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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST OVER THE WADI RUM RESERVE: WERE THEY AVOIDABLE? A SOCIO-POLITICAL CRITIQUE

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As far as the socio-political implications of environmental conservation projects are concerned, the Middle East is very much a blind spot of research, probably because state-sponsored conservation attempts are relatively new in the region, the earliest ones dating back to the 1970s. In a 1998 article, Dawn Chatty wrote about the problematic involvement of pastoralist communities in conservation programmes in Oman and Syria. Her main conclusion was that: 'Conservation schemes in Arabia continue to disregard local populations as obstacles to be overcome – either by monetary compensation or by special terms of local employment – instead of as partners in sustainable conservation and development' (1998: 27–28). The author found that new trends of conservation efforts that advocate community participation were totally lost on the Omani and Syrian authorities, both disregarding local Bedouin communities at all levels of their projects in arid areas. In the case of Oman, this might be due to the fact that conservation attempts, in the form of a desert mammal reintroduction scheme, started in the late 1970s at a time when community participation was not on the agendas of either WWF or IUCN. On the other hand, this explanation cannot be valid in the Syrian case. There, efforts to set up a protected wildlife area are recent, and the Syrian authorities seem to have forgotten all about their past experience in managing the rangeland in the *Badia* (the semi-arid steppes of Northern Arabia), where sustainability was achieved only after Bedouins' traditional resource preservation system (*hema*) was incorporated.

When, in 1996, the World Bank came up with its Second Tourism Development Project for Jordan, there seemed to be good reasons to hope that the lessons learned in other regions of the world were finally going to be applied to the Middle East. Conservation featured prominently in the project, and the development of tourism-related activities was envisioned as the participatory method by which local communities would maintain their sense of ownership over the land and improve their socio-economic situation – very much in line with the new agendas at IUCN, WWF and other conservation agencies. The World Bank project made special provisions for developing environmentally sustainable tourism in Wadi Rum, a Bedouin-populated area in the South of Jordan already famous as a tourism site. Unlike what had happened in Oman and Syria, it could be expected that the relations between the agencies in charge of implementing the project and the local Bedouin community would be harmonious, since they were to be based on the new prevailing philosophy that links conservation with human development, and that provides for the incorporation of local communities in planning, development and implementation.

In fact, the Wadi Rum case, currently at the implementation phase, has proved to be a very contentious one. Although efforts were made to gain the support of the indigenous Bedouins and involve them in the project, local-community participation is extremely limited and opposition widespread. The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) – an Amman-based NGO which is the main implementing agent – is the institutional stakeholder that is most directly enmeshed in the conflict with the local inhabitants, but also with the public

body that has commissioned it, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA). At the managerial level, the reason behind the crisis is twofold. On the one hand, the project was not aimed at developing tourism but at *re*-developing it. The goal was to establish an overall management structure, encapsulating and reorganising existing tourism-related activities that had been almost independently managed by the Bedouins for 15 years, and to emphasise a new environmental component.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the management structure the World Bank imposed on the project has forced the RSCN, a conservation NGO, to function in partnership with ASEZA, a government body geared towards economic development. The two agencies diverge in their long-term aims and in their approaches to community participation, a fact that has impeded effective involvement of the indigenous population in the implementation of the project in Wadi Rum.

Although this paper describes and analyses several dimensions of the crisis and focuses on two major players, the local community and the RSCN, the approach taken here is neither technical, nor managerial, and the purpose is not to give practical advice on how the crisis could have been averted or dealt with on the ground. Rather, casting a political and cultural look at the conflict, the argument is that the crisis was unavoidable because it had underlying causes that were neither technical nor managerial, therefore not falling within (or *only* within) RSCN's competence.<sup>2</sup> Typically, the planning and implementing agencies have tackled the whole question of the involvement of the local Bedouin community only from the socio-economic angle, as if economic well-being was able to dilute all cultural and identity claims. Neither at the planning, nor at the implementation level was any consideration given to the political and cultural implications of the project for the local community. At the planning stage, experts at the World Bank never asked if the Rum Bedouins were in a position to convey their views about their own development, and what were the competing conceptions of the status of the land on which the protected area was to be established. In the implementation phase, indigenous systems of knowledge acquisition and transmission about the environment were not incorporated, and little consideration was given to the local dynamics of social change. This paper argues that such political and cultural underpinnings are the fundamental lynchpins behind the crisis<sup>1</sup>.

### **Local Development of Tourism versus Establishment of a Special-Regulation Area**

The area of Wadi Rum is part of a vast depression extending from the border with Saudi Arabia – and beyond – to the south of the Petra basin. Its remarkable geological features – large valleys (*wadis* in Arabic) of pink or golden sand bordered by colourful sandstone mountain ranges – provided the background for several scenes of David Lean's classic movie *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Rum and its surroundings are home to several Bedouin sub-tribes, the Zalabyeh being the main one based in the valley of Rum proper. Even though many families still raise livestock, few are still nomadic, as they have followed government incentives and started sedentarising as of the 1970s. Today, Rum is a permanent settlement of roughly 1,200 inhabitants located at the southern end of the *wadi*.

