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Occupy Nature: Representation as the Basis of Emancipatory Environmentalism

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The 'Occupy' movement has spread to the world's forests, pastures, rivers and seas. To 'Occupy Nature' is to affirm public rights over nature and natural resources. It is to assert that the economy, the wealth of nations, social services and nature are public goods. Yet the developing world's forests, pastures, and farmlands are being given and sold to private interests – right out from under the feet of the poor. Farmlands are being purchased by industrial economies to ensure *their* long-term food supply. Forests are being turned into the private carbon storage bins to enable industrial nations to burn away the world's fossil fuels. Our first decade of the new millennium is witnessing a surge in the privatization of nature – under an ideology that the market is the best mechanism for managing the world's natural heritage. These enclosures are expropriating the basis of life and livelihood for Asia's, Africa's and Latin America's poor.

The Long Spring, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Y'En a Marre are echoing around the globe. Their messages of equity and justice also apply to natural resource use and management. People who depend on forests, pastures, agricultural land, and fisheries for their daily livelihoods remain underrepresented in decisions about the ownership, use, and management of nature. Rights of these resource-dependent poor are grossly inadequate and they are un-represented. Social protections remain marginal. Even their inadequate rights are abused and their livelihoods violated under the global processes of fortress environmental conservation, regimes of resource use, and climate stabilization interventions – mitigation and adaptation. Social protections on environmental interventions such as 'free prior and informed consent', participation, and benefit sharing, are good first steps. They are, however, not enough. Rural people are still managed as subjects. They need to be emancipated and transformed into citizens with the ability to influence and to sanction those who govern them.

Most environmental projects and programs claim to be 'pro-poor' and have taken on Agenda 21's call for local participation – which asked the world's nations "To create mechanisms to facilitate the active involvement and participation of all concerned, particularly communities and people at the local level, in decision-making on land use and management." But participation has failed local people time and time again – rather than empowering local populations, it has been used to mobilize local people to carry out external agendas. It has failed to empower them to determine the use and modes of management of the resources around them. Governments, international development agencies, and global environmental non-governmental organizations often use 'participation' to facilitate their interventions rather than to emancipate affected people. Even where there are elected local representatives, these intervening agents circumvent them in the name of expediency. Democracy is too slow. They patronizingly argue that local institutions lack the capacity to manage. They argue that local government is corrupt. They argue that indigenous leaders are 'legitimate' without investigating whether or not they represent local people. The result is that environmental interventions still do little to emancipate local people. Since Rio 1992 participation has become the 'new tyranny'. We need to aim higher – toward representation and emancipation!

Environmental programs prioritize their environmental objectives over the procedural goals of democracy. To achieve environmental results they often override local representation, compromising people's ability to engage as citizen in determining the purposes, designing and implementing, accepting or rejecting environmental projects and policies. While shrouded in a language of 'participation' and even 'empowerment', environmental interventions are first and foremost about conserving nature – even as they blame the local users by ignoring the destruction of nature by large commercial interests taking place just outside of their local project boundaries. In the project process, intervening agents often override local self-determination by imposing participatory processes that coopt local people into engaging with conservation objectives. While these conservation objectives are laudable and even necessary, no interventions merit practices that compromise representation and democracy. Further, these environmental goals are not likely to succeed in the long run without real local engagement– for those who are excluded are able to sabotage implementation. As throughout history, local people can burn down forests and kill wildlife in protest. Without deep local support conservation is doomed – or it succeeds only as a military imposition, a human travesty.

We are living through a reconfiguration of power on a global scale, producing new relations between states, markets, and civil society. This new dynamic is playing out to the detriment of nature and resource-dependent people. In Africa and Asia, this is translating into a new scramble for nature, characterized massive injections of capital into natural-resource exploitation resulting in the alienation of vast communities from public natural resources. There is also a counter movement to this dynamic, as societies organize themselves into social movements to resist market dominance and demand representation. It is no mystery, as the Nobel economist Amartya Sen observed, that markets allocate goods and services away from the poor – as they cannot pay. To what degree are the current market-oriented policies of privatization and commodification of nature positive and productive? Who do they damage and

how? What social protections are needed to prevent markets from over-exploiting nature and further marginalizing the poor? The answer is something to be negotiated socially and therefore requires public debate and regulatory response. Markets can be a force for good, they are also deeply destructive. How do affected populations leverage protections? Who represents them and how? Decisions about markets are public decisions and require public scrutiny.

The *Occupy Nature Forum* at Rio+20 is a public dialogue on the relation between Rio's 'Green Economy' theme and the safeguards required to build a 'Just and Green Society'. The economy is not everything. We all occupy the same planet as a society. We live under the same sky. Social justice must guide the greening of the earth. A green economy without justice is unsustainable. Without democratic representation and democratic processes, the gains of environmentalism undermine environmentalism's ultimate objective – the wellbeing of nature and people. To live as subjects in an environmental protection regime is not what most people would choose. Environmentalism without representation is unacceptable. Therefore all environmental interventions – from mitigation and adaptation to watershed protection – must be emancipatory. They must support real representation of all scales of citizens in significant decision making. They must put justice first. Prioritizing justice will slow down the implementation of environmental projects; it will do so with the benefit of making them legitimate and socially sustainable.

Note: Environment and Development of the Third World (ENDA), Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Social Dimensions of Environmental Policy (SDEP) initiative of the University of Illinois is holding the **Occupy Nature Forum** at Rio+20 in June 2012. The forum is a half day of talks, discussions, theatre, round tables and teach-ins on rights, recourse and representation in building global environmental justice. The forum presents insights from research on the democracy-environment relation. The workshop aims to inspire the application of research to emancipatory action.