservation through offsetting – are complicit in a ‘necropolitical ecology’ whereby some environmental defenders are systematically exposed to more risk of harm, violence and death. As highlighted above, this operates through ‘Green Violence’ that is redolent of the colonial necropolitics which saw ‘natives’ classified as ‘poachers’ whose lives are rendered disposable through militarized conservation. In the next section, we examine how environmental BINGOs/GONGOs enter into relations of complicity with extractive industry firms whose operations reproduce atmospheres of violence and expose would-be defenders to risk, threat and harm.

Royal Dutch Shell: The Nature Conservancy & (formerly) WWF

Shell’s long history of entanglement with WWF has been well documented. Shell’s General Director, John Loudon, was brought into WWF International by its founder, and became its president in 1976 (Huismann 2014: 89-93). More recently, WWF (particularly WWF-UK) has been more outspoken and confrontational in its relations with Shell. CEO David Nussbaum has recently spoken out against Shell’s expansion of drilling into the Arctic, and previous CEO Robert Napier attacked Shell over lax environmental standards on the Sakhalin-2 project in 2005. However, WWF has long been reluctant to speak out against Shell’s alleged complicity in human rights abuses, and the cultivation of atmospheres of violence with which defenders must contend (see above). Shell has been involved in a formal partnership with TNC since 2009 (and has also engaged with IUCN since 2003, albeit not without controversy - see below).
TNC present their partnership with Shell as a matter of integrating science and conservation expertise with Shell’s business practice. There is a focus on the ‘mitigation hierarchy’, and the reduction of net carbon footprint through offsetting: Adams’ (2017) Faustian Bargain in action. Meanwhile, concerns have been raised by UNEP over Shell’s failure to clean up oil spill sites, and its use of discredited and misleading information to attribute oil spills in the Niger Delta to sabotage or theft (Amnesty International & FOE 2014; Amnesty 2014). At the time of writing, a court case is ongoing against Shell in The Hague, brought by Esther Kiobel and other widows of the Ogoni 9. A previous attempt at holding Shell to account for their part in the trumped-up judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Esther’s husband Barinem Kiobel and the rest of the Ogoni 9 has been rejected by American courts on jurisdictional grounds, marking the closure of an important pathway to redress for corporate human rights abuses (Grear and Weston 2015). Nonetheless, proceedings in this earlier case resulted in the release of numerous internal memos. Some of these appear to show Shell requesting support from the military, and paying honoraria as a ‘show of gratitude’ for the ‘sustained favourable disposition’ shown by military commanders implicated in killings of civilians, both before and after the gratitude was expressed (Dummett 2019; see Zalik 2004).

There are haunting parallels between the WWF’s displays of gratitude towards park guards accused of abuses and murder in Nepal (above), and Shell’s prestations towards abusive military figures in Ogoniland. Divided by decades and continents, these actions seem to be united by a form of necropolitics, whereby spaces are governed such that some categories of people are more at risk of death than others. Given TNC’s (at least partial) embrace of the rhetoric of ‘defenders’ in representations of their own conservation work, questions once again need to be raised about the role of environmental BINGOs in policing a ‘Thin Green Line’ through their partnership with extractive industry corporations. Some ‘defenders’ of nature as a whole are to be valorized; extractive industry partners who engage in mitigation and offsetting are to be lauded; but those corporations’ entanglements in human rights abuses and the murder of defenders is met with silence. While there is a tendency for those working in the extractive industries to disconnect “legacy issues” such as Shell’s actions in Ogoniland from contemporary corporate personhood (see Gilbert 2015), events such as the murder of the Ogoni 9 are anything but ‘legacy issues’ for the family of those involved. If environmental BINGOs continue to support extractive industry corporations who attempt to evade accountability for complicity in creating atmospheres of violence - however long ago - it is difficult to see how decolonial solidarity with defenders can be cultivated.
Chevron: Conservation International & IUCN