Since the mid-1980s, the Rum area has been affected by the development of international tourism. The landscape, together with selected items of local history and of Bedouin traditions,

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<sup>1</sup> For sharing information and debating issues with her, the author would like to thank members of the local community in Wadi Rum; the staff of the RSCN, particularly Chris Johnson; Tony Howard, Di Taylor and Raouf Dabbas.

have all become major attractions for foreign tourists.<sup>3</sup> The number of visitors has rocketed: from a few dozen a year at the beginning of the 1980s, to over 70,000 in 1996, a peak year. Responding to an increasing demand created from outside the country (first by the European climbing community, then by Western tour operators and the travel media), the Bedouin inhabitants were initially left to respond with their own means and initiatives to provide services to foreign visitors. They received limited assistance from the authorities, beginning in 1984 when the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism (MT) set out to implement a modest tourism development plan for the area. In particular, it helped establish the Rum Tourism Co-operative (RTC), registered as an NGO, to share the benefits of the growing tourism-related activities by organising a rotation system of jeeps, camels, and Bedouin tents to transport and shelter the foreigners (Rowe et al. 1998). Otherwise, the MT introduced only minor changes to the management system that the Bedouins had spontaneously put in place. Things went on relatively smoothly between the inhabitants of Rum and the authorities; the MT had identified sites of interest for heritage tourists, either in connection with the history of Lawrence, or because of their archaeological significance. At the entrance of the Rum village, the MT also built a rest house to provide tourists with food and tent accommodation, and the relevant authorities asphalted the track road connecting Rum to the main Amman–Aqaba highway. Not all moves by the MT were taken after consulting with the Bedouins, but there was always scope for negotiation with the local representative of the MT, with the Aqaba Regional Authority (ARA) – which was the official body charged with development planning for the Aqaba governorate of which Rum was part – or with the relevant authorities in Amman.

Bedouin men worked as drivers and desert guides; they knew the best spots for taking pictures of the landscape, to admire sunset, or to camp around a fire at night. Some also had good skills to take out adventure-driven visitors, such as hikers and climbers. Bedouins were generally satisfied with their share in the economy of tourism. While some kept living in tents in the *Badia* to herd livestock, the majority now had their main residence in the village and were guiding tourists. The two activities were complementary within the economy of each household since there was a generational and gendered division of labour (Rowe et al. 1998). Be it as pastoralists or as providers of services to tourists, the Rum Bedouins felt that they were conducting their activities with minimal outside interference over their main resource: the land that they considered their *dirah*, or tribal territory, state owned since the 1920s, but on which they still claim rights of collective use.

The idea of establishing a reserve in Wadi Rum, as in other selected areas of Jordan, originated in 1978 when an IUCN mission to the kingdom recommended that the area's fragile desert ecosystem be protected. At the time, the main cause of environmental degradation was overgrazing. The development of tourism only added to the problem. The Jordanian government, later a signatory of the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), was unable to bear the costs of national conservation programmes, and gave jurisdiction over protected areas to the RSCN. The conservation NGO was established by a prominent businessman who also held several ministerial portfolios. It was created in 1966 after consulting with, and under the patronage of King Hussein, who gave it the mandate of protecting the country's wildlife and natural resources. It is nevertheless independent from state institutions and able to raise its own funds. The RSCN's special relationship with the late King, and with his wife Queen Noor, gives it 'a special standing and power in the larger pools of NGOs' (Brand 2001: 573). But it may also limit its role whenever the interests of conservation run against the interests of stronger government agencies.<sup>4</sup> In fact, until the World Bank project was implemented, the RSCN was not able to extend its jurisdiction over Wadi Rum because more powerful agents in

the public and private sectors saw opportunities for high financial gain in the area. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, even if Rum's inhabitants were barely aware of it, competition was running high for planning and controlling the expected development of the area as a tourism site. At its forefront were ARA and the MT, both 'unconcerned with the potential environmental impacts' of tourism, and 'more interested in promoting short-term, big-investor interests' (ibid.: 574), such as those of tour operators and the hotel industry. But time was not yet ripe for large-scale tourism investment and planning, as the political situation in the Middle East was considered too unstable. Therefore, competition took place mainly at the administrative level and little materialised on the ground, except that the RSCN was kept at bay.

In 1996, things took a dramatic turn. Tourism to the kingdom was on the rise following the 1994 peace treaty with Israel, prompting the World Bank to produce its Tourism Development Project for Jordan (Hazbun 2001). The general objectives of the project were to create 'the conditions for an increase in sustainable and environmentally sound tourism', and to 'realize tourism-related employment and income-generation potential' (World Bank 1996: 2). As for Wadi Rum in particular, the plan specified that:

- The protected area should be conserved
- The reserve should be developed as a site for eco-tourism
- Tourism flows should be well managed in order to prevent negative environmental impact
- Help should be provided for the local residents to share in the benefits of tourism through income generating activities.

