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National Park of American Samoa, Polynesia: A case study of virtualizing environmentalism and development

Marieke Blondet*

My Ph.D. research examined the establishment of a National Park in American Samoa by the United States, which administrates this Polynesian territory. The research focused on the possible impacts the protected areas may have on the local communities. At the end of my fieldwork in 2006 and 2007, I concluded that the Park is affecting two pillars of this society: the communal land which is intrinsically associated with the Samoan extended family and its internal organization and the chieftainship organization. In this paper, I argue that the original project for this protected area was based on a virtual construction of both nature and indigenous peoples. Virtual constructions, or attempts to make the practical world align with the world of the conceptual, may lead to strong disjunctions between the initial conservation project and its on-site execution, and thus to a project that does not meet all of its intended objectives. Environmentalism itself, as a vision of the world and a discourse, has been used to construct a virtual reality of what biodiversity conservation and sustainable development should be. These are the issues my paper will address in light of the ethnographic research I conducted in American Samoa. Many contemporary social scientists have recently challenged this environmentalist discourse and the imposition of its view on others. I hope this paper will contribute to this debate.

Keywords: American Samoa, Environmentalism, virtualism, national park, conservation

Since the early 1980s and the establishment of the Brundtland Commission (1983) by the General Secretary of the United Nations (UN), issues of development and environment have become intimately connected (Rist, 2001). The Brundtland Commission's first mission was to reconcile these two notions that were, until then, antithetical. Human activities, such as the industrial mode of production characterizing development, were understood as precisely what would inflict the most damage upon the environment. At the same time, it was inconceivable for the Brundtland Commission and the UN not to hasten the development of societies that had yet to obtain the conditions of a decent life. The concept of "sustainable development" originated from the work of this Commission.¹ From that point on, no project of development would be considered serious or be funded if it did not include an environmental aspect or a section related to the sustainable development of the local community (Rist, 2001).

¹ Sustainable development is a pattern of resource-use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present but also for generations to come (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

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Since the 1970s, social scientists, especially anthropologists, have become increasingly involved in looking at the social effects on the lives of local populations that can occur as a result of having protected areas (West, Igoe & Brockington, 2006). By describing and analyzing the multiple ways human societies conceptualize their environment and their relationships to it, they have notably demonstrated how central the concepts of nature and culture are to many protected area projects (Little, 1999). One of the main issues they discuss is “environmentalism,” the theory about nature and its protection shared by industrialized Western societies (Milton, 1996). Environmentalism is characterized by an awareness of the necessity to protect the environment against the damaging impact of human activity.

Social anthropologists have also shown that the integration of an environmental dimension to development projects has led to the bureaucratization of conservation programs. This institutionalization is often accompanied by a form of virtualism in the way decision-making authorities—who are often strongly disconnected from the reality in the field—have designed the protection of nature (Carrier & West, 2009). My understanding of virtualism is when one’s reality is based on a virtual, or conceptual and ideological, construction of the world. Environmentalism itself, and the conservation theories and programs it promotes, is an example of a form of virtualism. This virtual construction characterizes the Western way of understanding nature and its preservation. This vision often ignores the social, economic, and political context of communities located in the places where a protected area has been established. It is also the most diffused theoretical approach to the environment in development and conservation organizations worldwide.

This paper, therefore, comprises two parts. First, I describe the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in American Samoa on a U.S.-established national park and its relation to the local population. In the second part, I present my ethnographic research as a case study to illustrate the virtualism of the projects in the national park. Finally, I hope to demonstrate the significance of an anthropological point of view to critically analyze the issues surrounding both sustainable development and environmentalism theories.

The American Samoa Islands

American Samoa is a United States unincorporated territory in the Pacific, situated east of the Independent State of Samoa. It is comprised of five volcanic islands (Tutuila, Aunu’u, Ofu, Olosega and Ta’u) and two atolls (Rose atoll and Swain islands). Rapidly growing, the population was 68,200 people in 2007, with most people living on Tutuila, the largest and most developed island.²

The territory shares the same history and a similar culture as the Independent State of Samoa. In 1900, however, the history of what was then the Eastern part of the Samoan archipelago took a different turn when the United States of America took over its administration. Since then, and especially after World War II, the U.S. has imposed many American policies and hence culture and lifestyle. Nevertheless, the U.S. administration has always taken great care to preserve the local customary social organization, especially the system of chiefs, or the

² From 5,679 people reported in 1900, the population of American Samoa has multiplied ten times over the Twentieth Century. While it was growing about 3.7% per year during the 1980-90s—one of the world’s fastest rates of population growth at the time—the increase has since slowed down to approximately 2% per year in 2003. In 1960, the fertility rate was about 6.2 children per woman, dropping to approximately 5.2 children in 1980, and finally 3.9 children per woman in 2000 (American Samoa Government, 2005).

fa'amatai.³ Today, American Samoa is largely autonomous. It has its own government and constitution and makes its own decisions regarding many internal affairs. Yet it is dependent on the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) for some of its policies regarding, for example, international relationships and trade agreements.