CI has been working with Chevron for close to two decades, and Chevron’s sponsorship of CI’s Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool has been the most lauded outcome of their collaboration. Chevron has also engaged in forms of partnership with national branches of IUCN, notably IUCN Bangladesh on which we focus in this final section. We end our discussion of BINGO/GONGO partnerships with extractive industry corporations and their implications for solidarity with at-risk defenders by focusing on IUCN, because its unique organizational form reflects the possibilities for, as well as the challenges faced by, pursuing decolonial solidarity with defenders. IUCN is, as MacDonald (2003) notes, an ideological actor involved in ‘producing and circulating a definition of what constitutes conservation.’ The IUCN’s World Conservation Congresses (WCCs) and the resolutions adopted therein have proven fruitful sites of analysis for scholars seeking to understand broad shifts in the legitimation of global environmental actors. Lehmann (2019) identifies three shifts in the IUCN since the 1980s: the first from nature protection to sustainable use and sustainable development; the second to a rights-based focus on conservation that (eventually) made space for indigenous participation; and finally a full-on embrace of market-led approaches to conservation. While disaffection towards engagement with actors like Shell (see above) was expressed at WCCs through the 1990s and early 2000s, formal expression of discontent towards cooperation with extractive industry corporations trailing controversial human rights records peaked in 2008 (Khan 2013: 116), perhaps reflecting the flowering of Foster’s (2014) ‘harmony ideology’.

In Bangladesh, IUCN’s country office entered into a controversial relationship with Chevron and Chevron’s environmental consulting firm, SMEC, to provide monitoring services for a controversial seismic survey that Chevron carried out in the Lawachhara National Park during 2008. Negotiations between IUCNB, SMEC and Chevron in the run-up to the survey - which violated municipal law - reveal pointedly how far Adam’s (2017) Faustian Bargain might take environmental BINGOs (or GONGOs) who come to accept market-based approaches to conservation, and rely on continued corporate partnership. Emails acquired by Tanzim Khan (2013: 160) reveal that IUCN allowed SMEC, hired by Chevron to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment, to delete suggestions made by IUCN’s panel of experts and insert allowances to drill regardless of considerations for particular animals ranging routes and behaviour patterns. As IUCNB wrote in a February 2008 email to the regional office in Bangkok, ‘We find this is a very good opportunity to show case business and conservation can go hand in hand’ (ibid.: 163).
A willingness to sacrifice ‘scientific expertise’ to further partnership with business seems to undermine even the core commitments of environmental BINGOs/GONGOs. Where, one might ask, is the willingness to sacrifice partnerships with extractive industry corporations in order to stand in solidarity with defenders? Chevron has been repeatedly subjected to allegations before the UN Human Rights Council that it has perpetrated what might be called slow environmental violence on indigenous people in Ecuador, polluting 450,000 hectares and digging 880 hydrocarbon waste pits (CETIM 2015). Responsibility has been deflected through creative presentations of corporate personhood (Sawyer 2006), and defenders and their fellow claimants have been depicted as criminal in their pursuit of justice. The lawyer fighting to hold Chevron accountable for the contamination in Ecuador has been placed under house arrest after Chevron came after him with a host of trumped up charges and a campaign to demonise him (Lerner 2020). As we saw above, environmental BINGOs frequently deny corporate personhood in order to distance themselves from an extractive corporation’s activities beyond the immediate setting of a specific partnership. Defenders do not often have that privilege: they are subjected to atmospheres of violence that emerge from the actions of large transnational entities, and it should be incumbent on environmental BINGOs/GONGOs, especially those who invoke the discourse of ‘defenders’, to stand in solidarity with them.

**Conclusion: Decolonizing Solidarity**

> “I will not waste my time working with environmental BINGOs. They are in bed with the very people we are fighting against, with the same people who are killing us and destroying our waters” - environmental defender from Ecuador.

As we argue above, environmental BINGOs/GONGOs are frequently complicit in shaping ‘necropolitical ecologies’ and atmospheres of violence around sites of conservation and/or extraction. It is unsurprising that many environmental defenders do not see BINGOs as allies when they side with extractive corporations and ‘enemies of nature’ rather than the defenders who attempt to secure land, livelihoods and environment in the face of extractive harm. The greenwashing of violence resulting from BINGO partnerships with extractive companies and their complicity in green violence carried out in the name of conservation, reflect a holdover from the colonial past (and present) of conservation. While growing efforts to support environmental defenders are commendable, BINGOs, GONGOs and other actors need to consider the implications of their wider remit of activities and partnerships, many of which contribute to creating the very spaces and atmospheres of violence that threaten environmental defenders. Silence in the face of necropolitics, in the face of human rights violations, and
complicity in greenwashing companies responsible for slow violence and other violences, is inexcusable. Given the increasing number of accusations and reports that point towards their complicity, BINGOs cannot claim ignorance and need to take concrete actions to counteract the human rights violations and violences with which they have been complicit. While defenders attempt to hold transnational corporate persons to account through legal mechanisms, we must ask whether BINGOs are still content to distance themselves from extractive corporations’ activities beyond the narrow confines of their partnerships.