The Jordanian MT was to co-ordinate the overall implementation of the project, while ARA was to directly implement the Wadi Rum component. Nevertheless, ARA was not competent to fulfil those aspects of the project concerned with an environmentally sound development of tourism, and the World Bank, consistent with its philosophy, sought private sector and civil society involvement. Therefore, ARA opened a tender competition that was won by the RSCN, finally able to exert a mandate over the area. But ARA had in fact succeeded in limiting this mandate by imposing its own designation for Wadi Rum: it was no longer to be called a 'protected' but a 'special-regulation' area, the argument being that its 560 square kilometres of uneven terrain were impossible to fence completely (Brand 2001: 576–577). This designation, which had clear legal implications, was a way of leaving the door open for ARA's own agenda over Wadi Rum, more geared towards fostering outside private investment than promoting conservation and the economic sustainability of the local community. On the other hand, the RSCN was now charged with tourism development, a mandate for which it had only limited experience,<sup>5</sup> and which had been formerly a prerogative of the MT in Wadi Rum.

Amidst the considerable regional and international excitement that followed the peace treaty with Israel, the World Bank plan was so hastily conceived that the local community in Wadi Rum was never properly consulted about its provisions.<sup>6</sup> Neither had its views on the protected area been heard at the time of IUCN visit in 1978, when consultation with local communities was not yet fashionable. As a result, members of the local community felt that implementation of the project was imposed upon them, even though they might agree with several of the provisions. But there is a second bone of contention with the local community. In the implementing documents it has produced to manage sustainable tourism in the protected area, the RSCN never presents the Bedouins as equal partners but as mere users of the area who

derive income from it through tourism and pastoralism and who should exert these activities under the umbrella and exclusive supervision of the site management agency. Only within this framework is consultation and participation envisioned, in particular through a steering committee whose members are elected. The RSCN, which has established the management unit of the Wadi Rum Protected Area, has indeed sought the participation of the local community but without much success. The claim of the Bedouins being about control, most have found offers to participate in management irrelevant.

### **Relations between the Players, and Where do the Bedouins Stand?**

The implementation of the project has triggered an intense conflict of interests between various local and national stakeholders. The four main governmental and non-governmental bodies involved are all playing against each other, sometimes entering into alliances, but shifting them as a new contention arises. On the one side, the RSCN has only been contracted and its mandate over Rum is temporary. In the near future, it should return tourism and environment management to ASEZA, ARA's successor.<sup>7</sup> The RSCN has good reasons to be worried. It has failed in its repeated attempts to force ASEZA to pass regulations to safeguard Wadi Rum along the same lines as other protected areas in the kingdom, in particular by permanently banning hotel construction, or the organisation of large scale, environmentally damaging events such as an international marathon, held yearly. It has also failed in several attempts to drop provisions in the original plan that are not directly related to environment conservation, but that are detrimental to the economic interests of the local community and more favourable to outside investors. Clearly the agendas of both organisations do not coincide either on conservation issues or on the priority given to the development of the local community. On the other side, the RSCN has not succeeded in preventing regular interference from the MT in matters of tourism management. This has happened because the RTC, deemed the grass-root level representative organisation, and therefore the prime local partner of the RSCN for implementing the project, has called upon the Minister of Tourism himself to resist the reorganisation of the previous tourism management system which the RSCN has found to be environmentally damaging.

Since ASEZA is not directly managing the reserve, the Bedouins in Rum are largely unaware of its current decisions and future intentions. On the other hand, the Bedouins have to deal face-to-face with the reserve management team put in place by the RSCN, which is constantly on site. Tensions between the RSCN and the local community relate to the practicalities of reorganising tourism management and to the enforcement of rules for environmental conservation. It is not always easy for the locals to understand who takes the decisions and which ones and, in fact, the Bedouins often blame the RSCN for provisions made by ASEZA. For a long time, and because their relations on the ground were tense, a majority of Rum Bedouins saw the RSCN as part of a global plan to evict them from their traditional land or, at best, to deprive them from using its resources as they wished, despite the fact that the RSCN stood by the Bedouins to resist the planned relocation of their village outside the boundaries of the reserve. But the relations of the RSCN with the local Bedouins, who never presented a united front, was characterised by mutual misunderstanding and an incapacity to communicate effectively. Things have improved recently, as both sides have come to acknowledge that their common interest is in resisting the exclusive jurisdiction of ASEZA over Wadi Rum, and the expected diversion of financial benefits to outside private investors. In fine, it can be said that the management structure, in which the RSCN and ASEZA are to work in partnership, has greatly impeded the relations of the RSCN with the local people and its effective operation in

Rum.

If one is to go beyond managerial questions, however, tensions between the local community on one side, and the two implementing agencies on the other, can be said to stem from the location of the Rum Bedouin community within the Jordanian power structure and within a system of relations with developers and conservationists. These dimensions of the crisis cannot be solved at the technical level of a project implementation but should have been tackled well upstream. Taking a view 'from above', Laurie Brand, an American political scientist well versed in Jordanian politics, wrote an informed critical account of the crisis in Wadi Rum, looking at competition between the various stakeholders and at what went wrong with the involvement of local participation in project planning and implementation, despite World Bank directives (Brand 2001). Brand concludes that supra-national funding agencies, while openly promoting grass-root level participation as an avenue towards democratisation and economic liberalisation, lack contextual analysis of civil society actors and the power system in a given polity, especially when the government is of a centralised and authoritarian nature, as in Jordan.