In terms of economic development, World War II strongly impacted both the economy and the lives of American Samoans. Changes in society started to accelerate as the deployment of U.S. troops shifted what was an economy predominantly driven by agriculture and a few jobs offered by the U.S. Navy during the first half of the 20th century to an economy primarily driven by the U.S. Navy as large waves of migration from the U.S. mainland began. Shortly after the War, the military base in American Samoa closed, leaving behind a somewhat weakened economy.⁴

The economic situation improved in the 1950-60s with the opening of two tuna canneries, driven by the economic advantages the territory offered at the time: low wages, duty free access to the U.S., and some advantageous income tax incentives. From the 1960s, the tourism industry began to develop with the construction of a major hotel, the Rainmaker Hotel, and the participation of American Samoa in the NASA Apollo program (Gray, 1980; Kiste, 1994).⁵ Since then, no major structural changes have influenced the islands' economy. The territory, not having a large amount of natural resources to exploit, relies mostly on income provided by the canneries and U.S. federal grants made annually since 1951 to compensate for the departure of the Navy.⁶

When the National Park of American Samoa (NPAS) opened its doors in 1993, the canneries were the second-leading provider of both employment and income in the territory, after the American Samoa Government (ASG). Yet, the territory's strong dependence on these two sources of income was not very satisfying to the locals and options to develop other economic sectors such as tourism came under scrutiny. Beyond protecting nature, the idea of the National Park was to give American Samoa a tool to further develop its tourism activity and to eventually diversify the local economy (Stein, 1997). During the Park's dedication ceremony in 1997, Bruce Babbitt, the Secretary of the Interior at the time, declared:

It should be no surprise to anyone that the federal money is not as available today as it was in the past (...). When Congress passed legislation authorizing your great National Park, it was actually giving the territory an economic tool whose potential has just begun to be tapped (...). Wherever a boundary line is drawn around a piece of land to create a National Park, it is not long before tourists find out about the National Park and begin to visit. (American Samoa Department of Commerce, 1997, n. p.)

³ *Matai* is the generic Samoan name used to refer to any kind of traditional chief. Usually a *matai* is the head of an extended family. The *fa'amatai* or *matai* system refers to the hierarchic organization of the various *matai* and their respective rights and obligations.

⁴ Today, American Samoan migrants mainly travel to the U.S. mainland, with first destinations being Hawaii, California, and the region of Salt Lake City in Utah. Yet a lot of them are also in Alaska, or Iraq and Afghanistan as members of the U.S. army. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, approximately 91,376 Samoans lived in the U.S., which was more than the population living in American Samoa at the time (American Samoa Government, 2005).

⁵ For example, NASA used its waters as the site to recover several space shuttles.

⁶ For example, 63% of the territory's income came from U.S. federal grants in the fiscal year 2007.

Following the Brundtland Commission's recommendations, the protected area therefore held a strong development component. Unfortunately, since the park's establishment, economic conditions have deteriorated. In the early 21st century, the canneries have been challenged by dramatic changes in the international tuna processing market and increasing competition from low-wage nations, such as Thailand and Mexico. Many of the territory's tax incentives were also abandoned. Finally, American Samoa was hit by the 2008-2009 world economic recession, and continues to suffer from a 2006 decision by the U.S. Congress to raise the local minimum wage to the level of that of the U.S. mainland. As a result, employment at the canneries dropped significantly. By September 2009, one of the two original canneries quitted American Samoa (Sagapolutele, 2009), leaving the territory's economy in a worrying state.

