

Survival



**For tribes, for nature,
for all humanity**

#DecolonizeUNESCO

**UNESCO's
support is being
used to evict us.**

Maasai leader, Ngorongoro Conservation Area



Chepong woman standing in the remains of her house after it was burnt down by officials of Chitwan National Park, Nepal, during the monsoon.
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#DecolonizeUNESCO

Contents

1. Abstract	1
2. Introduction	2
3. Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex, Thailand	5
4. Kaziranga National Park, India	6
5. Chitwan National Park, Nepal	7
6. Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania	8
7. Odzala-Kokoua National Park, Republic of Congo	10
8. Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo	12
8. Conclusion	14

(References included as footnotes and hyperlinks)

Abstract:

Every year since 1983, on 18 April, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) invites the world to celebrate the International Day for Monuments and Sites, also known as World Heritage Day. While raising awareness about preserving our shared human heritage might seem like a positive idea, the reality of many World Heritage Sites (WHS) on the ground is very different.

In many of these sites, horrific abuses are unfolding in plain sight, with the complicity and sometimes even the support of UNESCO. Too often, the so-called “natural” World Heritage Sites are war zones for Indigenous peoples, whose vital role in the preservation and nourishment of these spaces is denied and often ruthlessly suppressed. They are beaten, raped, abused, and even killed when they try to access their ancestral lands. All of this in the name of “conservation”.

Wrongly described as pure “nature”, at least a third of the 227 sites designated as World Heritage “natural” sites under UNESCO’s 1972 World Heritage Convention, “are fully or partially located within the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples and are of great significance for their livelihoods and their spiritual, social and cultural well-being”¹. But instead of being celebrated as the best guardians of their territories, Indigenous peoples are paying a bitter price for having shaped and inhabited the most beautiful and important landscapes of our world.

On this World Heritage Day, we call on UNESCO to end its complicity in human rights violations, to remove sites from their list where human rights atrocities occur and to listen to Indigenous peoples – the best guardians of the natural world.

1. IWGIA, Forest Peoples Programme and Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, [World Heritage Sites and Indigenous Peoples’ Rights](#), 2014.

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Locations are approximate.

Introduction

UNESCO has played a major role in the proliferation of fortress conservation, starting in Africa, particularly after the end of colonial rule. In the years that followed the independence of new African states, UNESCO was central in spreading the idea that African nature needed to be saved through the intervention of “experts” – mainly former colonial officers – and the application of Western science, and through the creation of national parks which excluded the original inhabitants².

UNESCO’s first Director, Julian Huxley – who went on to be one of the founders of WWF – explicitly identified African local people as a barrier to conservation, complaining of the “tendency to satisfy the immediate demands of African tribes at the expense of long-term planning”³. He wrote that “most tribal Africans regard wild animals either as a pest to be destroyed or simply as meat on the hoof to be killed and eaten”⁴. UNESCO’s solution was to provide “assistance” to African states to create national parks – fenced, so as to keep out “tribesmen in search of firewood”⁵ – in which

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2. See e.g. J. Huxley, *The Conservation of wild life and natural habitats in Central and East Africa: report on a mission accomplished for UNESCO, July-September 1960*, UNESCO, 1961.
 3. J. Huxley, ‘Poaching: the shocking slaughter of Africa’s Wildlife’, in [The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world, XIV, 9, p. 8-13, illus.](#), 1961 [FR: [Le Courier de l’UNESCO: une fenêtre ouverte sur le monde, XIV, 9](#) // ES: [El Correo de la UNESCO: una ventana abierta sobre el mundo, XIV, 9](#)]
 4. J. Huxley, *The Conservation of wild life and natural habitats in Central and East Africa: report on a mission accomplished for UNESCO, July-September 1960*, UNESCO, 1961.
 5. *Ibid.*

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wildlife could be saved from such destruction by Africans, and maintained for the pleasure of tourists.

As a consequence, in the years that followed the independence of African states, many Protected Areas were created on Indigenous peoples' land, without their consent, under the influence of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in partnership with UNESCO.