This over-centralisation means that, even though they may have their own civil society organisations such as the RTC in Rum, the rural Bedouins cannot express their claims directly to the power elite, or in any local or regional political fora. Wadi Rum village is too small to have a municipal council of its own, and Aqaba is such a 'special zone' that the town council has been disbanded so that a certain view of economic and urban development could be imposed top-down directly from the cabinet of the Prime Minister. A look at tribal politics also supports Brand's conclusions and shows that national fora are not more accessible to Rum Bedouins, despite the democratisation process launched by King Hussein in the early 1990s. The members of the Zalabyeh sub-tribe who live in Rum are not related by blood to the Howaytat, the largest Bedouin tribe in Southern Jordan. This tribe is itself split into two rival factions, and the one that has managed to send an MP to parliament to represent the Southern Bedouins is not the one to which the Zalabyeh pay allegiance for historical reasons. Therefore, the only possible leverage is in the Royal Palace, meaning that the Bedouins need the mediation of well-connected individuals and NGOs based in Amman who see their interests in this.<sup>8</sup> It has to be added that the rural Bedouins are not used to openly challenge the Jordanian and foreign representatives of modern authority, especially when they use titles such as 'engineer', 'director', or 'doctor' (see Chatelard 2002). But it does not mean that they consent simply because they do not directly voice opposition and discontent to middle-level or high-ranking officials, or to the World Bank experts that monitor the project.

In evaluating the Bedouins' capacity to express their views about the project of protected area, one has also to account for their weak leadership structure. Most relations with state institutions have stopped being mediated by the old men who used to be considered leaders (*shuyûkh*). It is now the young adult males, who are literate and who derive their income and local standing from their involvement in tourism-related activities, that have taken most instances of collective decision away from the elders. Nevertheless, members of this new social group have not been able to agree on leadership among themselves, a feature of the current process of social adjustment they are undergoing. This is also due to the fact that the various agencies involved with Rum Bedouins in matters of development have not always selected the same local partners as being representative. Various individuals therefore try to seize the opportunity to be recognised as leaders by public institutions, which does not mean that their representativeness is acknowledged locally, hence a series of misunderstandings. The conflict

over the protected area has deepened the existing factionalism among the extended families in Rum, and it has impeded the emergence of consensus and concerted actions among the Zalabyeh.

Partly because of the structure of the Jordanian political system, and partly because of their internal divisions, Rum Bedouins have found that access to those who decide upon the future of the area they call home is stalled. Their main recourse is to protest on the ground, actively or passively resisting the implementation of the project, for example by openly disregarding the new regulations but also by boycotting the consultation and information meetings that the RSCN organises. This might be seen as obstruction or refusal to co-operate, but it is also a way of expressing dissatisfaction when it cannot be voiced elsewhere. Several of the Bedouins who display a negative attitude towards the protected area do in fact agree with a number of provisions in the project. But the point that they are trying to make is that they have been ignored, insufficiently consulted in its drafting and implementation, and not put on an equal standing with outsiders who now decide on the future of the area and of its inhabitants.

It can finally be argued that, contrary to the stated objectives of the World Bank to foster the devolution of power to civil-society actors, the control and management system adopted for Wadi Rum Protected Area remain coherent with the 'embedded authoritarianism' of the Jordanian bureaucracy where 'power and control are embedded in bureaucratic processes, masked beneath the veneer of visible democratic institutions and practices' (Wiktorowicz 2002: 111). At the national or local levels, constituencies cannot choose the system, democratisation (or participation) are imposed from the top down, rulers have veto power over any assembly decision, and they seek acquiescence of the people through the allocation of scarce resources over which they have a monopoly. But 'without avenues of political participation, those affected by the changes [are] unable to voice their concerns through formal political structures and instead [carry] their grievances into the streets' (ibid.: 113).

### **Environmental Knowledge and Dynamics of Change**

There is a general consensus among conservationists and the Jordanian authorities about the need to protect the natural environment of Wadi Rum that has been damaged or over-exploited. The village is deemed 'unsightly', with unfinished concrete houses, electricity poles and litter in the streets. Innumerable vehicle tracks criss-cross the sandy valleys, destroying both the view and wildlife. There is also a serious problem of littering and human waste in the desert, in particular around tourist camps, but also in Bedouin encampments. Large desert mammals have fled far away from Rum, wild birds are rarely sighted, and overgrazing has created adverse effects on the flora. Pastoral as much as tourism-related activities are identified as the causes of the very serious environmental degradation of this fragile desert ecosystem. It is not for social scientists to discuss the validity of this claim and the various measures the RSCN and ASEZA have adopted to reverse, or at least limit, the trend. But they may view as problematic the fact that local dynamics of knowledge transmission about protection of the environment is given no attention, or that the national decision-making process about conservation does not go unquestioned.

Classic studies of nomadic pastoralism have noted that herds are the most important mediating vector between nomads and their environment (Wilkinson 2000: 45). In previous decades, when overgrazing appeared to be the most problematic issue to solve in the steppe, some anthropologists came to realise that pastoral tribes in the Arabian Peninsula had always had



notions of 'protected areas' under communal ownership and management (Draz 1969). In the Syrian *Badia*, the authorities subsequently revived the so-called *hema* system for rangeland management, and this has proved a success (Chatty 1998: 29). Other works have confirmed that Bedouins have a knowledge of their environment which, however limited and experimental, does not go against modern, scientific conservation practices, provided a certain balance is found between available resources and needed income (Hobbs 1989). In Jordan, as in many other contexts, this balance has been disrupted in recent decades because of state-sponsored policies of settlement and economic development, and the introduction of technological devices (Lancaster 1981, Barham and Mensching 1988, Dutton et al. 1998, Mundy and Musallam 2000).