The National Park of American Samoa (NPAS)

It was during the same period as the Brundtland Commission's discussion that the National Park of American Samoa (NPAS) was created. The establishment of the park was the result of several years of negotiations from 1986 to 1993 between the U.S. National Park Service (NPS), the ASG, and chiefs from seven selected villages. The negotiations produced a 50-year lease agreement to protect the land. The objective of the National Park was to protect three different spaces considered threatened by the modern world: the paleotropical forest, a part of the coral reef, and the American Samoan traditions and heritage. The paleotropical ecosystem of American Samoa, which refers to ecosystems that can be found in the ancient world, is especially significant as it is the only one of its kind within the U.S. network of national parks. Scarce plants that can be found in paleotropical forests sparked further U.S. interest in establishing a national park in American Samoa in order to enable access to these plants by U.S. medical and pharmaceutical industries. For example, it is written in the National Park's management plan that:

The forest [of American Samoa] has great diversity with hundreds of different plant species often found in a few acres. Many of these plants are now being studied for medicinal value including 150 species subject to National Institutes of Health investigations into possible cancer cures. (United States Congress, 1988, p. 7)

The NPAS is also the only mixed species forest under the jurisdiction of the American NPS and is a major population area for endangered flying foxes (United States Department of the Interior, 1997).⁷

The idea of having a national park in American Samoa did not arise from the American Samoans themselves. Instead, at the origin of the project was a group of conservation activists and American scientists who, in the 1980s, became aware of the disappearance of both the Samoan flying fox and the White collar flying fox due to commercial hunting.⁸ Also involved in

⁷ As a paleotropical forest, the NPAS is also greatly significant at the regional level because American Samoa is the endpoint of a process of ecological filtering that begins in Southeast Asia and New Guinea. It remains largely intact and extends uninterrupted from the sea level up to the mountain summits.

⁸ The group comprised of a local NGO, *Le Vaomatua* (including American Samoans and American expatriates) and a group of American scientists on the islands for the purpose of research. Among these scientists was Dr. Paul Cox, a professor of Botany at Brigham Young University who was also integral in the initiative of several protected areas in the Independent State of Samoa (the Falealupo and Tafua/Salelologa Rainforest Preserves in Savaii). The group was also supported by a wealthy conservationist American couple, Mr and Mrs Verne Read.

this group was a U.S. Congress subcommittee on Interior and Insular Affairs. This team managed to convince the then American Samoan Governor A. P. Lutali and Lieutenant Governor Eni Hunkin of the importance of creating a national park to help protect the two endangered flying fox species, as well as a large part of the rainforest (*BCI Helps Samoans Gain National Park* 1988). Gaining their approval, however, was not an easy task. The Governor and Lieutenant Governor expressed many reservations. For instance, according to one of my informants who was a member of *Le Vaomatua*, an organization involved in the discussions with the two American Samoa officials, the Governor hardly understood why it was necessary to protect a rainforest that has and will continue to exist for generations without any noticeable change (Fieldnotes, January 28, 2006). According to this *Le Vaomatua* member, the Governor could not imagine why Americans were so insistent about its protection. Nonetheless, the Governor finally gave his agreement after being seduced by the idea of using the park to promote his islands to tourists (Fieldnotes, July 14, 2007). Once this step had been taken, the group of conservationists began to pressure the U.S. Congress to sign a bill authorizing the creation of the national park.⁹ Finally, *Public Law 100-571* was passed on October 31, 1988, which permitted the establishment of the National Park of American Samoa.

Much work, however, remained to be done since approximately 85% to 90% of the land in American Samoa was and continues to be communally owned by Samoan extended families (*aiga*).¹⁰ Within the area selected for the National Park, land was also communally owned and fell under the *pule* (authority) of the Samoan traditional chiefs, the *matai*. They too needed to be convinced of the greater benefits of having a protected area. It took another five years of negotiations to reach a lease agreement, which was finally signed on September 10, 1993.¹¹ Without such a contract, there would most likely have been no park at all.

Although the lease agreement fixes the terms and amount of rent to be paid to the selected Samoan families, it also clearly defines acceptable activities that can take place within Park lands. The villagers continue to have the right to use certain selected natural resources, but some restrictions were implemented. The forest, for instance, cannot be cleared to extend taro plantations; only existing taro fields can be used.¹² Trees cannot be cut to build houses or used as house covers. Villagers, however, can continue to collect medicinal plants and practice subsistence activities such as traditional non-commercial fishing.¹³ The impacts of *Public Law 100-571* on the local lives of American Samoans will be discussed later in this paper.

⁹ An act of the U.S. Congress is the only way to add a new park to the U.S. network. Furthermore, because of the communal ownership of land in American Samoa, the park's establishment necessitated the enactment of special legislation by the U.S. Congress.

¹⁰ Since 1900, the various American administrators in American Samoa have always taken great care to preserve the traditional land tenure. Laws, such as the *Native Land Ordinance*, were passed that forbade the transfer of native land to any foreigner and also regulated leases (Stover, 1990).

