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# The Rich, the Powerful and the Endangered: Conservation Elites, Networks and the Dominican Republic

George Holmes

Sustainability Research Institute, University of Leeds, UK;  
g.holmes@leeds.ac.uk

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**Abstract:** This paper explores conservation as an elite process in the Dominican Republic. It begins by showing how conservation at a global level is an elite process, driven by a small powerful elite. Looking at the Dominican Republic, it demonstrates how the extraordinary levels of protection have been achieved by a small network of well connected individuals, who have been able to shape conservation as they like, while limiting the involvement by the large international conservation NGOs who are considered so dominant throughout Latin America. Despite this, conservation both globally and in the Dominican Republic is shown to share similar political structures and the same lack of critique of capitalism or its environmental impacts.

**Keywords:** conservation, elite, globalisation, protected areas, Dominican Republic, Latin America

The Dominican Republic is often held up as a paragon of environmentalism, an example of excellent conservation of tropical forests in the global South. It has an extremely extensive network of protected areas, with 21.5% of the country in national parks and scientific reserves (International Union for Conservation of Nature—IUCN category I and II protected areas—the strictest levels of protection), the fourth highest percentage of any country in the world (UNEP-IUCN 2006). It is lauded because it has achieved this despite its relative poverty and high population density. Yet there are two other important aspects to Dominican conservation that have led geographer Jared Diamond to use it in his best selling book “Collapse” (2005) as an example to illustrate his argument that societies chose their ecological destiny and ultimately their ability to survive. Firstly, the Dominican Republic shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, but the two countries have stark social, political and environmental differences. Diamond argues that the Dominican Republic has chosen to strictly protect much of its forests, creating a relatively stable society and a reasonably prosperous economy, whereas Haiti has chosen not to protect its forest, trapping itself in a cycle of environmental devastation, political instability and underdevelopment. Such a comparison makes the policies of the Dominican Republic look even more enlightened,

progressive and effective. Secondly, Diamond argues that these policies are even more remarkable because they were created by Dominicans, not imposed or brought in by outside actors. He views them as the result of a “vigorous indigenous conservation movement” (p 332) consisting of Dominican NGOs and activists, and the legacy of a repressive but environmentally minded president.<sup>1</sup>

The Dominican Republic provides an excellent case for understanding issues of environment and development, particularly because it is held up by conservationists as an example to follow. This paper is concerned with how the Dominican Republic came to be so conserved, how this “vigorous indigenous” movement achieved so much. The case is important not just for the reasons stated above, but because of how it interacts with two trends in conservation’s relationship with capitalism.

Firstly, it adds to a growing literature that shows how conservation policy results not from popular movements, but from well-connected elites. Alongside others in this collection, this paper explores how specific, identifiable networks can be shown to drive conservation. Membership of these networks is often facilitated by wealth, and they often include corporations and their directors. The capitalist influence on conservation comes not merely through the presence of these actors in networks, but through their ability to shape how conservation happens and what form it takes, its ideologies and its practices, in particular in ensuring that conservation does not critique capitalism. Elites are important when considering conservation’s relationship with capitalism. This paper presents an account of global and Dominican conservation elites, the similarities they share, the complex relationships between them, and their relationship with capitalism.

Secondly, it provides a counterpoint to a related body of literature critiquing the influence of large international conservation NGOs, who are seen as too powerful, able to act with impunity, often causing harm whilst pursuing biodiversity protection. These NGOs are often considered prime conduits by which forms of contemporary capitalism affect conservation practices. Their seemingly excessive influence over conservation in the global South is considered damaging to local environmentalist politics. The Dominican Republic shows a case where their actions are restricted, where they cannot act as they might like, identifying where the limits to this trend may lie.

At the heart of this paper is the idea of networks of elites in conservation, and capitalism’s place within this. It discusses different elites, the tensions between them, yet it shows how elite networks sharing a particular form are present throughout conservation, beginning with an exploration of the structures and workings of global conservation elites, particularly the role of large conservation NGOs. It then chronicles the growth of Dominican conservation, exploring the networks of influence within this. There is a particular focus on the

struggles for control of protected areas between globally powerful and nationally powerful conservation actors. It shows the Dominican conservation elite as a scaled-down version of the transnational counterpart, using the same methods to be successful, while at the same time rejecting the actors (although not necessarily the ideologies and practices) of the global elite. Both elites share a reluctance to critique capitalism. This paper concludes by showing how and why elites may have had such an influence on conservation both in the Dominican Republic and globally.

### Elites and Conservation

This paper uses Woods' (1998) idea of elites, defined by the disproportionate influence they have in comparison with the rest of society, based on ideas of societal networks and connections. Certain individuals have more influence than others in particular areas, and they form the elites for that particular area. In contrast to early conceptualisations of elites, membership in this model is partially detached from social structures—for example, although parliamentarians may be seen as the quintessential elites, television presenters and academics can also be highly influential within society, albeit in a different way. There can be multiple elites in the same field, working at different spatial levels.

Elites in conservation are not a new phenomenon. Adams (2004) and Mackenzie (1988) show how a mix of aristocrats, wealthy hunters and naturalists and colonial bureaucrats drove the creation of protected areas in British colonies in Africa, using their strong social connections to important figures in government as their primary asset, creating the first international conservation NGOs in the process. Gadgil and Guha (1992) demonstrate a similar process occurring simultaneously in British India, built on a foundation of earlier Mughal elite hunting regulations (Rangarajan 2001). The emergence of US protected areas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was driven by the formal and informal networks of wealthy urbanites, such as hunting or social clubs, and their contacts in government, most notably Theodore Roosevelt (Jacoby 2001). Well-connected elites have continued to drive the expansion of many US protected areas (Fortwangler 2007; Walker 2007). What is new in recent decades is the emergence of a strong global elite in conservation, the strong position of a few NGOs within this, and the opportunities this offers for transnational capitalism to affect conservation.