Much remains to be written about the new activities in the steppes that have replaced, or that complement, pastoralism. Tourism is one of them, where Bedouins have recycled their know-how as herders into guiding skills. In Wadi Rum, tourists are now the mediating factor between Bedouins and the *Badia*, that they have started calling 'the desert' (Chatelard 2003). With tourism, the landscape and the view have assumed a financial value by becoming marketable items. All the Bedouins who work with tourists in Rum have heard disappointed visitors complaining about the garbage left around encampments, graffiti on the rocks, and other damage to the environment. They have realised that they get less money from visitors if they take them to spend the night in a place that they find dirty or where the view is spoiled by too many jeep tracks. Therefore, protection of the environment has long been an issue in Rum, albeit under a different vocabulary. Since well before RSCN's involvement, there has been a recurrent debate going on between those who support 'improving the views' and those who do not see why they should change their habit of throwing Coca Cola cans out of the windows of their jeeps. Members of the former group are a handful of skilled desert and climbing guides. They have managed to take business initiatives and to limit their reliance on middlemen. Their knowledge of the desert or mountain environment and their professional know-how is highly valued by clients and contractors, mainly foreign tour operators specialising in outdoors activities or adventure tourism. Despite having personally experienced the shift from nomadic pastoralism to sedentarisation and tourism-related activities, members of this group can still directly relate to the steppe as their main economic asset. They have spontaneously stopped littering and have started telling visitors not to uproot plants or draw graffiti on the rocks. More important, they are passing these attitudes on to others in the community: spouses, children, or those they employ as cooks, guides or drivers. Refraining from driving off track does not yet seem to be on their agenda, but one could say that they are in the process of adopting attitudes and behaviours that demonstrate their understanding of the values of landscape conservation (if not biodiversity) for sustaining tourism, which is their very own livelihood.

Although, to a number of old-time observers of Rum, it is impressive to see how this attitude is spreading (albeit certainly not fast enough), it has been ignored by the current project which does not take into account how knowledge and know-how about the environment are acquired and transmitted locally (including the adoption and reinterpretation of modern scientific knowledge). Rather, the current Tourism Management Plan (TMP) makes provisions for ecologists to train Bedouin guides and rangers on biodiversity conservation, and to develop material for schools where the teaching has generally alienated Bedouin children from their traditional environment. This is not to say that the RSCN has ignored local knowledge. On the contrary, Bedouins were interviewed throughout the baseline ecological surveys for information, and employed in the research teams, and the RSCN's conservation programme

incorporates local knowledge as far as possible.<sup>9</sup> But the issue here is not about how much of the local knowledge will be incorporated in the training programme, but about supporting and speeding up the pace of indigenous social change, rather than simply importing training methods. In other instances, it has been shown that the transmission of elements of modern scientific knowledge to traditional, mostly illiterate communities cannot be effectively achieved outside of the indigenous system of knowledge transmission (Hobart 1993).<sup>10</sup> In the case of Wadi Rum, it is important to enhance the process by which individuals become aware of the value of landscape conservation, and build upon it to introduce the notion of biodiversity conservation. This is the true meaning of 'capacity-building', implying that individuals and communities do possess capacities that may need to be developed to meet the needs of a changing world. If conceived otherwise, 'capacity-building' may result in effective disempowerment and alienation of entire communities, and in the 'growth of their ignorance' (Hobart 1993).

Furthermore, if one is to look at the dynamics of change in Wadi Rum, it is questionable whether the Bedouins can be identified as bearing the main responsibility for environment degradation. The point here is not to negate their direct responsibility as agents, but to ask why their aspirations should be subsumed under national priorities for environmental conservation, considering that these shifting priorities are the main cause of degradation. In its TMP, 'national necessities' appear to provide the RSCN with an unquestionable justification for exerting a conservation mandate over Wadi Rum and, at times, for placing the interests of conservation above those of the local community (if they should ever be separated is another debate). And yet, the current ecological situation and visual aspect of the Wadi Rum area are the products of previous projects of socio-economic development that have been *imposed* on the Bedouins by the Jordanian state itself, under different national priorities. Let's not forget that we are not in a democratic system. In the past, the concerns of the state were more political and less economic or environmental, and the rhetoric was not about sustainability, but about security in the steppe and modernisation of the Bedouins. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the modernisation approach posited that Bedouins had to become settled and to de-tribalise through state-sponsored agricultural projects and education (Bocco 2000). In Jordan, choosing the soft approach towards forced sedentarisation, the state provided the Bedouins with cheap cement and electricity to prompt them to set up villages. More recently, governmental agencies brought in the telephone and running water. Other public institutions subsidised water and animal feed for goat-breeders in the *Badia*, leading to an increase in the number of goats and degradation of habitat (Rowe et al. 1998). In the 1980s, the MT assisted in developing tourism in a form that is today considered unsustainable. Upstream, donor agencies have set the development agenda(s) of the Jordanian state for the last 50 years.