¹¹ The lease contract was signed between the seven villages that possess land within the selected area, the American Samoa Government (ASG) which owns 8.5 hectares (21 acres) within the Park's boundaries, and the American NPS.

¹² Taro is a tropical root crop in the *Araceae* family which is one of the main staple foods in American Samoa as well as in many other Pacific Islands.

¹³ These restrictions on resource-use are clearly stated in Section 3 of *Public Law 100-571* (1988). Under Administration (b) it states: "Traditional subsistence uses. (1) Agricultural, cultural, and gathering uses shall be permitted in the park for subsistence purposes if such uses are generally prior existing uses conducted in areas used for such purposes as of the date of enactment of this Act and if such uses are conducted in the traditional manner and by traditional methods. No such uses shall be permitted in the park for other than subsistence purposes

At the time of the Park's opening, the park planners and managers expressed many expectations regarding its future development. Yet, when I did my ethnographic fieldwork in 2007, many of the original goals in reference to infrastructure, services to visitors, and tourism activities had not yet been achieved.¹⁴ The Homestay program, for instance, is not yet working efficiently. The original idea was to accommodate visitors in one of the villages of the Park and to allow them, by staying with a Samoan family, eating Samoan food and practicing traditional handicrafts, to experience the Samoan way of life and to learn firsthand about Samoan culture. It was also expected that this would encourage ecotourism activity and provide the villagers with a source of income (United States Department of the Interior, 1997). Rather, services offered to visitors were not as good as expected, and the list of host families was not regularly updated.¹⁵ As a result, this has discouraged tourists from visiting the Park. The protected area's other major challenge is the lack of both funds and staff, which prevents it from making further developments (i.e., more promotion and tourism infrastructures).

National Park, Sustainable Development and Local Population Involvement

After conservation, the second main objective of the National Park was to contribute to the improvement of the local economy by supporting the development of the tourism industry, and thereby contribute to the territory's sustainable development. By 2007, however, real progress remained far from these goals. As discussed above, the activities and services offered to visitors of the park simply have not had the expected quality to attract more tourists. In other words, the Park did not put American Samoa on the tourist track (Stein, 1997). Yet, the situation was more complex; the little improvements of its services by the protected area were not the only reasons for tourists to stay away from the territory.

Indeed, one of the main problems was that the islands remain unknown to most tourists wishing to travel to the Pacific despite the promotion from the National Park. Few cruise ships stop regularly on the islands and those that do usually stay for one or two days, not enough for passengers to stay overnight in one of the Park's villages. Few planes also land in the territory, and those that do carry mostly Samoan family members visiting their relatives. As a result of the lack of tourism, there are not enough incentives for the private sector and the ASG to invest in tourism and other related activities and services. Therefore, commodities such as drinkable water, health service, transportation, and accommodation have not been improved. The indirect economic benefits that were expected from the Park and its Homestay program never materialized. This situation appears to be ongoing, especially since there are currently no efforts to develop tourism. Lastly, the ASG seems quite reluctant to open its gates to tourists. It may be

(2) Subsistence uses of the marine areas of the park shall also be permitted in accordance with paragraph (1), and no fishing or gathering shall be permitted in such marine areas for other than subsistence purposes" (p. 3).

¹⁴ Only a few trails were created and only one is well signposted and maintained, although there are no benches in the shade and no picnic tables or toilets on the trail. The rainforest canopy walkway and flying fox observation tower are still projects to come. The rehabilitation project of the old tramway flying over the Pago Pago harbor, which was, before it collapsed, the best way for visitors to access the National Park, has not been successfully completed either.

¹⁵ It happened that the houses of host families were not available for tourists for months at a time, yet the vacancy still appeared on the Park listings. Other people are not on the list although they do offer accommodation as part of the National Park Homestay Program. Although the program's manager told me that the Park staff visits each accommodation site every four months, it seems that quality control is somewhat poor, which leads to abuse from some of the Park hosts (e.g., very expensive rent for poor housing, no meals, and/or no traditional activities).

that the territory does not need this source of income since it receives annual grants from the U.S., as many of my field interlocutors often reminded me.