The idea that African states must fence off their “natural” landscapes – with the help of Western expertise – for the pleasure of tourists, got a new push on the global stage thanks to the idea of World Heritage. By applying this concept, UNESCO places those ecosystems which have been shaped and inhabited by Indigenous peoples, under the trusteeship of a generic “humanity”.

In 1972, after being introduced in the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the concepts of World Heritage, and a World Heritage Trust responsible for conserving it, were definitively set in stone when UNESCO's General Conference adopted the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage”. Through the convention, UNESCO “seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity”. It adds that “what makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage Sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located”⁶. The convention makes no mention of Indigenous knowledge or stewardship – let alone of Indigenous land ownership rights. In its definition of “natural heritage” there is no mention of the people who shaped, created and nourished those landscapes, nor of the social or spiritual value that they have for Indigenous peoples. The value of these places is described only from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty.

The IUCN and UNESCO themselves did, over time, recognize that conservation was perceived as incompatible with the needs of local communities, and in the early 1980s, they promoted the concept of “community conservation”. In the decades since, they have updated policies, guidelines and positions, supposedly to call for the “consultation” or “participation” of Indigenous “partners”. Yet, as our examples below show, this has failed to change anything on the ground: the rhetoric has become community-based, while the practice has remained anti-community.

Since their inception up to the present day, the “natural” World Heritage Sites have remained highly problematic. Colonial and racist ideas of needing to protect “wild nature” from “bad locals” – made explicit at times by the creators of the World Heritage approach, and implicit in the UNESCO conventions and agreements underpinning the World Heritage framework – have, again and again, taken very concrete form in evictions and other human rights violations of Indigenous and local people whose land becomes a World Heritage site.

These violations have given rise to frequent challenges to UNESCO's World Heritage Sites on Indigenous land, from communities, Indigenous organizations, Survival, UN Special Rapporteurs and others. Yet UNESCO's response has been scandalously weak, and it has not changed course. For many local people, it's all too apparent that their lands, when designated as World Heritage Sites, are then treated as though they belong, not to them, but to “all the peoples of the world” – and especially the fee-paying tourists. Once a place is awarded for having natural “outstanding value to all humanity”, governments and NGOs are given the green light, and in some cases clear

6. UNESCO, [About World Heritage](#).

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instructions, to keep the locals out – blaming them for the destruction of a “natural” environment that, in reality, they have nourished and helped to create.

Countries are keen to have their landscapes, as well as their monuments, included on UNESCO's famous list – it gains them international prestige and support, publicity, tourists and money, including access to new funding mechanisms. But for the people whose territories are declared natural World Heritage Sites, this is no cause for celebration.

Several Survival investigations, during which we have visited many Indigenous communities in Africa and Asia, have found repeated cases of torture, rape, and killings of Indigenous people in and around natural World Heritage Sites. Behind the beauty of these outstanding “natural” sites, the very people whose contribution to humanity we should be recognizing are being evicted and violently abused to make room for our false fantasies of “wilderness”. UNESCO bears a huge responsibility for this because of its past; its continued pushing of the colonial narrative that portrays Indigenous territories as “empty nature” (“natural” sites) to be protected from their own inhabitants; and its ongoing support for governments that are killing in the name of protecting “World Heritage”.

If there is a lesson to be learned about sharing the beauties of our world among humanity, that lesson is being taught by Indigenous peoples, whose ways of life are based on sustainability and providing for future generations. They are the best guardians of the natural world and their rights must be respected. We urge UNESCO to stop supporting the fortress model of conservation and remove from their World Heritage Site list places where human rights atrocities occur. These would be important steps in starting to decolonize itself.

Read more about why UNESCO should take a stand against fortress conservation.

(The following list is not exhaustive)

Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex, Thailand

“KKFC becoming a WHS is a serious violation of human rights.”

Karen Indigenous man, not named for his own safety.

The Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex (KKFC) was designated a World Heritage Site in 2021 under the “natural criteria” – as a “significant natural habitat for in-situ conservation of biological diversity”. It is home to Karen Indigenous people, who have practiced rotational farming there for generations.