Rural Bedouin communities are not helpless people who can be seen as having suffered from government imposed programmes: they have been quick to instrumentalise them for individual purposes, be it education and social mobility, or the enlargement of herds and financial enrichment. As a conservationist informally put it, 'their traditional knowledge of sustainable grazing regimes, gained over centuries of nomadic existence, went out of the window in the face of short-term gains'. This has also happened with tourism development, and in both cases it has been at the expenses of the environment. However, in modern Jordan, rural, illiterate communities were never able to exercise their free choice over their own development, and they have been merely reacting to social change imposed from above. Therefore, identifying any marginal social group as the direct cause of environmental degradation falls short of assessing the real responsibilities, such as the changing agendas of donor agencies, or the

shifting national priorities of governments. In the long term, these are incoherent policies, and the rhetoric on 'national necessities' should not be left unquestioned by civil society actors including those that implement development projects. In a country like Jordan, 'national necessity' is too often called upon to conceal the absence of democratic processes, or the selling of development models by a ruling elite to populations that do not fully grasp the implications of such projects. And isn't democratisation and empowerment of civil society actors precisely what the World Bank is aiming at through its various development projects? Here is a contradiction that should perhaps be kept in mind.

### **Can Claims over Tribal Lands be Disregarded?**

In line with the objectives of the World Bank project, the RSCN holds the view that increasing the revenues from eco-tourism will make up for the planned banning of pastoral activities. The whole philosophy of eco-tourism is also to target a smaller number of consumers, but with high purchasing power. Therefore, fewer visitors should not mean less income for the community. This is how, in the long run, the project should be made economically and environmentally sustainable. Despite the internal coherence of this approach, it does not seem to be applicable in the case of Rum, as several tribes have refused to co-operate together over its implementation, mainly because they disagree over territorial issues.

Individuals affected by development projects may have needs that are not strictly socio-economic, but of a more political nature and linked to issues of group identity preservation. In the case of the Bedouins, this preservation is intrinsically linked with the community's rights over land use and with the fact that each tribal group is attached to one territory. When drawing the boundaries of the protected area, no attention was given to the several tribal territories that were overlapping with it. Moreover, the World Bank Project, supported by ASEZA, made provisions for a single gateway where all tourism operations should be managed. The RSCN saw this imposition on the tribal structure of the Rum area as a potential for tension but was unable to oppose the creation of a visitor centre, 7km before the village of Rum. It was eventually left to deal with this legacy, and unsuccessfully attempted to apply a managerial approach to a problem that should have been dealt with at another level.

Seven Bedouin sub-tribes now have all or part of their territories within the protected area. Long before the introduction of tourism and of protected areas, a series of factors had modified their relationship to their *dirahs*, starting with the establishment of the modern state of Jordan under British Mandate in 1923. While a border was soon drawn with newly-established Saudi Arabia, cutting across several of the *dirahs*, most Bedouin territories became state-owned (Bocco 1987, 1989). This does not mean that tribal territories disappeared, even though they are not recognised in the modern legislation. In the restricted area of Wadi Rum, the state intervened very little in the development of the *Badia* and the members of the Zalabyeh sub-tribe could use their *dirah* and manage access to its natural resources according to the traditional system of collective and shared access rights over pastures, natural water springs and reservoirs and some new resources such as tourism. In other cases, large-scale state-sponsored agricultural projects were launched on the territory of neighbouring sub-tribes. In the 1970s, this is what happened to the Zawaydeh in the area of Diseh, 15km northeast of Wadi Rum. To compensate them for the loss of most of their *dirah*, on which they could not continue to practise pastoralism, the authorities sunk several artesian wells so that the Bedouins could cultivate their own small plots. The Jordanian state is therefore the owner of most of the lands (except private-owned village land) that have been included within the

protected area, and Bedouins do not contest this ownership, all the more that there is a general consensus to recognise *de facto* the existence of the traditional system of resource use over tribal territories, and to compensate for its loss.

The RSCN has adopted a zoning plan for the protected area, defining an intensive use area that concentrates all the main natural or historical sites that tourists visit when in Wadi Rum.<sup>11</sup> Within this area, three tourism co-operatives, set up by three Bedouin sub-tribes, should soon function under a single reserve management. They should share in the same rotation system of cars and camels, with activities starting from the new visitor centre. Not surprisingly, members of the Zalabyeh from Rum hold quite the reverse view and are ready to obstruct the plan. Seventy-five percent of the land on which the protected area was established is on their *dirah*, just as the new visitor centre and *all* of the intensive use zone. It is true that the Zalabyeh have benefited from tourism development much more than any of their neighbours. But, on the other hand, tribesmen from the Zawaydeh, the largest other sub-tribe concerned, have access to water and agriculture, all resources that are scarce in Rum. Only recently did they try to redirect part of the flow of visitors towards their village by setting up their own tourism co-operative, but taking most of the visitors to the area of Rum, encroaching on Zalabyeh's territory. This has resulted in conflicts that both communities have been unable to solve: customary law, widely used in Jordan, does not make provision for tourism-related conflicts over land use. Yet, tribal boundaries are known to be flexible, and use of resources in the territory of another group is common practice as long as it can (at least theoretically) be reciprocated. If tribal boundaries are becoming so fixed with tourism, it is because competing sub-tribes have not yet found a way of reciprocating tourism-related resources located on their respective *dirahs*.