In the late-1980s and early-1990s, the period during which the NPAS was planned, discussions around protected areas and the integration and empowerment of indigenous people were strong. Social anthropologists were involved in this debate and notably argued that the lack of integration of local communities often led to the failure of conservation projects (Carrier, 2003; Harper, 2003). According to the National Park Management Plan, it seems that the NPS planners had been positively influenced by the international discussions around parks and the participation of the local people (United States Department of the Interior, 1997). The voices of particular American Samoan leaders (Government officials and village chiefs) were taken into account during the first stages of developing the protected area. They were consulted and their points of view were acknowledged in order to reach an agreement on conservation, sustainable development, and respect of the local customary way of life. The NPS carefully worked in a compatible way with both the American Samoa Law and the *fa'asamoa* (the Samoan culture and ways). It recognized the importance of land issues to locals and acknowledged the authority over land of the *matai* by negotiating the lease agreement with the village councils and by gathering all the *matai* of each village.¹⁶ At first, it seemed that everything possible was undertaken to integrate the local people and their activities and use of natural resources into the project. The National Park planners made sure the locals would not suffer from the establishment of the protected area but would rather benefit from it in terms of the quality of their natural environment and provided income.

Nevertheless, things did not appear that way to me. My ethnographic research shows that the protected area has not always reached its targets of development, local involvement, and environmental awareness among the American Samoan population. As with any development project, the local community could have been more involved. The development of ecotourism based on the creation of a National Park and its Homestay Program should have been a way to include the villagers living in the Park into its sustainability and to encourage them to contribute to their communities' development. The arrival of tourists in the villages, for example, would have helped in the development of shops and accommodations and, therefore, support the local economy. My argument is that this failure is the consequence of an original form of virtual construction of the protected area in which the social, economic and political context of the islands have not truly been taken into account. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss what my ethnographic study reveals about this issue.

The American Samoans' View of the NPAS

The ethnographic fieldwork I conducted over two periods of several months in 2006-2007, consisted of settling in one of the villages within the National Park. There, I observed and participated in the daily lives of the villagers. I also conducted several interviews with them, as well as with people from other villages living inside and outside the Park, the National Park's staff, as well as some of the ASG officials. I was interested in studying the involvement of locals in the protected area's project and the possible impacts of the Park and the rents paid to some American Samoan families for their local social organization. This ethnography led me to conclude that although the NPAS allowed villages to be situated within its boundaries, the reality

¹⁶ In American Samoa, land and its ownership are central to the society. The history of land and how it was first acquired (by warfare, as a gift for good service, by working it, etc) tells the history of the people and, therefore, situates them within the social hierarchy.

was that villagers did not participate in the management of the Park. Most of the protected area's projects consisted of scientific monitoring of natural resources and did not involve locals, with the exception of a few permanent park rangers. Apart from the chiefs in the lease agreement negotiation, villagers were not consulted for any decisions the Park officials made. No public meetings were held to explain the project to the villagers until everything was signed off by the villages' senior *matai*. Although the National Park's managers organize yearly public meetings in accordance with the National Environment Policy Act (NEPA), villagers do not attend.¹⁷ I believe this is because the meetings were not advertised widely enough, and since villagers have never been invited to actively participate in the conservation process, their interest in the project is quite minimal. As evidence of this type of communication and understanding, many villagers can attest to the following statement made by one of my informants:

I don't know about this National Park. I heard good things, I heard bad things too. I heard, well, the good thing is the village gets the money from the National Park, and the bad thing is, I don't know what's gonna happen after that. For the..., they gonna take American Samoa land for the National Park or what? (Interview, April 14, 2006)

This man also told me that the few pieces of information he had received came from his *matai* and not from the National Park's people. One *matai*, who was a young man at the time of the lease contract negotiations, told me that the village council did not explain the project to the rest of the village and made the decisions on its own. Finally, a woman whose late husband was one of the *matai* involved in the signature of the lease agreement seventeen years ago, explained to me:

I think most of the people they don't understand what the National Park [is]. Except, you know, for educated people, but the rest of the, you know, like kids. I don't know if they learn that in school. Like young kids, the students. I don't think they know what that [is] for! I mean what the National Park's doing over here. (Interview, March 7, 2006)

Furthermore, the indigenous knowledge of the natural environment, such as the plants' cycle of regeneration and what threatens them, was not well utilized by the National Park's managers, although recordings and presentations of traditional tools and techniques are available for Park's visitors.