Recent analyses of global transnational capitalism have offered an insight into the structure of global elites, based around personal interactions and social networking (eg Rothkopf 2008; Sklair 2000), and these provide a good model for understanding global conservation.

This transnational capitalist class, as Sklair calls it, consists not just of the directors of large companies who have an obvious impact on the shape of global capitalism, but also the politicians who provide the political structures that allow these companies to be successful, the professionals and thinkers whose ideas vitalise and reinforce capitalism and the media and trendsetters who promote concepts such as consumerism that ultimately underpin neoliberal capitalism. The elite works through the movement of individuals between different sectors, face-to-face interactions and personal contacts between members. Rothkopf highlights both the varied makeup of this elites and the importance of personal contacts by analysing the form and mix of attendees at the annual Davos summits. This structure resembles that of global conservation, which has become dominated by a networked elite made of individuals from NGOs, governments, corporations, science and the media, working through personal contacts built up as individuals move between these sectors and meet socially or at formal spaces such as conferences. Interactions allow the exchange of ideas and lead to mutually beneficial projects across different sectors. While each organisation and actor have their own interests, these exchanges encourage relatively homogenous and dominant discourses and practices in global conservation to emerge, creating the global scale in conservation. There is considerable heterogeneity in conservation overall, but at a global scale there is a much more homogenous set of actors, discourses and practices. As later sections show, similar elites can form at the national scale, and interact with transnational elites in interesting ways.

The transnational conservation elite is driven and dominated by the directors and senior staff of a few large conservation NGOs. NGOs are the heart of global conservation: they have been globalised since their inception (see Adams 2004), they are virtually the only organisations working on environmental issues with global aims and manifestos (younger bodies such as the UN environment programme excepted), and they have a long history of dominating global conservation issues. Their position means that NGOs are often seen as the most capable actors in global conservation and they are given a prominent position in treaties and negotiations on the environment (Princen and Finger 1994). NGOs are at the forefront of conservation thinking, employing large numbers of conservation scientists who are arguably producing the most innovative conservation research (da Fonseca 2003). These two points put NGOs at the heart of a conservation epistemic community, allowing them to frame the terms of debates. Conservation NGOs have benefited in recent decades from a political climate that has been favourable to NGOs generally (Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington 2007). Globally, conservation is dominated by a few, very large organisations with billions of dollars of assets and excellent political contacts, around whom power and money

is increasingly being centred at the expense of smaller organisations (Chapin 2004). Organisations such as The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International and Wildlife Conservation Society can be distinguished from the rest of the conservation movement by their size, influence and global ambitions, and it is these who form the heart of the transnational conservation elite, dominating how conservation is talked about and practiced at a global scale.

The work of NGOs is aided by politicians and bureaucrats working for national governments or international structures such as the World Bank or UN, who provide structures and policies which support and promote the work of NGOs. These range from formal inclusion of protected areas and NGOs into international development plans and international treaties, such as the UN convention on biodiversity, to debt-for-nature swaps, whereby part of a nation's foreign debt is cancelled in exchange for pledging to create new protected areas. Under US versions of this, large NGOs work closely with the US Agency for International Development to plan, fund and facilitate these swaps, and end up administering the new protected area (Lewis 1999). NGOs extensively lobbied for the creation of such legislation, and swaps are seen as a means by which NGOs have used their contacts to facilitate international expansion (Bernau 2006), as demonstrated in the Dominican Republic. Conservation NGOs have deliberately forged close links to the World Bank and aid agencies, through exchanges of personnel and integrating conservation into major development programmes as a way of increasing their influence (Goldman 2001).

Conservation NGOs have developed close ties to corporations, particularly as corporate directors join NGO boards—between 62% and 72% of the board members of the biggest three NGOs have also had board membership of large corporations,<sup>2</sup> greatly outnumbering those with scientific or technical backgrounds. This provides funding but more importantly brings corporate strategies and management structures into conservation (Birchard 2005). Many of these strategies, such as expansion of NGOs by taking over or merging with others, directly mirror those of large corporations, and have allowed NGOs to rapidly expand.

Global conservation is supported by a group of thinkers and professionals—the scientists, consultants and academics who research, write and advise on conservation—who create and promote forms of conserving biodiversity which are taken up and implemented by other actors. Media actors are very influential, controlling how biodiversity issues are portrayed in the media, endorsing conservation as an intrinsically good thing which cannot be challenged (Mitmann 1999). Repetition of images of wilderness landscapes devoid of their human occupants promotes the exclusionary forms of conservation, such as protected areas, upon which NGOs thrive. Complex realities of animal

behaviour or ecology are brushed over to present a simpler portrait that is closer to viewers' preconceptions. Brockington (2009) highlights the importance of "conservation celebrities", individuals who use their fame and influence to promote conservation.

There is considerable cross-over and movement between these factions of the conservation elite: a prominent scientist may also work for an NGO or a bureaucracy, as well as becoming a conservation celebrity by presenting a nature programme on television. Interactions and networking taking place in formal meetings, such as the World Parks Congress and other conferences and workshops, or through informal social contacts such as cocktail parties, allow ideas to circulate and influence to be asserted, and the key tools are access and personal relationships. We can argue for the existence of a transnational conservationist elite, consisting of NGO directors, scientists and thinkers, corporate directors, bureaucrats, celebrities and individuals working in the media who all combine to promote the notion and practice of conservation across the world.

