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Life in "Paradise" a social psychological and anthropological study of nature conservation in the Caribbean Netherlands

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SUMMARY

“Life in Paradise”: A social-psychological and anthropological study of nature conservation in the Caribbean Netherlands.

Like the rest of the Caribbean, special Dutch municipalities Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba are being confronted with changing weather patterns, leading to extensive periods of drought, more intense storms, and rising sea temperatures which affect diverse local ecosystems. Not only does the deterioration of the local environment have negative consequences for the biodiversity and the health of the population, it also has major economic consequences (Debrot et al, 2017; Nature Policy Plan CN 2020). The vulnerability of islands to environmental degradation and the effects of climate change necessitates policies to protect the environment in the Caribbean (Barker, Dodman & McGregor, 2009). This dissertation examines the efforts and motives of conservation actors on Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius, and situates these actors within the larger context of the Caribbean Netherlands. The main research question addressed is: How are the efforts of conservation actors to protect the environment of the Caribbean Netherlands affected by the recent social and political changes and their (post) colonial context? To get at these issues, this dissertation focused on residents of the Caribbean Netherlands who do make an effort to protect local environments from further deterioration. This research combines insights and approaches from environmental psychology, anthropology, and Caribbean studies to investigate how and why residents engage in conservation actions. Situated in social history, cultural and environmental anthropology, public administration, and environmental science, this research aims to create a broader, less compartmentalized, picture and will also address societal concerns. Because of its multidisciplinary and multi-method character, this dissertation produces information that will be useful in engaging more people in environmental conservation in the (Dutch) Caribbean. In other words, this research aims to contribute new insights and practical recommendations to the debate on how to act upon or even solve some of the urgent environmental challenges while also remaining sensitive to (post-)colonial realities.

Part One centers on the discipline and methodology of environmental psychology. Based on a content analysis of the interviews conducted with conservation actors on the three islands, Chapter 2 gives a description of the different social-psychological drivers of behavior of conservation actors in the Caribbean Netherlands. Building on these findings, Chapter 3 examines the motives of conservation actors in relation to the context of the small scale and the constitutional reforms realities of the islands and how these affect their notions of belonging within the island communities. I do this by means of a reflexive thematic analysis. A distinction is made between local and (new) migrants and how this aspect of their identity affects the types of conservation actions they engage in and their motives to do so. The relationship between conservation actions and of the actor's sense of belonging is explored in greater depth in Chapter 4. Here, I ask the question if engaging in conservation actions leads to better integration within the

island communities. The hypothesis addressed in this chapter is that individuals engage in actions to protect the natural and cultural environment at least partly to improve their sense of belonging to their community.

Part Two presents a case study about fishery management on Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius. In this part all the themes and topics that have been addressed in Part One and two come together, illustrating the realities of nature conservation on the three islands. Aware of the fact that managing the fishery sector is as much a social as an ecological issue, WWF-NL asked me to assist with identifying the social bottlenecks and specifically to come up with solutions for these bottlenecks. The question raised was under which circumstances it would be possible to engage fishers in an organized manner in the development of sustainable fisheries. At the time the study was conducted, it was believed the fishery management issues were most pressing on Bonaire and that that stakeholder participation would be a key element of successful fisheries management. Therefore, an intervention study on Bonaire was done in which I closely collaborated with the fishers. Based on the intervention study and interviews, the different views about fisheries and fisheries management of the stakeholders became evident. Chapter 5 describes the fishery sector on Bonaire and the different institutions, organizations, and stakeholders responsible for fishery management. The challenges the different stakeholders of fishery management are facing, and their underlying reasons are presented in this chapter. An in-depth description of the process that led to the establishment of a fishery cooperative on Bonaire is described in Chapter 6. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the roles, responsibilities of, and relationships between, the government, the (international) NGOs, fishers and citizens in general as well as my own role and presence as a researcher throughout the intervention study.

The dissertation is concluded in Chapter 7, where the research findings are summarized and used to answer the main research question of this dissertation. In addition, suggestions for future research and implications for policy development are made.

This research has shown that notions of belonging indeed play a significant role in the decision of residents of the Caribbean Netherlands to engage in environmental conservation actions (or not). This relationship is multilayered and highly dependent on the context of the three islands, as well as the way an individual identifies him or herself in relation to other members of the island communities. Not only does this perception of belonging have a significant influence on residents' willingness to participate in conservation actions, it also (partially) affects the type of conservation actions they choose to engage in. This interplay is strongly affected by the islands' colonial history and the more recent constitutional reforms.

The small scale of the islands affects the availability of resources and human capacity on the islands, which means that most conservationists felt a strong sense of responsibility

for their actions (“if we don’t do something, nobody will”), but are also overwhelmed with the sheer amount of work that needs to be done by so few people. At the same time, due to the islands’ small populations, most residents know each other. This can both complicate and facilitate the process of nature conservation. The effect of the constitutional reforms instituted on 10/10/10 is multifaceted. On the one hand, there are instances where the changes of 10/10/10 complicated environmental management. Informants expressed how changes in legislation present loopholes, created ambiguities in governmental and organizational responsibilities, and those financial resources that were available before 10/10/10 were no longer available for the islands.

Another repeatedly mentioned challenge was the big gap between the Dutch government’s expectations and demands and the realities of the islands. This reflected a second prominent effect of the constitutional reforms, which is visible in the sentiments regarding environmental conservation on the islands. The Dutch migrants and Dutch government’s prominent and dominant presence on the islands and their involvement in environmental conservation and management efforts triggered sentiments of “re-colonialization” and a sense of loss of ownership among some residents. Among some local conservation actors, this development was an important reason to engage in conservation actions, while others like the fishers instead distanced themselves from conservation activities. On the other hand, the closer ties with the Netherlands gave the three islands access to new resources — financially and in terms of capacity and knowledge — for environmental conservation.

Lastly, this research examined the effect of notions of belonging for conservation efforts in the Caribbean Netherlands. While we found some indication that residents who participate in conservation efforts do so to improve their sense of belonging, this was mostly a secondary (unexpected) experienced benefit and thus not their primary motive. Overall, we found that the effect of a person’s desire to belong to community on their engagement in conservation actions is especially imminent when the need to belong to a community is salient — either because people do not feel they currently belong to a community or because they are concerned about their reputation.

The complexity of the relationship between belonging and conservation actions among conservation actors in the Caribbean Netherlands can be partially explained by the islands’ small scale and socio-political context. Specifically, as conservation behavior has a reputation of being a “Dutch” thing to do, engagement in these actions can lead to exclusion. Due to the colonial history of the islands and the sentiments of “recolonization” arising from the constitutional reforms of 10/10/10, conservation actors can experience resistance from the community when they try to take action to protect the environment. Moreover, the visibility of these conservation actions in small scale communities makes conservation actors particularly vulnerable to the prevailing opinion (and thus rejection or acceptance) of the efforts they have made. Overall, my

research has shown that whether participating in conservation efforts is beneficial for a person's sense of belonging depends on the way people approach or engage in these actions.

All in all, my dissertation is both expansive and limited. Its conclusions have global applicability, yet its focus is very much on the local context of the Caribbean Netherlands, with a particular focus on the case study of fishers on Bonaire. It argues for broadening the academic approach and methodologies used in studying the environment to embrace true trans-disciplinarity. This necessarily includes a contextualization of the culture, post-colonial histories, and contexts of the societies in which environmental actions (or lack thereof) are occurring. By expanding who, what, and how we research we can have a far greater impact than if we were to stay confined to our narrow disciplinary boundaries.