Beyond its expected participation in developing tourism activities and creating related jobs, the National Park itself did not create much employment for Samoans. Few jobs were available to locals and most of them were short-term contracts or volunteer positions. The villagers and their *matai* have been hopeful about the National Park, but now they have begun to be more critical about it. For instance, a *matai* from one of the villages located within the Park told me: "They [the NPAS] haven't done so much work, they just did the recover of the forest, you know, invasive species. They could have done more (...). They've been here for a long time, and nothing has been done" (Interview, June 14 2006). Despite the critical tone, this leader was generally quite positive about the protected area and its goals. Not only the chiefs, but also the

¹⁷ The NEPA is a law requiring that each national park regularly and publicly announces its upcoming projects (Communication with Roger Moder, NPAS Superintendent, 2007).

people were hoping the Park would directly provide work opportunities, as explained by the Reverend in the village where I lived: “That’s one thing the National Park should bring in, a lot a jobs for the village kids, especially for these, for villages where the Park is” (Interview, June 10, 2006). Villagers also expected that the Park would help the community economically, as well as that of the whole territory, by fostering tourism development and bringing visitors to the villages as it was once announced. Many of the people I worked with were complaining that they were still waiting for tourists to come to their village, and that the Park was not keeping its original promises.

The Park, however, has had very little impact on the village’s economy or its tourism industry as mentioned earlier. For instance, the restrictions placed on natural resource have not had a major effect on village economies, mostly due to the significant changes to the American Samoan way of life brought on by other social changes like the loss of interest in plantation work and the subsequent surrendering of subsistence activities like fishing or cultivating taro, as well as increased migration driven by economic concerns. Many of my fieldwork interlocutors communicated that they would not use the land that the Park protects, mostly because it is too far away from their villages and too steep. They would rather lease their lands to the National Park and benefit from the rents. I was told for instance: “Because, you know, [the villagers] are now not planting, or they’re now not building anything on [the land protected by the Park]. But it’s more like we are getting something out of it, like we’re getting money out of it!” (Interview, June 10, 2006). One of the talking chiefs of the Olosega village, which is in the process of negotiating with the NPS to join the National Park, told me something very similar: “I don’t believe the people in this village will go up over there in the future and live over there (...). So that [is] why I agree to make a Park over there! Get some money for the people that [are] living down here” (Interview, May 10, 2006).

Consequently, the only real economic difference villagers have observed since the Park’s establishment is that the *aiga* receives money every year from the rent of their land, with which they have been generally satisfied. This observation was acknowledged by many of the American Samoans I met, such as the woman quoted above. She said: “The National Park, I think peoples here (...) they like it because they get money from it, that’s the main... That’s the best part of the deal” (Interview, March 7, 2006). My ethnographic research also led me to realize how much the project of the National Park was based on a virtual construction of what the Park’s achievements would be, its impacts on the local sustainable development, and the participation of the local communities.

A Virtualizing Development and Conservation Project

The complex situation of American Samoa described above illustrates what happens when protected area and sustainable development projects are top-down initiatives rather than collective work involving indigenous populations. The NPAS is a good example of a virtual project where a conservation area bumps into the economic, political and social realities of the islands. Although originally the Samoan chiefs were involved in creating the protected area, according to my observations, the participation of the Samoan people comes down to their living within the Park.¹⁸ Their needs and expectations have never been carefully appraised by the National Park Service, and their cultural specificities have only been marginally considered. This again demonstrates the disconnection between the virtual reality of the Park’s project and the

¹⁸ The only real exception was the participation of a few American Samoans in a program on the eradication of invasive tree species.

field that I observed. This description is an instance of virtualization. Carrier and West (2009) explain that each person studying a certain aspect of the world necessarily approaches his/her object from a certain perspective and focuses on some specific elements according to his/her initial interest and objective. Consequently, the observations made and the rules and principles produced out of them are “not complete and neutral. Rather they are partial” (p. 7). The result of such observation is the creation of a “virtual reality,” or defining the world in a virtual way. Carrier and West (2009) add that:

This virtual reality becomes virtualism when people forget that the virtual reality is a creature of the partial analytical and theoretical perspectives and arguments that generate it, and instead take it for the principles that underline the world that exists and then try to make the world conform to that virtual reality. (p. 7)

As referenced in the introduction, this virtualism is the result of a social and historical construction of a specific vision of the world (Descola, 1996). Environmentalism, as a discourse about nature and its elements, characterizes the Western view of both nature and its preservation.