There are two important consequences of the transnational conservation elite. Firstly, it has produced a set of dominant practices and attitudes in global conservation, notwithstanding diversity in conservation at other scales. The transnational conservation elite determine how biodiversity is thought about, discussed and practised by those outside of the elite in a way that reinforces their dominant position. Certain things become taken for granted and others are beyond the terms of the discussion. Debates within global conservation are centred on what form of protected area is best and which type of NGO is most effective (see Adams and Hulme 2001; Adams and McShane 1992; Brandon, Redford and Sanderson 1998; Terbourgh 1999; Western 1997), yet whether NGOs and protected areas—the central actor and key policy recommendation of the transnational conservation elite—are the best ways of protecting biodiversity is beyond the terms of the discussion. By remaining unchallengeable, their dominance continues: protected areas continue to expand worldwide (West, Igoe and Brockington 2006), media representations continue to portray conservation and NGOs as good things, worthy of support (Brockington 2009). Additionally, criteria for assessing success and failures of conservation are set by these same NGOs (Bundell 2006), and by defining concepts and measurements, they can set the terms of debate in a way that serves their own interests and reinforces their status. While there is diversity in conservation practices, the NGOs in the transnational conservation elite have tended to promote exclusionary forms of conservation that have had significant social impacts on local populations, aided by media representations of biodiversity occupying spaces free of human impact and of NGOs as unchallengeably good actors. Importantly the elite's connection with capitalism, through funding and more importantly

corporate involvement in NGO boards, makes it unwilling or unable to provide a bulwark to capitalism's impact on the environment—within global conservation, capitalism's environmental impact is beyond the terms of discussion. Not only do protected areas and other projects which they espouse fail to environmentally critique neoliberal capitalism, they allow "greenwashing" (McAfee 1999) of the corporations and organisations that sponsor conservation, as some of the papers in this edition show (see also Chapin 2004; Dowie 1995; Goldman 2001; Rothkopf 2008; Sklair 2000).

Secondly, recent decades have seen the rise of a few large conservation NGOs, whose financial and political resources have expanded massively—The Nature Conservancy grew from annual incomes of US\$110 million in 1990 to over \$800 million by 2005 (Birchard 2005), and Conservation International, founded in 1987, now has annual incomes in excess of US\$200 million (MacDonald 2008). Critics have argued that their dominance of global conservation means they are now too powerful, particularly when these global actors become involved in national scale politics in the global South (Chapin 2004). One way of understanding this is through what Harrison (2004) terms governance states. Following recent post-conditional turns in global governance, the World Bank and aid agencies have been pushing governments in the global South to engage civil society such as NGOs as stakeholders or partners. Governance states form as banks, agencies and civil society actors become so integrated into the workings of the state that they compete with it for sovereignty. Global conservation NGOs have become partners on biodiversity issues, but their ability to lobby powerful organisations such as the World Bank and aid agencies—the result of consciously forged close links—means NGOs have strong influence over the policies of governments in the global South. They now compete with states for sovereignty over natural resources and protected areas. Perhaps the most extreme case of an environmental governance state is Madagascar, explored by Duffy (2006), where conservation NGOs sit on the Donor Consortium which determines future funding priorities and policies for Madagascar, from where they compete with the Malagasy state to shape national environmental policies. As part of governance states, these NGOs are less inclined to criticise the environmental impacts of World Bank driven neoliberalisation and increased capitalisation of nature.

These concepts explain how NGOs, as part of the transnational conservation elite, can become involved in environmental management in the global South. Governance states literature argues that states compete with NGOs for control of policy. The case of the Dominican Republic provides a useful counterpoint, giving a different perspective to theories of weak Southern states and powerful global NGOs. Here there was another set of actors, a vibrant, powerful national conservation elite,

with whom the global elite had to compete for sovereignty, for control over the running of protected areas. This shows where some of the limits to the transnational conservation elite may lie. The next section describes the growth of Dominican conservation and the forces behind it, showing the similarities between transnational and national elites, and the significant tensions that have emerged between the two.

### Protected Areas in the Dominican Republic

Conservation in the Dominican Republic has been linked to elites since its inception. The first protected areas were forest reserves created in the 1920s by the occupying US forces to protect the watersheds that fed the tobacco and sugar producing valleys, products destined for US markets (Moya Pons 1995; Turits 2003). These reserves later expanded and became national parks during the Trujillo dictatorship (1930–1961). This was not a conservation strategy, but instead aimed to expropriate land and appropriate timber resources for the personal benefit of Trujillo, who owned a monopoly on timber and sawmills (Bolay 1997). Trujillo's dictatorial rule has been described as "a regime of total plunder organized to furnish him with total control of every economic enterprise existing in the country" (Moya Pons 1995:359).