We argue for a decolonial approach to conservation, for a “vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ” (Mignolo 2007, p459). In essence, a transition towards ‘convivial conservation’ which Buscher and Fletcher (2019) describe as a “post-capitalist approach to conservation that promotes radical equity, structural transformation and environmental justice and so contributes to an overarching movement to create a more equal and sustainable world.” A transition away from the creation of ‘deathly spaces’ (Margulies 2019) and the atmospheres of violence that put environmental defenders at risk. Many INGOs have begun to engage in discourse around decolonial approaches and ‘shifting the power’ away from INGOs based in the North towards NGOs and grassroots movements in the South. Such a shift would allow for more effective change but also would lead to a drastic change in the structure of these organisations and has been slow to materialise.

As Doane (2019) noted recently, for “all the lofty words about ‘shifting the power,’ many INGO staff and board members still seem unable to let go of a model that values technocrats over movement builders, and which places a higher value on their own Northern white role.” Environmental BINGOs are no exception. It is time to move away from a focus on Centers for Environmental Leadership (CI) and One Planet Leader Academies (WWF) that further amplify the voices and perspectives of personnel from BINGOs’ corporate partners. Instead, we need to foreground the voices of defenders, listen to the narratives of those who live in atmospheres of violence, and take care before entering into partnerships with the “bewilderers” who turn the slow progression of environmental violence into doubt and inaction (Nixon 2011: 40). Decolonizing BINGO solidarity with environmental defenders requires structural change, but perhaps more critically bravery on the part of BINGOs to recognise their complicity and begin to build decolonial, respectful and equitable relationships with grassroots movements and communities that fight to protect lands, forests and waters from invasion by extractive industries and thereby protect the wildlife and ecosystems that BINGOs aim to conserve.
Bibliography


Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. 2019. Chile: concerns around social &
environmental impacts re BHP Billiton’s Cerro Colorado mine, 3 September 2019, available
at: https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/chile-concerns-around-social-environmental-
impacts-re-bhp-billitons-cerro-colorado-mine


Cavanagh, C. and Himmelfarb, D. 2015. ‘Much in blood and money’: necropolitical ecology
on the margins of the Uganda protectorate. *Antipode* 47(1), 55-73.

Cerrejon. 2019. Cerrejon’s comments on London Mining Network’s article on the status of
the Tabaco community. 27 August 2019, available at: https://www.business-
humanrights.org/sites/default/files/documents/Cerrejo%CC%81n%20response%20to%20BH
RRC%20on%20LMN%20article%20on%20Tabaco%20082719.pdf

CETIM. 2015. Chevron denounced before the Human Rights Council for violations of the
human rights of indigenous and peasant populations in Ecuador, available at:
https://www.cetim.ch/chevron-denounced-before-the-human-rights-council-for-violations-of-
the-human-rights-of-indigenous-and-peasant-populations-in-ecuador/

November/December, 17-31.

CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionario). 2019. Nota do CIMI sobre assassinatos de
indígenas Guajajara no Maranhão e Tuiuca no Amazonas. Available online
https://cimi.org.br/2019/12/nota-do-cimi-sobre-assassinatos-de-indigenas-guajajara-no-
maranhao-e-tuiuca-no-amazonas/

Twenty companies 1965-2017, 9 October 2019, available at:

Innovation Review* Fall 2007

https://www.conservation.org/corporate-engagements/bhp-billiton

Corry, S. 2015. When conservationists militarise, who is the real poacher? *Truthout*, 9 August
2015, available at: https://truthout.org/articles/when-conservationists-militarize-who-s-the-
real-poacher/

https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/wwfletter.pdf


Hume, N. 2019. BHP under pressure to cut ties with mining industry lobbyists, *Financial Times*, 3 September 2019, available at: https://www.ft.com/content/8bd5f040-ce40-11e9-b018-ca4456540ea6


https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/05/04/nonprofit-land-bank-amasses-billions/10fdb070-d956-40e7-a508-b03483c21899/