There has been a long history of human rights violations in the KKFC, including brutal evictions, the burning of Karen villages, multiple arrests and the murder of Karen activist [Pholachi “Billy” Rakchongcharoen](#) in 2014. Karen are prohibited from practicing rotational farming inside the World Heritage Site, which is fundamental to their way of life. They say that without their land “the Karen will be no more”.

The World Heritage Committee designated the KKFC as a World Heritage Site, despite being well aware of the abuses. In 2021 Karen from KKFC lobbied the World Heritage Committee in China to raise their objections and three [UN Special Rapporteurs called on UNESCO](#) to defer the decision until the human rights concerns could be addressed. But all their pleas were ignored.

Karen people have told Survival that due to the declaration of the WHS, the Kaeng Krachan National Park has expanded, leading to an increase in harassment and arrests, and a tightening of restrictions. They said that the World Heritage status meant that attempts to force everyone out of the forest “have got worse”. They can no longer even collect mushrooms.

One Karen man said, “*The WHS staff only see the forest and animals, they don’t see the people, but the people are part of it. They don’t see us, it’s a kind of blindness*”. Another added, more bluntly, “*KKFC becoming a WHS is a serious violation of human rights*”.

Video: [Listen](#) to Kampu, a Karen youth whose village was evicted from deep inside Kaeng Krachan National Park, explain how things have got worse since the park was declared a World Heritage Site.

Read [the letter](#) that Karen people living in Kaeng Krachan National Park wrote to UNESCO about how the declaration of the World Heritage Site has exacerbated the problems they face.

Kaziranga National Park, India

“The forest guards suddenly shot me.”

Akash Orang, a seven-year-old Indigenous boy shot by park guards in 2016.

Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve in Northeast India has been a UNESCO WHS since 1985. Since that time, it has become [infamous](#) for brutal extra-judicial killings, torture and arbitrary arrests, with park guards shooting on sight with impunity. It is home to the Mising and Karbi people, as well as other Indigenous peoples brought to the area to work on the tea estates, collectively known locally as the “tea tribes”.

Between 1990 and 2016, park guards killed 144 people in the park, including a severely disabled Indigenous man.

In 2016 Akash Orang, a seven-year-old Indigenous boy, was [shot in the legs by park guards](#) as he was on his way to a local shop. He told the BBC, “The forest guards suddenly shot me”. He suffered life changing injuries and is maimed for life.

Despite official denials of a shoot on sight policy, [a 2014 report by the Park’s Director](#) described a training maxim: “never allow any unauthorized entry – kill the unwanted”.

Far from expressing alarm at the extrajudicial killings in Kaziranga, the UNESCO World Heritage Center, in its [2011 State of Conservation report](#), praised a government notification which gives forest officers immunity from prosecution if they use firearms in the course of their duty, as a “significant step to prevent poaching and boost staff morale”.

After Survival and local organizations exposed the killings in 2016, resulting in greater scrutiny of the park guards’ actions, both the number of extrajudicial killings and the number of rhinos poached has dramatically reduced. But the Indigenous people living around the park are still harassed and banned from entering their ancestral lands. One Mising man explains, “Now we cannot even bring a piece of stick from the forest. We don’t even go there but they try to falsely implicate people in cases and torture them”.

Video: [Watch](#) a short film about the evictions of Indigenous people and appalling human rights abuses in the Kaziranga World Heritage Site.

Chitwan National Park, Nepal

“Raj Kumar’s biggest crime was that he could not see his family starving and went to search for food in the jungle.”

Mother of Raj Kumar, Chepang youth beaten to death by guards in Chitwan National Park in 2020.

Chitwan National Park was designated a World Heritage Site in 1984. It is home to Tharu, Chepang, Bote and other Indigenous peoples, who protected their forest for generations before they were evicted from the park. The Tharu worship the tiger and have a special relationship with many animals, including elephants which, they say, only understand the Tharu language.