The main periods of expansion for protected areas and environmental legislation occurred during the rule of Joaquin Balaguer. Originally Trujillo's protégé and puppet president during the last few years of the Trujillo regime, he was elected<sup>3</sup> in 1966 following a tumultuous period of civil war, coups and US invasion that followed Trujillo's assassination in 1961. Balaguer's government was dominated by a small body of advisors, largely made up of military personnel, with a highly centralised presidency as a way of retaining power (Ferguson 1992). As I show later, Balaguer's style of government was of great importance in allowing elite-driven conservation measures. Balaguer's environmental legislation, particularly regarding protected areas, was characterised by deep social impacts and highly centralised planning. In 1967, Balaguer passed law 206-67, which banned lumbering and made all trees, including those on private land, property of the state, rules ruthlessly enforced by the newly created military-run forest police. It significantly disrupted peasant life until its repeal in 1997: Roth (2001) and Rocheleau and Ross (1995) show that this changed how Dominican peasants engaged with trees and forests by removing any incentive they previously had to plant trees and created a disincentive to have trees on their land. As is shown below, such a strategy of crude regulation rather than sustainability or livelihood issues is a consistent feature of Dominican environmentalism. A number of protected areas were created during Balaguer's first period of power (1966–1978), although like the tree law of 1967, they were implemented with minimal planning

or consultation, and local peasantry were evicted and excluded without compensation.<sup>4</sup>

Balaguer enacted far more environmental legislation than other presidents, and most Dominican national parks and all scientific reserves were created during his presidencies. In the first year of his second period (1986–1996), he enacted operation *Selva Negra* (Black Forest), a high-profile paramilitary crackdown on charcoal burners and shifting cultivators, and created four new protected areas that increased area under protection by 96% (Roth 2001). In the penultimate year of his rule (when, due to a history of vote rigging and political violence, the Clinton administration forced him not to stand for re-election) his administration created 32 new protected areas totalling 1129.9 km<sup>2</sup>. In August 1996, just 12 days before the handover of power to the new president, Balaguer created another 37 new areas and expanded existing ones to a total of 4932 km<sup>2</sup>.

The outburst of environmental legislation at the very beginning of Balaguer's rule was in small part due to outside influences: reports by the Organisation of American States into infrastructure development persuasively argued for watershed protection for hydroelectricity.<sup>5</sup> Yet the large proportion of protected areas in the Dominican Republic is the result of Balaguer's drive to create them, rather than any external pressure. Although his motives are not certain, there is no suggestion that international actors or agendas affecting his thinking. Nor was it due to broad public pressure, as there is no widespread culture of visiting protected areas among Dominicans—foreign tourists visiting beach resorts constitute the vast majority of visitors to Dominican national parks, and the largest park receives fewer than 3000 Dominican visitors annually (ABT Associates 2002). One academic argues that his policies were part of his Machiavellian system of control rather than environmental convictions—park boundaries were created so that enemies could be evicted, or the eviction compensation scheme manipulated to reward supporters.<sup>6</sup> Balaguer's land reforms were a clientelist form of maintaining support (Ferguson 1992; Moya Pons 1995), where favoured groups received large compensation payments, and perceived enemies nothing. Diamond (2005) speculates, among other things, about the influence of his family and his childhood in forming his opinions and desire to protect the environment. Others consider Balaguer's concept of development, particularly his desire to make the Dominican Republic the polar opposite of neighbouring Haiti, socially, culturally, economically and environmentally. Balaguer's virulently anti-Haitian views strongly influenced his politics, and the idea of protecting the environment to benefit hydroelectricity and agriculture projects provides a stark contrast to Haiti's notorious deforestation, erosion, undeveloped agriculture and poverty (Balaguer 1983; Moya Pons 1995). Anti-Haitian sentiment is widespread in

Dominican society, and is manifested largely in “othering” of Haitians as African, black, poor and uncivilised in contrast to a European, white(r), developed, civilised Dominican people (Ferguson 1992; Howard 2001; Wucker 1999). The idea of preventing their country from becoming like Haiti is a constant theme among Dominican conservationists.<sup>7</sup> As one NGO director wrote:

Several years ago, I dared to speak in public . . . about the state of natural resources in our country. On that occasion, I presented the dramatic situation of Haiti as a mirror of what our future could become if we kept on following the same path . . . the country would soon be classified as a “red alert” zone in the world, or even worse—God forbid—as an “ecological catastrophe”, just one step removed from being declared as “wasteland” (Armenteros 1989a:10).

Whatever the roots of Balaguer’s environmental views, the protected areas policies of his administrations were the result of a particular conservation elite, uniquely placed in Balaguer’s style of government. Many analysts describe Balaguer as a *caudillo*, a reference to the quasi-feudal warlords who dominated nineteenth century Dominican politics, using coercion, patronage and a strong public persona to maintain power (Ferguson 1992; Moya Pons 1995). Balaguer operated in a very small circle of selected associates, mainly senior military officials, while remaining as a very visible personality and wielding strong, centralised individual power as president, refusing to delegate decisions to ministers (Moya Pons 1995; Wucker 1999). Despite Balaguer’s strongly held environmental views, he created no environment ministry, keeping close control over environment issues; the forestry service was military and thus part of his political inner circle, and the protected areas directorate was part of the office of the presidency. According to foreign aid agency staff, Balaguer’s concern combined with the centralised power made liaising with the state on environmental matters very efficient.<sup>8</sup>

Within Balaguer’s close circle of loyal associates was Eleuterio Martinez, a connected member of the Santo Domingo elite well known for his environmental concern and rhetoric. A biology professor at the state university, he wrote eloquent newspaper pieces on environmental threats, was a member of the elite Academy of Sciences, and had family and social ties to important senators. Like Balaguer, there was minimal international influence in fomenting his environmentalism—he was educated and has worked solely in the Dominican Republic, always for the Dominican state or Dominican NGOs. His articles for the *Listin Diario* over the last 20 years have evoked impending threats and the necessity of urgent action:

In 1979, a United Nations official predicted that Haiti could very well become the first real desert in the Caribbean. In 1980, a report by the government of the United States warned that, unless current

trends be halted, Haiti would be an ecological wasteland by the year 2000. We can certainly not remain indifferent to the Haitian case. That country is our Siamese twin, a binding condition for very existence on this island . . . Can we remain indifferent while our country is being converted into a desert? (Martinez 1988, quoted in Armenteros 1989b:3).

