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# From ‘Anthropological Natural Monuments’ to ‘Ecosystem People’: Hunter Gatherers and the Discourse of International Nature Conservation

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## Abstract

Scientists involved in cross-border nature conservation have historically shown a strong interest for hunter gatherer cultures. In the 1910s, one of the pioneers of international nature protection, the Swiss zoologist Paul Sarasin, described contemporary groups of hunter gatherers as true ‘anthropological natural monuments’. He believed that, like rare animals and plants, they should be ‘preserved’ in ‘integral reserves’. In the following decades, such ideas would become increasingly marginalized among conservationists, but the fascination for ‘primitive people’ remained. In the 1970s, the American Raymond Dasmann, then a leading ecologist at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, described hunter gatherers as ‘ecosystem people’ of whom he hailed the sustainable societies. No longer seen as objects of preservation they were presented as models for westerners, exemplifying man’s ‘old partnership with nature’. From the time of Sarasin to that of Dasmann, the international conservation movement engaged in discussions about which parts of global nature counted as valuable, how these parts of nature should be administered, and who should be allowed access to them. My paper will explore the role that hunter gatherers were attributed in these discussions – and this from the earliest attempts to establish international conservation institutions in the 1910s to their heyday in the 1970s ‘environmental age’. The paper will look into the intellectual origins of the prevalent discourses on hunter gatherers, how these discourses shifted through time and the ways in which they inspired concrete policies.

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