

# A Political Ecology Lens for Addressing Corruption in Conservation and Natural Resource Management

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## Key takeaways

- » The “political” nature of corruption makes it a structural driver of conservation and natural resource management (NRM) threats and a barrier to better outcomes.
- » Understanding the political context for conservation work is critical to more effectively addressing corruption’s impact on conservation and NRM outcomes.
- » Political ecology can help better analyze dimensions of politics and power in a given conservation/NRM context and integrates nature into this political understanding. As such, it helps practitioners to develop better strategic approaches to their work.

## The challenge

Corruption undermines every aspect of conservation and natural resource management, from sustainable management of fisheries and forests to efforts to stop illegal wildlife trade. Corrupt actions result from a complex of legal and institutional weaknesses, social norms and expectations, individual motivations, and power dynamics at all levels. The problem of corruption is profoundly political, yet programmatic responses often focus on single, “technical” responses that tackle a specific weak spot in the system without assessing the impact of the political dynamics that created the system.<sup>1</sup>

Among anti-corruption experts, [there is increasing consensus that technical approaches alone are necessary but insufficient \(USAID 2015\), and interventions are often seen to have “failed” to deal with systemic corruption \(Mason 2020\)](#). A strong

political lens and understanding of local political dynamics are [now seen as critical in designing appropriate anti-corruption interventions \(USAID 2018a\)](#). For conservation and NRM practitioners, a political ecology approach links these questions to the science of nature and provides a more complete situation analysis to inform activities where corruption poses significant risks.

<sup>1</sup>The Targeting Natural Resource Corruption project conducted a needs assessment survey in 2019 in which practitioners from WWF, TRAFFIC, USAID and implementing partners for USAID were asked about the constraints that prevented them from addressing corruption in their programming. The top answer was a lack of analysis of corruption risks and anti-corruption opportunities in program planning stages (TNRC 2019).

# What Is political ecology?

[There is no single agreed definition of political ecology \(Robbins 2012\)](#). We can understand it here as *an approach that includes the study of ecological processes and human-environment relations in conservation and natural resource management*. As such, political ecology can help underpin more effective methods to thinking and working politically ([USAID 2018b](#)) in the area of conservation and NRM.

A political ecology lens does not just view nature as a series of commodities for human consumption to be managed in a technocratic manner; as Robbins (2012) notes, “[i]f there is a political ecology by implication there must be an apolitical one.” Political ecology [examines the wider social and political dimensions that explain](#) why and how a landscape has been managed in a particular way, illuminate the social and political consequences of production of certain commodities, and shape the options for conservation and sustainable management in the future (Kishor 2016).

At the core of this is the notion of “**power**” and *asymmetrical/uneven power relations*. “Power” itself is an abstract concept, but essentially it is the ability of groups and individuals to make others act in the interest of those groups and individuals and to bring about specific outcomes. Power can be exercised in numerous ways, including money, violence, social pressures, religion, ideology, technology, or the media. In order to construct a functioning society, some sort of arrangement between people and the governing authority has to be arranged, with power invested in that authority – this is often termed the “**political settlement**” (Laws and Leftwich 2014). The abuse of that entrusted power under a given political settlement, by a given authority (which may be public but in certain contexts could be private,) is at the core of understanding why corruption is so enduring and

## Key Terms

**Political economy** – A grand (if imperfect) synthesis of various strands of thought, treating political economy as the methodology of economics applied to the analysis of political behavior and institutions ([Weingast and Wittman 2008](#)).

**Political economy analysis** – A structured approach to examining power dynamics and the economic and social forces that influence development ([USAID 2018b](#)).

**Political ecology** – An interdisciplinary field of the study of ecological processes and human-environment relations.

**Political ecology analysis** – An inter-disciplinary approach (that incorporates some aspects of political economy) to understand the various processes on how and why a landscape/seascape/wilderness may have come to exist and be managed in a particular way, and what the social and political consequences of those processes are.

systemic in many contexts.

One way to understand the political settlement is to undertake a [political economy analysis](#). *Political economy*<sup>2</sup> analysis, which has been broadly used to inform international development programming, can form part of a larger political ecology analysis, but the two are not identical, and they may require social and natural science skills from different disciplines.

The following areas of analysis can form a core of *political ecology* analysis:

- » What do [biophysical ecology and environmental science analysis reveal \(Walker 2005\)](#)?
- » How has land use been demarcated, by whom, and when? Who is managing the land and how?

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “political economy” has had many different meanings over time e.g. the source of managing a nation’s resources (Adam Smith); the ownership of the means of production to influence historical processes (Marx); as simply an area of study for the interrelationship between economics and politics; or as a methodological approach to understanding public choice and individual rationality versus a sociological approach centered on institutions (Weingast and Wittman 2008).