Some social scientists, however, have a critical view of this view and argue that environmentalism has a totalizing vision of the world and the people in it, which is taken to be reality itself (Argyrou, 2009). As any other form of virtualism seeking to impose its specific view on others, environmentalism, through its conservation policies, projects and programs, tries to shape the world and to bring it into conformity with its initial vision or “virtual reality” (Carrier & West, 2009). In that, we may understand conservation programs and projects in Foucauldian terms as exercises of power. In terms of virtual reality, Foucault’s (1972) system of knowledge-power would suggest that the vision of environmentalists is taken in the nexus of a knowledge-power relationship. Those who have the knowledge and are in a powerful position would have a greater chance to make the world conform to their model. Carrier and West (2009) elaborate:

[t]he visionary must be powerful politically and the vision must be grounded in a form of knowledge production that is powerful socially [such as biology or physics]. (...) The broader the vision and the more powerful the visionary, the more pervasive the shaping. (p. 7)

Argyrou (2009) extends this framework in describing an extreme form of environmentalism: “ecocentrism.” This model carries a vision of the world in which people are constructed as part of nature, yet the construction of nature itself is expurgated of its social networks, thereby forgetting the ways in which the social makes the natural. Argyrou’s (2009) analysis echoes Escobar’s (1998) argument, which states that the description of the world being made by environmentalism is highly abstracted and often ignores the social and political features of the places that are portrayed. Protected areas and their resources would be described by stressing the ecological side, such as the fragility of the natural ecosystem and the threats that may weigh on it, while the socio-political context in which the natural reserve was established is silenced. When social aspects are actually taken into consideration, they tend to translate people’s actions into terms that fit pre-existing environmentalist notions of these actions, like the notion that local people are a threat to the natural environment (Carrier & West, 2009).

This “virtualising tendency” of environmentalism was well described by Filer (2009) and his study of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA).¹⁹ Filer (2009) shows that, for the MA committees, the environment is seen in terms of “environmental services” and local people as “consumers of these services” who are taken into “a web of services provisions and consumption” (Filer, 2009, p. 85). Filer also demonstrates that, although this virtualism functions at the policy-making level, the words used have little meaning at the organization and execution level and often do not fit within the field realities.

Virtualism of the NPAS and the Field Realities

What does the case study of the NPAS tell us about this issue of virtualizing environmentalism? In American Samoa, the planners from the U.S. National Park Service had a specific vision of the islands’ natural environment, strongly influenced by the discourse of environmentalism. They portrayed the paleotropical forest and coral reef as pristine and unique, and under human threat. They also had a virtual view of the Samoan culture and heritage, as well as the traditional relationship indigenous people have with their natural surrounding, best expressed by this statement found in the National Park Management Plan:

The cultural resources of the National Park of American Samoa (...) have their origin in the continued existence and vitality of the ancient Polynesian culture that has characterized the Samoan islands for nearly 3000 years. The values and traditions of this culture are intertwined with the natural resources of the national park. Even today Samoans retain close ties to the rainforest, as evidenced by communal ownership of forested land, the status which ownership gives to the family and the village, and the desire of Samoans to protect the integrity of the forest. (United States Department of the Interior, 1997, p. 15)

The vision expressed above can be compared with the kind of abstract representation described by Escobar (1998) and Filer (2009): a portrait of the American Samoans and their relationship to their environment based on some theoretical knowledge and pre-existing romantic images of the islands. Yet it does not include any thought about the contemporary social and political features of this society.

Although there are villages within the National Park boundaries, their dwellers are understood as a threat to the protected area. As a result, they suffer from the restrictions of use of the forest and the reef resources. In other words, the NPAS planners, like many environmentalists, referred to representations that translate the world into the images and discourse of their theoretical environmentalism model, eliding aspects of the locals’ lives that do not conform to that model (Carrier & West, 2009). For instance, the NPS did not really consider the American Samoan perception of land and its centrality to social life, especially its significant role in people’s social positioning and identity. The only exception made was in respecting the local law in terms of the sale and lease of Samoan land. The attitude and actions of the Park’s planners were akin to “forgetting and physically erasing the history of people on the land” (Carrier & West, 2009, p. 10), as well as the long social and historical processes that have shaped the contemporary relationship that people have with their natural environment. As a result, the

¹⁹ The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment is “an international program designed to meet the needs of decision makers and the public for scientific information concerning the consequences of ecosystem change for human well-being and options for responding to those changes” (Filer, 2009, p. 84).

NPAS may have had significant social impact on Samoans' perceptions of their land.²⁰ Although environmentalists often believe that conservation programs are readily transportable from one place to another, ignoring the local circumstances and variations, their virtualizing vision is difficult to transfer into practice (Carrier & West, 2009). The empirical study of the NPAS points out this disconnection. On the one hand, there is a virtual construction based on both a theoretical understanding of the society and an analytical model of biodiversity and the environment. On the other hand, there is the field approach to studying the community in context that highlights the various social dimensions surrounding and interacting with the protected area.