The Indigenous communities in Chitwan have suffered greatly from the existence of the park. They have been forcibly evicted, beaten, tortured and even killed, in the name of conservation. In 2006 Shikharam Chaudhary, an elderly Tharu man, [was tortured and beaten to death](#) by the park’s rangers. His autopsy showed that he had seven broken ribs and blue marks and bruises all over his body. Three park officials, including the chief warden, were arrested and charged with murder, but under pressure from conservation organizations including WWF, the Nepalese government dropped the cases.

In 2020 Raj Kumar, a young Chepang Indigenous man was [beaten to death](#) by soldiers after [collecting snails with friends inside the park](#). His mother said, “Raj Kumar’s biggest crime was that he could not see his family starving and went to search for food in the jungle”.

In the same year, as part of a drive to evict the few people remaining in the WHS, park authorities and soldiers burnt down Chepang houses and destroyed others, leaving ten families homeless during the monsoon.

Tharu leaders wrote in 2020, “If people want to empower communities, then recognize our rights to our lands and to manage and protect our forest ourselves. We’ll do a better job [than the] government and the NGOs!”

Video: [Listen](#) to Birendra Mahato, a Tharu activist, who explains how Tharu Indigenous people are victims of Chitwan National Park.

Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania

“UNESCO’s support is being used to evict us. We are very sick and confused, we don’t know when we will die.”

Maasai leader, Ngorongoro Conservation Area.

The Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA), which borders the Serengeti National Park, was established in 1959 as a multiple land use area, with wildlife coexisting with semi-nomadic Maasai pastoralists. However, since its creation, conservationists have repeatedly claimed that wildlife in the NCA was in danger because of “population pressure”: too many Maasai and too many cattle.

The narrative of “too many” has persisted over the decades and is now at the heart of the Tanzanian government’s justification for evicting the Maasai from NCA. Maasai have [reported arbitrary](#) arrests, torture and beatings, [a militarization](#) of the NCA and unlawful [confiscation of their cattle](#). The government has also cut social and health care services in the NCA in an attempt to force Maasai to “resettle”. This has reportedly led to the death of at least one pregnant woman and a lack of treatment for HIV, resulting in avoidable transmissions to newborn babies.



Maasai people protesting in Arusha, February 27, 2024

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One Maasai man told Survival: “We no longer know what more evils they still wish to commit against us.”

UNESCO has played a central role in legitimizing this land theft. The Ngorongoro Conservation Area was first inscribed as a UNESCO “natural” World Heritage Site in 1979. It is also part of the Serengeti-Ngorongoro Biosphere Reserve, which was created in 1981 under the UNESCO Man & Biosphere Programme. In 2010, the inscription was extended to a mixed Natural and Cultural Heritage Site.

However, the recognition of “cultural heritage” has not led to the acknowledgment of the Maasai’s role and land rights. The opposite is, in fact, the case. While even the Tanzanian government cited the Maasai’s “outstanding significance for effective conservation” in their application for cultural heritage, UNESCO made no mention of this in its [decision](#). Instead, UNESCO stressed that “further growth of the Maasai population and the number of cattle should remain within the capacity of the property”.

It wasn’t the first or last time UNESCO raised this point. It had previously [stated](#) that it considered the current population of Maasai to be far above the “capacity of the reserve” and it threatened that unless “addressed urgently” the area’s status as a UNESCO site “will be jeopardised”. In a 2019 [report](#) from the Tanzanian government, UNESCO’s position was summarized as objecting to the multiple land use model in NCA and supporting the relocation of Maasai, while maintaining only some structures for “cultural tourism”.

A Maasai expert on the involvement of UNESCO explains that “all this is forgetting that it’s a home of Indigenous Maasai, Barabaig and Hadzabe ... [As a result], the Indigenous peoples in the NCA are confronted with new management priorities aimed at safeguarding so-called ‘Outstanding Universal Values’”. Maasai have also criticized UNESCO for designating NCA as a World Heritage Site without their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and for honoring a place with abuses and human rights violations as a WHS.

