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Hamilton-Smith, Elery

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Review: Conservation is Our Government now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea

By Paige West

Reviewed by Elery Hamilton-Smith
Charles Sturt University, Australia

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West, Paige. *Conservation is Our Government now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea*.
Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. 320 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3748-5. \$22.95 (pbk).

Recently a colleague from a conservation organization said to me, "We find it very difficult to communicate with and understand the people of Papua New Guinea." I could only respond, "The people of Papua New Guinea find it very difficult to communicate with and understand your bureaucratic euphemisms."

Paige West has taken the time and developed the sensitivity to genuinely understand and communicate with the people of Maimafu - a settlement in the South-Eastern Highlands. She commences her book by discussing the extent to which Maimafu is not truly a single, timeless Papuan village, but a place created by tidy-minded colonists who gave the name to a mountain space with a number of small settlements. Both the inhabitants and the colonists, followed by generations of neo-colonialists, have since given that place its contemporary and still-changing culture.

She focuses upon the relationships between the people of Maimafu and a particularly well meaning but naive international conservationist organization. Not surprisingly, both end by being deeply disappointed by the results, or perhaps more accurately, the non-results of their interaction.

Genuine partnership has never been established. Maimafu has provided the gifts of genuine friendship and trust along with various valuable and tangible gifts of hospitality. In return they have received words, words and more words. The project offered to them came under the label of an Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP). The project did its best to impose conservation, but the only development has been the development of coffee growing initiated and implemented by the village people themselves. They remain without a clean water supply, wellness-based health services, adequate

education services, and or even basic infrastructural support. At least Maimafu is remote enough and lucky enough to have escaped the worst of the fundamentalist missionaries who have systematically destroyed so much of the good that is inherent in Papuan Society.

This book should be essential reading for anyone working at grass roots level in Papua New Guinea.

Elery Hamilton-Smith <elery@alphalink.com.au>, Adjunct Professor, School of Environmental and Information Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Albury, New South Wales, Australia.