Neither the World Bank nor ASEZA have been able to take a holistic approach, integrating both ecological and social parameters, so as to help local communities adapt their system of reciprocal resource use to the new economic context.<sup>12</sup> The RSCN has attempted to mediate between tribes over critical territorial issues because it was forced to, but the original disregard for traditional claims over land use has fuelled conflict between tribal groups and may jeopardise the whole project. Indeed, the prospect for the Wadi Rum Protected Area is that it will soon fall under the direct jurisdiction of ASEZA. Despite having set up a Commission for Environment, there are clear signs that biodiversity conservation and sustainability of the local community are not among its priorities for Rum. The RSCN will withdraw, and the local communities, no less divided and no more empowered than before, will be left to fend for themselves in front of an agency whose primary aim is to facilitate big international investments. It is an open secret that some major actors in the tourism industry are already lining up to secure land concessions in Wadi Rum.

### **Conclusion: Bedouins as Indigenous Peoples?**

At the managerial level, the Rum case certainly exemplifies the failure of the top-down approach to resource management in protected areas. At the institutional level, it provides an illustration of the warning statement an IUCN handbook about tourism management in protected areas thought useful to make in its introduction: 'protected area planners and managers (...) operate within legal, political, economic and cultural contexts that greatly limit their freedom' (Eagles et al. 2002: xv). To bridge the managerial and institutional levels, it can be said that, when several public and civil-society agencies have overlapping jurisdiction and diverging agendas over a protected area, local community participation will be harder to

achieve and environmental protection objectives more difficult to attain. Still, it is the contention of this paper that, given the political and social contexts, conflicts of interest over the Wadi Rum reserve were inevitable and could therefore not be resolved through formalised processes such as negotiation, arbitration, or improved communication between stakeholders.

And yet, at the level of policy planning, there might be a lesson to be learnt from the Wadi Rum case. It is not enough to provide for community-based participation in politically authoritarian settings where democratic mechanisms are not efficiently in place to allow local communities to share equally in the decision-making process about the establishment of a protected area. In Western democracies, in principle, civil society actors have at hand a variety of legal means that allow them to lobby for their interests. In authoritarian systems, communities can only resort to forms of resistance: using passive or active obstructive strategies, and other 'weapons of the weak'. To those familiar with the literature on Jordan, it may appear unorthodox to call Bedouins 'the weak', the Jordanian political system being traditionally described as an alliance of the ruling monarchy with the tribes. But it may well be that things are changing, or that they were always more complex.

In Jordan, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the twentieth century ruling elite and the urban middle class have appropriated the vision of British and French Mandate officials, adapting it to the nationalist credo, and have 'declared nomadic pastoralism a backward way of life antithetical to social and national development' (Mundy and Musallem 2000: 1). From the late period of Ottoman rule to modern independent Arab states, the aim of the central powers has been to control territory, settle the Bedouins and, at a later stage, modernise them through education and projects of economic development devised by international experts who shared the same vision (for the late Ottoman period see Rogan 1999; for modern Jordan see Bocco 1989, 2000, Bocco and Tell 1994). Today, for the Arab general public, mainly of urban background, Bedouins who still live in the *Badia* are an uneducated, backward social group to be modernised (Bocco and Chatelard 2001). This is a view widely shared by the Jordanian technocrats who staff public and civil-society development agencies, including those involved in Wadi Rum. On the other hand, the ruling monarchy in Jordan has changed priorities in the 1980s, and has started favouring the emerging urban elite at the expense of rural Bedouin tribes (Hamarnah 1987). The alliance of the technocrats with the Palace was reinforced after the new king Abdullah II took over from his father in 1999 (El-Said 2002). All these elements put some groups of rural Bedouins at a special disadvantage in Jordan, and threaten their way of life and their heritage, a concept that might be difficult to grasp as it is comprised of mostly non-material elements (cultural practices, customary institutions, traditional knowledge, and a certain type of relationship to ancestral land and to natural resources).

It is now widely acknowledged that coercive systems of environmental protection are rarely effective, and the 1996 World Bank project for developing sustainable tourism in Jordan integrates several of the lessons learned in Africa and elsewhere that have led to developing the concept of co-management of natural resources. Nevertheless, in the case of Wadi Rum, the location of the various stakeholders at very unequal levels in the Jordanian power structure has impeded any possibility of effective co-management. In practice, the local Bedouin community was marginalised in the decision-making and implementation processes, and its dynamic of social change, its identity and even its collective self-esteem were all negatively affected. This is why it can be said that the World Bank project fails to include the latest recommendations from international organisations concerned with human development and/or the protection of the environment, and lacks a serious examination of the status of the local community, that

could certainly qualify under the category of Indigenous Peoples devised by a series of international organisations, among them IUCN and the World Bank. Indeed, Rum Bedouins possess several of the characteristics listed in the Bank's definition of Indigenous Peoples (World Bank 1991). They have a strong sense of collective identity and specific customary social institutions; they are attached to their traditional territory; they continue to derive income from resources located in it; their way of life is perceived by the dominant society as being inferior; they have a limited capacity of expressing their aspirations; development policies that affect them are decided without their consent; and therefore they are a vulnerable social group whose rights are threatened. Yet it is rather puzzling that the scholarly literature on indigenous peoples rarely, if ever, mentions the Bedouins who still inhabit the steppe areas of the Arabian Peninsula. Nor are they included in the yearbook published by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. The reason for this might be that Bedouin groups such as the ones in southern Jordan have not always been marginalised, but are in the process of *becoming* indigenous peoples as members of the dominant society, despite taking pride in their nomadic ancestry, become more and more alienated from Bedouin ways of life, values and modes of production. And indeed, Jordan's Bedouins are an illustration that 'indigenous is a not a static concept' (Gray 1997: 16), and that social groups who were favoured under certain historical circumstances may become disadvantaged in a changing context.