He became very close to Balaguer, who appointed him as head of the forestry service, and he became the main architect of Balaguer's environmental laws in later years, particularly the protected area system. He was influential in shaping conservation because of his close relationship with the president,<sup>9</sup> his academic status and his media profile. There are other cases where closeness to a head of state has allowed conservationists to wield a very large amount of influence (Boza 1993; Garland 2006). Martinez's vision, based on strict protection of areas with no human use allowed, dominated. Category I and II protected areas became the method selected for protecting the Dominican Republic's environment, rather than sustainable development focused policies.

If he [Eleuterio Martinez] had his way, the whole country would be a park (academic and activist).

[Martinez] has a focus that is extremely protectionist. He has little social vision of conservation problems, seeing parks as isolated islands and not part of a sea that is social, political . . . far from being good it caused harm to the system of protected areas (protected areas consultant).

Having a centralising presidency with a small number of key advisors creates problems where one person is advising politicians on areas in which the politicians do not have technical expertise, and where no one else is being consulted. Legislation was pushed through on the will of Balaguer and Martinez, without prior studies of the social and economic makeup of the area, run on an ad-hoc basis without long-term planning or management plans. Currently out of a total of 69 terrestrial protected areas, only 13 have management plans and 32 have full-time staff. The few management plans that exist largely contain description of ecosystems, with minimal or no socio-economic data. Many protected areas had ill-defined boundaries, did not consider how local people used the resources contained within them, and did not plan for dealing with the aftermath of evictions and displacement of peasants from newly created parks (Geisler and Barton 1997). Protected areas created substantial hardships for neighbouring communities, resulting in sustained opposition to them:

None of these parks that were created in this other period, in none was the community consulted, and many ended up displacing sizeable populations that were inside or next to the parks that were created,

without studies, without consulting, without compensation, without any of this. So if you go to the countryside there remains a negative attitude towards what is the protection of natural resources, protected areas, national parks (protected areas operations director).

NGO workers, consultants and national parks directorate employees all complained of the massive task of reforming the protected area system so that it takes social factors into account.<sup>10</sup> Observers say this process has been “hijacked” by large international tourism companies allegedly aided by corrupt politicians, as subsequent laws aimed at changing park boundaries were altered, removing key beaches from coastal parks, allegedly so they could be developed for resorts.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conservation Elites in the Dominican Republic since 1996**

The end of the Balaguer regime in 1996 represented a new phase in Dominican politics, society and conservation. Environmental issues became a lower political priority: rather than increasing environmental regulation and expanding protected areas, many Balaguer era laws were repealed and national parks shrunk. An environment ministry was created in 2000, but investment in it has waned. The National Parks Directorate, which had reported directly to the office of the presidency during the Balaguer era, became the Sub-secretariat for protected areas as part of the Ministry of the Environment. The ministry has become a means to reward loyal party supporters with jobs, bloated with unqualified staff who take resources away from infrastructure investment, and who are replaced after every election, losing expertise and institutional memory.<sup>12</sup> There has been some devolution of environmental governance, although centralising tendencies are still strong, to the annoyance of environmental and aid NGOs. Some limited protected area co-management projects have been created with community groups, and some other larger projects set up in conjunction with Dominican environmental NGOs. The Dominican government gives little support to NGOs generally, except NGOs directed by politicians used as a front for co-opting state funds to buy political support. Although environmental NGOs almost never receive money from the state, they remain highly politicised along party lines; ruling parties choose to work only with NGOs who support that party. This provides an element of temporariness to membership of the Dominican conservation elite—if the NGO’s favoured political party is in power, this gives them the connections to be influential, but they lose this when the party loses.

Another feature of Dominican society now manifest in the conservation sector is the almost oligarchic power of a few well-connected families which dominate the economy. These are descended from the families who controlled trade during the Spanish colonial

period and post-independence, particularly industries such as sugar and tobacco. These positions were reworked and reinforced by Trujillo, who rewarded loyalty by granting monopolies to his supporters (Moya Pons 1995). The elites emerged with sufficient power from the Trujillo era to play the central part in the overthrow of Juan Bosch as president in 1962, and continue to dominate politics and the economy (Ferguson 1992; Rosario 1988). These families have also entered conservation, and head up many of the key NGOs. Fundación Progressio, one of the most successful NGOs in terms of influence, was founded by one of the country's leading bankers. The vice-president is the extremely influential Cardinal Nicolas de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez and other board members include oligarchs from tobacco and manufacturing. The board has also included newspaper directors, university rectors and an ex-president of the Supreme Court (Armenteros 1991). These elite board members and their personal contacts have been central to the success of Fundación Progressio since its inception in 1982. As one of their employees put it "[our directors] can phone up the [presidential] palace if they need to". In a rare example of Balaguer era decentralisation, in 1989 the directors of Fundación Progressio used their contacts with the president and successfully lobbied for the organisation to be granted total autonomy to administer a small state-owned scientific reserve. This lobbying was helped by the personal friendship between their founder and Eleuterio Martinez, who intervened on their behalf. In later years, they lobbied subsequent presidents to overrule senators who wanted to downgrade or abolish the reserve, allegedly to take advantage of its timber resources for their own gain. They have also been able to survive sustained resistance from subsistence farmers evicted to make way for the reserve because they have the political and financial backing to oppress and ignore them.