## Case study: Narco-cattle ranching in Guatemala

Political ecologists have documented the mechanisms through which drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) in Guatemala contribute to deforestation in Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve (Devine et al. 2020). The political settlement in Guatemala produced weak and easily corrupted institutions which DTOs have been able to exploit, creating a symbiotic relationship in the **protected areas** of the park, where airstrips are created to fly drugs in and out of the country. The proceeds from drug trafficking can then be laundered into the licit cattle market, and additional profits can be made by controlling territory and corrupting border posts to reduce costs for selling beef across the border. Where the narco-ranchers meet local communities living and working in the **mixed-use areas** of the park, a "defensive shield" has been created by local communities. Local foresters and conservation allies patrol the area, monitor activities, and report illegal activities to national authorities. Deforestation rates in this part of the forest are far less than in the official protected area. This analysis helps demonstrate the fundamental connection between power and ecological outcomes.

What social consequences follow from this? How is "power" defined locally, where does it lie, and who can exercise it?

- » What is the effect of this ordering of power relations on how society has been constructed? What are the social and economic outcomes and consequences?
- » [What is the effect of scale on all these issues \(Green 2016\)?](#) For example, how do global consumption patterns affect local land use?

Formulating and understanding these questions for a specific context allows NRM and conservation practitioners to [think politically – and thereby work politically to achieve better outcomes](#). With this analysis, practitioners can better understand what has become corrupted and why, as well as what might be done about it.

## A political and scientific understanding?

The concept of the "[political forest](#)" (Devine and Baca 2020) helps to illustrate the intersection of the ideas behind political ecology. The two basic prerequisites

comprising political forests are **territorial zones** (forest territories) and **forest species**.

A territorial zone that a "forest" occupies is usually politically created by the state, which decides what areas are forest while also determining what areas are *not* forest. These demarcations are usually accompanied by specific laws and regulations intended to exclude specific uses and users except those authorized by the Ministry of Forests. These decisions can create social displacement and grievances, particularly, for example, with local residents who may hold some form of tenure rights and who may actively work to undermine the state-imposed exclusion.

The political forest can be contrasted with the "scientific" forest (see [FAO](#) or [CBD](#) definitions of forest), which might be measured, for example, by total canopy cover above a certain contiguous percentage. The scientific forest is unlikely to map completely onto the political forest—areas of state control demarcated and controlled by state institutions on the ground.

## What implications follow?

[The issue of uneven power relations lies at the core of systemic corruption issues](#), and nature may play a significant role in creating and supporting those uneven relationships. With this understanding, conservation practitioners can gain better insight into the true character of the "problem" that they are dealing with. Corruption may be about a breach of the local law, but it [may also be something deeper](#) (World Bank 2019) that [touches on complex social and political arrangements](#) (U4 2019).

As part of an anti-corruption analysis, political ecology approaches can help us understand why politicians may not have, or may not be able to, exercise the [political will](#) to undertake key reforms. It can also help NRM and conservation practitioners to understand whether or not scientifically-based approaches have political ramifications in a given context.

## Where should I start?

- » Examine the work of existing **communities of practice** such as [POLLEN](#), [ENTITLE](#), or [CAPE](#) to identify current areas of thinking and debate. Engage with the community by asking questions and be sure to share your own experiences.
- » Review outputs from research programs such as [BIOSEC](#) to see how research areas are being translated into policy recommendations.
- » Make use of open source political ecology reading material such as the [Journal of Political Ecology maintained by the University of Arizona](#) or the list of documentaries and podcasts collated by POLLEN [here](#) – if you have access also review current trends or research past outputs in key journals such as [Political Geography](#).
- » Consider inviting individuals and organizations from different backgrounds with different skill sets to your next workshop on NRM and conservation planning – for example development practitioners, social scientists, geographers, anthropologists – to learn their perspectives on similar problems.
- » Identify potential collaboration with these different partners when developing landscape strategies or specific projects. Always consider the policy implications of your findings and analysis – what needs to change and who might need to know about it to make that change happen?

### Learn more

- » Kishor, Nalin, Selene Castillo and Nga Phuong Nguyen. 2015. Program on Forests (PROFOR). Washington, DC.
- » Kaika, M. 2014. [“What Is Political Ecology”](#). (Video resource).
- » Andreucci, D. et al. 2016. [Political Ecology for Civil Society Manual](#).

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#### About Targeting Natural Resource Corruption

The Targeting Natural Resource Corruption (TNRC) project is working to improve biodiversity outcomes by helping practitioners to address the threats posed by corruption to wildlife, fisheries and forests. TNRC harnesses existing knowledge, generates new evidence, and supports innovative policy and practice for more effective anti-corruption programming. Learn more at [tnrcproject.org](http://tnrcproject.org).

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