The example of Wadi Rum, and of other World Bank assisted projects currently in the pipeline especially in the Jordan Valley, show that it is high time to reconsider the socio-economic and cultural status of rural Bedouin groups in Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East, and to make sure that the directives designed to mitigate the adverse effects of development projects are applied. Then, perhaps, projects aiming at biodiversity conservation *cum* human development will include mechanisms that empower marginalised Bedouin communities, that protect their rights, livelihood, knowledge systems and cultural specificity alongside the desert ecosystem that they have shaped and that is intrinsically part of their identity as a group. Indigenous, aboriginal and community-owned protected areas are a growing trend, and in several parts of the world, communities now develop communally managed reserves to generate income in ways that are compatible with their lifestyle (Beltran 2000). Why not the Bedouins?

## Notes

1. This is indeed an unusual situation, as the technical literature that offers guidelines for establishing sustainable tourism in protected areas only considers instances where tourism development comes as a second step after the reserve has been set up, or cases where both are being planned and developed together (Eagles et al. 2002). Even if every conservation case should be viewed as unique, it has to be acknowledged that the RSCN had few examples to draw upon for inspiration.
2. In the RSCN, as in any other case where the policy of an organisation is being analysed from a sociological perspective, the personal beliefs and intentions of individuals within the organisation have to be distinguished from the actual policy of the institution, largely determined by the context in which it functions. The critiques that can be addressed to RSCN in dealing with the local community in Wadi Rum may reveal little about the philosophy of the organisation and of its members, and a lot more about the national and international systems that constrain their actions.
3. See Chatelard 2003 for discussion of competing representations of geographical space, Bedouin culture and local history in the context of the 'touristification' of Wadi Rum.
4. Without dwelling at length on the particulars of Jordanian politics, it should be noted that patronage is one of the main dynamics behind the functioning of all major NGOs in Jordan, as behind any other civil society actor (El-Said 2002). Since the death of King Hussein in 1999, this trend has been partly changing, allowing the RSCN in particular to challenge the government directly and successfully on contentious conservation issues.
5. A tourism unit had been established within the RSCN to manage the Dana Wildlands Nature Reserve, a project launched in 1995, coupling biodiversity conservation with community-based market-driven income generation schemes and tourism programmes (Irani and Johnson 1998, 2000). But the context in Dana was markedly different from the one in Rum, in particular in that there was no previous involvement of the local community in tourism-related activities, and that no other institutional stakeholder was involved. Moreover, the number of visitors to Dana was in no way comparable to that of Wadi Rum.
6. The anthropologist sent by the World Bank to give expert advice on the local social structure and on the adequacy of the project with the aspirations of the local community spent one day in Rum. Only a handful of so-called 'representative' individuals were briefly asked about their opinions on establishing a protected area and re-organising tourism management. In the final project by the World Bank, diverging local views were simply discarded and it was stated that 'the local community was consulted and agreed upon' a number of provisions.
7. In August 2000, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) replaced both ARA and the Municipality of Aqaba. It answers directly to the Prime Minister, and has regulatory, administrative, fiscal and economic responsibilities, with the declared aim of facilitating investors setting up and operating businesses throughout the zone ([www.aqabazone.com](http://www.aqabazone.com)).
8. This is indeed what happened in the case of the original planned relocation of the Rum community in a new settlement outside the boundaries of the reserve. The RSCN and another Amman-based environmental NGO (The Friends of the Environment) backed the Bedouins, and, each using their own channels with the Palace, managed to freeze the relocation plan, at least temporarily. This is one instance in which the RSCN expected to gain the trust of the Bedouins, yet it did not solve its problems with the

- Rum community, of a more structural nature.
9. Information provided by Chris Johnson (RSCN).
  10. A good example of this process in Wadi Rum is child malnutrition, as one aspect of community health care. Even though a clinic has been operating for several years in the area, originally as a mobile unit, and physicians have spared no efforts to raise the awareness of mothers in the local community, the prevalence of child malnutrition has not declined. This is not due to the economic situation of the Bedouins, which has generally improved, but to the inadequacy of the training methods with the way knowledge about child care is transmitted and legitimised (communication by Dr Batarshah, on assignment in Wadi Rum in October 2001).
  11. Zoning is not yet very contentious in Rum, as provisions for banning pastoral activities have not been implemented. On the other hand, only a few members of the local community, who deliver individual and high quality service to climbers and hikers, have contested the zoning plan which controls access to remote wilderness areas.
  12. One suggestion is that all five tribal territories could have been considered as a single geographical/social unit within which exchange was to be negotiated with the mediation of RSCN.

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