Like the global conservation elite, Dominican NGOs have rivalries, competition and alliances. There are a few official fora where NGO workers meet together, such as workshops hosted by the US Agency for International Development, DED (German Development Bank), the Ministry of the Environment, and The Nature Conservancy, the only large international conservation NGO working in the Dominican Republic. Relationships between NGOs are not always good—some NGOs have formed following a split from another, accusations of corruption fly between groups; rivalries are such that some conservationists refuse to be in the same room as each other. NGOs' relationships with different political parties, which have implications for their financial and political resources, are also important. Yet despite the passing of the Balaguer regime, Eleuterio Martinez's influence remains strong. This is due to his polemical books and articles in the national press, strong personal contacts with key political figures, positions in civil society such as the state university and the Academy of Sciences,

and because of a paucity of other commentators. He dominates all media discussions of the environment, giving him unique ability to influence public perceptions of conservation. Most recently, he was reappointed as director of protected areas in September 2008 following a political crisis and reshuffle of the environment ministry. The ruling party which brought him back into government is not the party of Balaguer which first nurtured him, reflecting his status across the political elite. One of his first acts in office was to send 1200 soldiers into Los Haitises National Park to evict 100 “squatter” farmers, a return to the Balaguer era strict protectionist policies.

Just as having a small networked elite in global scale conservation has led to complete domination of certain actors and concepts, the same has occurred in Dominican conservation. Amongst the civil servants, NGOs, oligarchs and experts in Dominican conservation, there is an undisputed acceptance that protected areas should be at the heart of environmental policy, while other issues such as pollution and urban ecology have been neglected by both government and the environmental movement. The town of Haina, 15 km from Santo Domingo, was the site of a highly polluting lead battery recycling plant. Although inadequate regulation resulted in massive pollution—over 90% of residents suffer lead poisoning, and the town is considered one of the top 10 most polluted cities in the world (Caravanos and Fuller 2006; Kaul et al 1999)—it has received minimal attention from government or Dominican NGOs. The Dominican conservation elite have not paid attention to commercial agriculture nor mining, both of which are large economic sectors with significant environmental impacts. They have been unable or unwilling to critique the consequences of capitalism on the environment, nor discuss issues of sustainable development. Instead, Dominican environmentalists debate how protected areas should be run, by whom and where exactly their boundaries should be, while other issues remain beyond the terms of discussion. One academic interviewed argued this was because protected areas and biodiversity issues were far more politically “easy”, with fewer difficult questions than sustainable development or critiquing urban pollution, particularly as the oligarchy who dominate the Dominican economy are involved in conservation NGOs. Yet while there are battles within the Dominican conservation elite, it has been successful in uniting to repel external competition from international conservation NGOs.

### **International Conservation NGOs and the Dominican Republic**

The Dominican Republic is praised not just for the extent of its conservation policies, but for their indigeneity, in contrast to much of Latin America. Large conservation organisations are criticised for

imposing foreign ideas about land use in the global South, harming the rural poor and indigenous peoples, while remaining too powerful and well connected to be held accountable (Brockington and Schmidt-Soldau 2004; Chapin 2004). They are also accused of bringing particular neoliberal, capitalist forms of conservation (Igoe and Brockington 2007). Yet the Dominican Republic appears to challenge the notion that international conservation NGOs can involve themselves as they would like throughout Latin America.

The only international conservation NGO with a permanent presence in the Dominican Republic is The Nature Conservancy, the largest conservation NGO in the world, with assets worth US\$4 billion (Birchard 2005), and a central actor in the transnational conservation elite. It works extensively in Latin American protected areas, first getting involved in the Dominican Republic in the late 1980s, working with the US Agency for International Development on "debt for nature swaps". This proposed creating new protected areas, which The Nature Conservancy would run, in return for reductions in Dominican foreign debt. Most recent work has been part of The Nature Conservancy's pan-American Parks in Peril programme, partly funded by USAID. This aims to build capacity in "paper parks"—protected areas that exist in law but which have very little protection in reality—so they become effective in biodiversity conservation (Brandon, Redford and Sanderson 1998). The Dominican Republic has many "paper parks" and The Nature Conservancy began targeting three regions,<sup>13</sup> investing US\$1.6 million in this programme alone between 1990 and 1997.<sup>14</sup> To administer this, The Nature Conservancy has nine permanent staff in the Dominican Republic, working in a fashionable suburb of Santo Domingo. In terms of expenditure and numbers of full-time staff, it is certainly one of the biggest conservation NGOs in the Dominican Republic, if not the largest overall, and has unique connections to globally powerful institutions such as USAID.

Under the Parks-in-Peril programme, The Nature Conservancy's policy throughout the Americas is to partner a pre-existing local NGO (Brandon, Redford and Sanderson 1998), which in the Dominican Republic has been the Moscoso Puello Foundation. Created in 1988, this conservation NGO has a particular focus on the central highlands, and the two organisations began working together in 1994, developing close links. In 2002 the director of Moscoso Puello became country director of the Nature Conservancy for the Dominican Republic, while holding his old job, and a number of other staff members transferred between the two organisations. It is through this process of partnering local NGOs and using their staff that The Nature Conservancy has been able to ensure that most of its personnel are Dominican. Moscoso Puello was hit by scandal in 2006 when it was embezzled by its accountant, and