The other important contribution of empirical research is that it demonstrates that a Foucauldian reading of environmentalism in terms of a power-knowledge relationship as described above does not cover all the components of the situation. A field approach helps us to realize how planners and head officers of conservation projects and programs have "little knowledge of and control over what is going on in the field," and are frequently ignorant of the disjunction between their view of the project, the vision held by field staff, and the observation made on-site by social anthropologists studying the daily lives and activities of locals (Carrier & West, 2009, p. 18). The field I studied in American Samoa around the NPAS is a perfect example of this disjunction. I would argue that in this territory three levels of the local context need to be taken into account for the park to be more successful. First, we need to consider the contemporary social changes of this society. We have seen that American Samoans today do not live in the same way as in the past, and the restrictions made on forest-use do not impact the villagers' lives in ways intended by the project. For that reason, conservation works well within the Park, but not so well outside, in the back of the village, into the streams, or over the roads, where Samoans continue to dump their garbage. The presence of the National Park and the diffusion of its philosophy of conservation in American Samoa do not seem to have developed any higher awareness of the locals regarding their attitude as polluters and the threats they represent to their natural environment. For the moment, conservation works for reasons other than those proposed by the NPS. As a result, the National Park has had only limited success. The main reason for this might be the lack of real involvement from the population.

Regarding the issue of sustainable development, the second reality worth considering are the various current economic and political circumstances in American Samoa. The virtual construction of the National Park as a tool to develop ecotourism activities through conservation—although it may work in other places—has had little chance to come into being. Not only because of the National Park itself but, as mentioned earlier, because of the many circumstances surrounding the development of tourism in American Samoa, such as the will of the American Samoa Government to promote tourism, the invested funds, the development of air and sea transportation, and the will of the locals to open themselves to foreigners.

A third specificity has not been considered enough by the virtualising project of the National Park. That is, the impact that the rent payment may have on the American Samoa society has never been addressed. American Samoan society is driven by gift-giving ceremonies. Among others, my ethnographic research demonstrates that American Samoans today use income, like the rent received from the Park, for other social activities such as in the internal

²⁰ I develop a longer analysis of the impact of the NPAS and its lease contract on the Samoans' perception of land in my Ph.D. dissertation (Blondet, 2010; see Blondet, 2009, for the French translation: "Samoa américaines et parc national. Les impacts sociaux de la protection de la nature aux îles Samoa.")

competition to gain a higher social status.²¹ In this regard, the National Park, without any intention to do so, plays an important role in the on-going social transformation of the American Samoan society—a consequence which was never envisaged by the NPS and its virtualism project.

Nevertheless, the on-site National Park's staff directly interacts with field realities. The staff interacts with local Samoans and has a better understanding of the expectations and the ways in which the Samoan society is organized and functions. Because of this, we can hope that the protected area will progressively adjust its implemented practices and meet more success in the future.

Conclusion

Although in its setting, the NPAS seems to have aligned itself with recent international discourse on protected areas and indigenous peoples, my ethnographic study of the American Samoan local context and cultural specificities as they relate to the established protected area has demonstrated how the conservation project has been virtually constructed. The definition of its goals and what was expected from it in terms of local sustainability and the participation by American Samoans were in fact disconnected from many of the observed local specificities. Indeed, my ethnographic research has shown that the virtual reality of this conservation project oftentimes clashes with the specific contemporary context of the islands. My study, I hope, has also demonstrated that social anthropologists offer a particularly insightful lens that shines a different light onto conservation processes and their underlying virtualisms. Anthropologists have a significant role to play in these debates as we offer a critical perspective on both the contemporary environmentalist phenomena and the hegemonic Western vision of nature (Brosius, 1999; Little, 1999; West, Igoe & Brockington, 2006). As Filer (2009) notes: “[t]here is considerable scope for anthropologists to make strategic or tactical alliance with environmental scientists, system ecologists, political economists and transnational advocates of local or indigenous knowledge to challenge the ‘top-down’ approach to problems of environmental management” (p. 108). This paper, I hope, has contributed to this debate.

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²¹ The Samoan families receiving rent money from the NPS usually encounter higher contribution expectations from their relatives or allied family groups in time of gift-giving ceremonies. If the family benefiting from this income wants to maintain its social status, or gain a higher one, it has to contribute according to its current social status or to the one it wants to obtain. In contrast, related families would have to give gifts and money back to this family according to the amount they received. In other words, the NPAS contributes, although it is not fully responsible, to the strengthening of traditional competition around authority and prestige in American Samoa.

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