Maasai representatives have, for years, been submitting reports of evictions, human rights violations, and harassment to various UN bodies, including UNESCO, and calling for a mission to investigate. When such a mission eventually took place in February 2024, they were not officially informed and the UNESCO mission only spoke to government-appointed stakeholders. The mission did not meet with legitimate representatives of the Maasai in the NCA.

In the context of these human rights violations, Maasai representatives [have requested](#) that Ngorongoro be delisted as a World Heritage Site.

Video: [Listen](#) to Karani Olenkaisiri, a Maasai elder, who talks about evictions of Maasai from Ngorongoro Conservation Area and Loliondo.

Odzala-Kokoua National Park, Republic of Congo

“We need the forest. Our kids don’t know the animals anymore, nor about our traditional medicinal plants. The Baka now live on the road. Telling you this hurts my heart. But the forest is also ill without the Baka.”

Baka man, Odzala-Kokoua National Park.



This Baka woman was raped by an African Parks ranger. “African Parks are very bad people. Everybody who works with them is really bad to us. That man was cruel, he was inhumane.” ©Survival

Located on the land of the Indigenous hunter-gatherer Baka people, Odzala-Kokoua is one of Africa’s oldest national parks, and was designated in 1935 by the French colonial administration as the Odzala reserve. It is famous for its western lowland gorillas and forest elephants and now covers 13,867 km², almost half the size of Belgium.

The park has been managed by the conservation organization African Parks since 2010, when they entered into a 25-year agreement with the Republic of Congo’s government. African Parks adopts a militarized approach to conservation and is responsible for widespread violence against the Baka people, who face atrocities if they try to access their land to hunt to feed their families, gather medicinal plants, and visit their sacred sites. The Baka have reported to [Survival](#) that in recent years, among other horrific crimes, abuses against them by park rangers include: pouring scalding hot wax onto their backs and whipping them; beating them with belts; holding their heads

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underwater in a river; [raping an Indigenous woman](#) while she was holding her two-month-old baby and sexually abusing an 18-year old Baka boy.

On top of the violence, preventing the Baka from accessing their forest means that they not only lose their livelihoods, but also their sense of identity. They say they have nothing left to show their children about their way of life. The very existence of the Baka as a people is threatened.

Odzala was awarded UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status in 1977 and the wider Odzala-Kokoua Forest Massif became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in September 2023, despite the widespread [atrocities](#) inside and around the National Park [being well known](#).

The [document filed](#) by the Congolese government to nominate Odzala-Kokoua as a WHS, acknowledged that there are many different peoples living around the park, depending on the park's forest for their livelihoods. In 2022 UNESCO itself asked the Congolese government to consult with local people on how the park should be managed – and deferred a decision on whether to accept it. The Congolese government's final request for WHS listing the following year made no attempt to fulfill this request. Nor did it show compliance with [UNESCO guidelines](#) on Indigenous peoples, in force since 2019, such as: governments “shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned [...] in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before including their sites on their Tentative List”. A [“technical review”](#) of the proposal by the IUCN even questioned what steps had been taken, in line with the UNESCO guidelines, to obtain the FPIC of the area's Indigenous people. Despite this, the World Heritage Committee's decision to accept and list Odzala as a “natural” World Heritage Site made no mention of any concerns about Indigenous people.

Video: [Listen](#) to Eyaya Nivrel, a Baka youth, who speaks out against African Parks leadership and about the evictions, violence and torture faced by the Baka.

Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo

“We live in the forest. When they confront us, they rape us. Those of us who will die will die, but the forest is where we will stay.”

A Batwa woman who was raped by park guards and soldiers in the July 2021 attack

Kahuzi-Biega National Park (created in 1970) became a World Heritage Site in 1980. The Indigenous Batwa people who lived in the area were evicted from their ancestral land in the 1970s to make way for the national park. The eviction of the once self-sufficient Batwa people led to decades of landless poverty, severe discrimination and extremely high mortality rates, as they were forced to move to informal eviction sites in areas neighboring the park.