subsequently collapsed, and The Nature Conservancy formally took over its projects and staff. Many in Dominican conservation commented that Moscoso Puello had become subsumed into The Nature Conservancy, and that other Dominican NGOs reportedly do not want to work with it for fear of being taken over.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the Nature Conservancy's large, sustained presence and connections to USAID have not translated into significant involvement in Dominican conservation. Despite repeated attempts, it has not been able to get involved in conservation practice or to enact its programmes as it would like. The Nature Conservancy faces strong resistance from Dominican NGOs, the state and the media, who are very strongly opposed to its involvement in protected areas administration. This is based on a form of anti-US sentiment, part of wider Dominican opposition to US ownership of land: giving a US NGO a role in running a protected area is seen as a damaging attack on sovereignty. Twice there have been attempts by Dominican presidents to sell or lease parts of the country to the USA, and both were met with fervent opposition, in the 1860s (when opposition led to the overthrow of the president) and in 1972, which was a rare case of open opposition to Balaguer's rule (Moya Pons 1995). Criticisms of debt-for-nature swaps as attacks on national sovereignty are widespread throughout Latin America (Lewis 1999), sentiments mobilised in opposition to The Nature Conservancy's four attempts in the late 1980s and early 1990s to set up debt-for-nature swaps in the Dominican Republic (see Chantada 1992). Leading figures in the conservation elite put pressure on the government to abandon the swaps, through the media and newspaper articles, and by lobbying senators to whom they were connected.<sup>16</sup> As a direct result, in three cases the plans were abandoned, and one altered so that a Dominican NGO inherited the protected area rather than The Nature Conservancy. This opposition goes beyond debt-for-nature swaps: attempts by The Nature Conservancy to instigate a co-management project with the Dominican government in a major park in 2002 under the Parks in Peril programme sparked similar opposition and lobbying, and it too was cancelled. Whereas in the rest of Latin America The Nature Conservancy has used debt-for-nature and Parks in Peril to get involved in the management and everyday running of protected areas, it has no such involvement in the Dominican Republic. This opposition was a rejection of an actor, voiced in terms of sovereignty and land ownership, not on competing conservation ideologies—indeed foreign consultants criticised both Dominican NGOs and The Nature Conservancy for sharing the same vision of people-free protected areas as the basis of environmental protection (a concept that was dominant in the Dominican Republic long before The Nature Conservancy began working there).<sup>17</sup>

The Nature Conservancy admits it faces opposition to what it would like to do in the Dominican Republic, particularly purchasing land or running a protected area, and that it faces considerable political constraints. The stated goal of The Nature Conservancy is to get involved in protected area management,<sup>18</sup> not to ensure that an extensive protected area network and a dynamic conservation politics exists, and in this it has failed. Instead of withdrawing in the face of this opposition to its involvement in protected areas, it has worked on different priorities. It contrasts its work in the rest of Latin America, where it gets involved in a few large projects with a hands-on role in the day-to-day management of protected areas, with the Dominican Republic, where it works across many different small issues, producing policy documents and reports.<sup>19</sup> Its country report for 2005, which details the 34 projects it has been working on, shows that all relate to the production or dissemination of data, and that none involved a hands-on role in protected areas (Marte 2006). A number of different parts of the Dominican conservation sector argue that the choice of The Nature Conservancy to take a hands-off, document-producing role is an attempt to keep attracting funding while not addressing its inability to have a role in running protected areas nor the opposition it faces. One consultant described how The Nature Conservancy was doing unnecessary and methodologically flawed studies in order to appear to its funders to be doing something. A manager in the National Parks Directorate described the activities of The Nature Conservancy as follows: "They make their big noise to sell themselves abroad and to have resources, but for the protected areas, nothing . . . These institutions are for finding financial resources for themselves, for their employees." The Nature Conservancy claims that its ideas still filter into Dominican conservation practice through its publications and through the workshops it hosts for local NGOs, bureaucrats and aid agencies, yet it is difficult to assess what impact this has had. Other actors attend, and maintain cordial relationships with The Nature Conservancy, despite opposition to its programmes, while denying that they are influenced.

Rather than being excluded from the Dominican Republic because they are not needed, as Diamond (2005) insinuates, international conservationists have been actively resisted, their attempts to gain sovereignty over protected areas out-competed. Preventing a powerful organisation like The Nature Conservancy from acting as it likes in the Dominican Republic is remarkable given the perceived dominance of large NGOs in the rest of Latin America, and only happened through the locally powerful and well connected conservation elite.

The Nature Conservancy could be seen to be a failure in the Dominican Republic, yet paradoxically it has also been a great success, if considered using different criteria which argue that the primary goal of NGOs is to sustain their funding and continue their existence

(Jeffrey 2007). Despite local opposition from government and other conservationists, and despite not meeting their stated goal of direct involvement in protected area management, The Nature Conservancy has been able to sustain a large, multi-million dollar presence in the Dominican Republic. It has successfully adapted its strategy away from direct involvement in protected area management and into the production of documents and reports, retaining the support and financing of both The Nature Conservancy head office in the USA and USAID. This enduring presence despite strong political challenges represents a great success.

### **The Dominican Republic, Conservation Elites and Capitalism**

The case of the Dominican Republic tells us several things about elite networks in conservation. Firstly, as with other case studies and with current global scale patterns, it shows that a well connected elite can be very successful, creating one of the most extensive protected area systems in the world despite the pressures of working in a densely populated island. This was for many years driven by the personal wishes and centralising power of a quasi-dictator, shaped by the environmentalist who had unique access to him. Later, it became dominated by a network of social elites, political elites and NGO directors, with access and personal contacts as key commodities in the network.

The Dominican conservation elite has been successful because its networks have allowed it privileged access to political power, and the ability to shape public and policy discourses on the environment. This is the same as the transnational conservation elite, who are able to influence how conservation happens at a global scale and to make it successful (as measured by the extent of protected areas globally and the size of transnational conservation NGOs) through similar strategies of using personal contacts to access wealth, political power and influence. The form of operating of the transnational conservation elite is present in the Dominican conservation elite.

Furthermore, both elites show that NGOs and other organisations who are outside of the elite network lose out because they cannot use contacts successfully. As Chapin (2004) shows, while funding for conservation overall may be slowing, the financial resources of the very largest organisations who are at the heart of the transnational conservation elite are expanding. Other case studies have shown how large conservation NGOs deprive their smaller counterparts of resources and influence because they are better able to use their connections (MacDonald 2008). In the Dominican Republic, those NGOs who have temporarily been excluded from the elite because they are linked to

politicians temporarily out of power find themselves unable to have any influence. This demonstrates the dominant power of each elite in conservation at a particular scale—to have influence, one must be part of the network.

More importantly, the global and the national elite both share the same non-critique of global and national capitalism. Conservation elites are interesting because they, with their links to corporations and trends in neoliberalism, seem unable or unwilling to engage with the environmental consequences of capitalism. Global scale conservation actors have been heavily criticised in recent years for becoming complicit in the destruction of the environment by large corporations, particularly by refusing to criticise corporations who have provided them with money or board members (Chapin 2004; Dowie 1995; McAfee 1999; Rothkopf 2008). The ever strengthening links between these conservation actors and neoliberal trends in development (Goldmann 2001; Igoe and Brockington 2007) allows them to extend into new geographical and political areas, yet in doing so, they introduce a form of environmentalism that is weak in its critique of the environmental impacts of the expansion of neoliberal development and accompanying capitalism. The Dominican elite shares this non-critique of capitalism. By almost entirely concentrating on protected areas, they are neglecting other important issues such as urban pollution, mining and agriculture that occur in the 78.5% of the country which is not in a protected area. Indeed, the lack of information on forest cover and erosion rates means it is difficult to find data to support claims that protected areas have been effective in protecting the environment, preventing the Dominican Republic becoming another Haiti. As with the global scale, capitalist elites in the Dominican Republic are deeply involved in the conservation elite, and they appear unable or unwilling to mount a critique of the environmental impacts of capitalism. It remains beyond the terms of discussion. The reluctance of the transnational conservation elite to critique capitalism is also present in the Dominican Republic, demonstrating the importance of addressing the networks that shape conservation when considering how conservation should relate to capitalism.

Yet although the Dominican conservation elite appears to be a scaled-down version of the transnational conservation elite, with the same form, workings and ideology, the actors central to the latter have been repeatedly rejected. This is in contrast to literature that argues that large international NGOs are seen as being able to dominate conservation in countries of the global South, involving themselves in protected areas as they like, marginalising local conservationists. Yet although the actors have been rejected, it would be difficult to also state that the ideology and practices of the transnational conservation elite have also been refused, and so the question of whether the Dominican

Republic represents a limit to hegemony of international NGOs remains unanswered.

Under the idea of governance states, large conservation NGOs able to compete with Southern states for sovereignty to control conservation policy, using their connections to donor agencies and international financial institutions. Yet in the Dominican Republic, The Nature Conservancy competes not with the state for sovereignty, but with a local elite consisting of NGOs, industrialists, politicians and media actors. They have their own access to power and influence that allows them to out-compete The Nature Conservancy's bid to get involved in conservation practice. Governance state theory assumes that local actors are much weaker than international actors in accessing political power. The exceptional case of the Dominican Republic points to the importance of national elites exercising particular forms of nationalism to rebuff international actors, using their superior access to political power at the national scale.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on two research trips to the Dominican Republic, in April–May 2005 and October 2006–June 2007. Although much of the research was an ethnographic study of a community living near a protected area, this paper is based on transcripts of 50 face-to-face interviews conducted with civil servants, international and national NGOs, academics, activists, aid agency officials, politicians and development and conservation consultants. Many were selected because I had an interest in their institutions, but others came from recommendations from previous interviewees. Given the relatively small number of people involved in Dominican conservation, this represents a significant proportion of the sector.

<sup>2</sup> The NGOs in question are the Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund for Nature and Conservation International. Data from <http://www.nature.org>, <http://www.conserv.org> and <http://www.worldwildlife.org>, all accessed 4 January 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Although technically elected for a total of six terms, none of these elections could be considered free and fair, involving outright vote rigging, manipulations of media, use of military force to intimidate and murder opponents and a multitude of other dirty tricks. This was successful up until the 1994 election, when loyal senior military figures stopped the election count early and declared Balaguer the winner. Following intense diplomatic pressure from the USA, Balaguer promised to limit his term to 2 years and never run again.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, protected area consultant.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, protected areas consultant.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, academic.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, NGO director.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, worker for development NGO.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, protected area consultant, former protected areas director.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with protected area consultant, national parks operations director, NGO worker, national parks planner.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with protected area consulted, national parks operations director, NGO worker, national parks planner.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, development NGO worker, USAID employee.

<sup>13</sup> These are: Del Este national park in the east, Jaragua national park in the southwest, and a group of protected areas in the Cordillera Central consisting of Armando Bermudez, Valle Nuevo, Carmen Ramirez, Humeadora and Nalga de Maco national parks, as well as the Ebano Verde scientific reserve. The Nature Conservancy refers to this as *Madre de las Aguas* (Mother of the waters) in reference to the role the region plays in feeding the island's most important rivers.

<sup>14</sup> Source, The Nature Conservancy US press office.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, former protected areas director, protected areas consultant.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, protected areas consultant, academic.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, protected areas consultant, academic.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, The Nature Conservancy employee.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, The Nature Conservancy employee.

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