Following numerous broken promises of reparations and justice, in 2018 several Batwa communities returned to their ancestral lands in the park, believing this was the only way to escape their misery. This triggered waves of violence against them, starting in 2019, when park authorities, with the support of the Congolese army (FARDC), started a campaign to purge the forest of the Batwa. They conducted several extremely violent attacks against Batwa villages involving many well-documented atrocities. Recent [reports](#) attest that this violence is still ongoing.



Guards and soldiers in Kahuzi-Biega National Park burn Batwa houses to drive them from the park - their ancestral land. ©KBNP

In 2022, a [report](#) of the human rights organization Minority Rights Group (MRG) documented that, during these attacks, dozens of Batwa women were gang-raped at gunpoint; at least twenty Batwa were killed; several Batwa, including children, were burned alive. Batwa corpses were mutilated and hundreds of Batwa were evicted, often repeatedly, in successive waves of attacks. According to MRG, these attacks “were part of an institutional policy sanctioned and planned at the highest level by the park leadership”.

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Before, during and after these recent waves of violence, the World Heritage Committee [urged](#) the government to reduce the local communities' "dependence on the resources of the Park" and requested that the government: "strengthen the anti-poaching combat and continue the joint patrols with the [FARDC]", "increase the scope and frequency of the patrols", "evacuate the illegal occupants", and address "the increasing pressure of encroachment in the property".

UNESCO therefore not only legitimized but also encouraged the system and operations that led to extreme violence against the Batwa.

While the French government [canceled its plans](#) to fund the park, citing human rights concerns, the park still receives funding from [Germany](#) and the United States and from the conservation organization Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), which now co-manages the park. MRG [also reported](#) that these funders have continued to provide crucial financial and material assistance to the park despite widespread evidence of severe violence against the Batwa.

Video: [Listen to Julien Basimika](#), a Batwa activist, who explains the violence, intimidations and arrests faced by the Batwa since they were brutally evicted from Kahuzi-Biega National Park.

Conclusion

The [scientific evidence](#) shows that Indigenous peoples are the best guardians of the natural world. Globally, 80% of biodiversity is found in their territories. Many of the world's most famous "natural" environments and landscapes, including listed World Heritage Sites, are in reality the ancestral homelands of millions of Indigenous people who have shaped them, been dependent on them, nurtured and protected them for millennia. The concept of "wilderness", in the sense of a pristine nature, untouched by humans, is a colonial myth – lands were portrayed as empty, so they could be taken. Another myth is that only Western science and its "experts" can manage these environments successfully.

Over the years, UNESCO has contributed to reinforcing these dangerous myths, as well as the evident consequences of them: the role of Indigenous peoples in conservation is denied, invisibilized and hidden, and they are evicted, raped, tortured and killed by park rangers when they try to access their ancestral lands.

In many cases, UNESCO has clear responsibility for human rights abuses, when it has encouraged governments to "protect" so-called natural landscapes from the people who live there. For too long, UNESCO has been alerted to the price that local people are paying inside the World Heritage Sites that the institution supports. For too long, they have maintained silence over the abuses.

UNESCO's silence is complicity. It's time for UNESCO to decolonize itself and take a stand for human rights by removing sites from its list where human rights atrocities are happening. This would send a strong message to governments and conservation organizations who are supporting and funding these abuses.

There is a simple way to protect biodiversity: recognizing Indigenous peoples' rights. Therefore, UNESCO should be promoting a model of conservation that is based on Indigenous land rights. Anything else will fail, not only the people affected by the conservation it supports, but also UNESCO's own fundamental purpose and mission.

UNESCO is promoting a conservation model that wounds, alienates and destroys Indigenous peoples, the environment's best allies. It is rooted in colonial violence and racist misconceptions. While Indigenous peoples are evicted, and their ways of life criminalized, tourists are welcomed in.

For over 30 years, Survival has been campaigning against the atrocities committed in the name of “conservation”.

Join us now to #DecolonizeConservation and champion a new approach where Indigenous peoples and their rights are at the centre.

They have been the expert conservationists since long before the word “conservation” was even invented.

#DecolonizeConservation

www.svlint.org/conservation



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