

# Philosopher brings human values to environmental decisions

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When Conservation International began working with one of Indonesia's largest energy companies on an environmentally conscious development plan two years ago, the groups looked to a philosopher for guidance.

Sahotra Sarkar, a professor at The University of Texas at Austin and leader in the study of environmental ethics, worked with the [conservationists](#) and energy producers to develop strategies that balance economic development and biodiversity protection while respecting the needs of indigenous people.

"We really are talking about people's values," Sarkar says of his approach to environmental questions, "not just facts."

As the planet prepares to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Earth Day this month, Sarkar is among a growing group of scholars and environmentalists promoting the "social ecology" model of conservation that puts local values at the center in any decisions.

As a philosopher, Sarkar was first drawn to this idea by his interest in decision theory, which draws from mathematics and focuses on the values and variables people consider in making choices.

Sarkar rejects the so-called fortress model of preservation popular throughout much of the 20th century that espoused putting a fence around a region and making it off limits. And he dismisses the idea that [environmentalists](#) from developed countries know what's best for

habitats around the world and can impose those values on less-developed regions.

"Local residents are privileged stakeholders," Sarkar, who earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, wrote in an article on the ethics and politics of conservation published last month in the journal [Biological Conservation](#).

"Given that not every biotic feature can reasonably be targeted for protection, what we decide to protect must be a cultural choice," he wrote.

Such cultural choices vary among regions. And Sarkar's laboratory — part of the Department of Philosophy and Section of [Integrative Biology](#) — has created software that lets local stakeholders develop conservation plans based on their values and needs. Former graduate students Michael Ciarleglio and Trevon Fuller were instrumental in developing the program.

"It's important to have scholars with Sahotra's philosophical ability working on problems with such practical significance," says Philosophy Department Chair David Sosa. "He can approach his subject matter from so many different angles, and with so many tools, that he's able to make distinctive contributions. His teaching, which builds on that, is also excellent."

In Central Texas, Sarkar has worked closely with landowners and state officials to help protect endangered warblers and salamanders, among other species.

In Equatorial Guinea, he and colleagues have proposed a conservation plan that promotes biodiversity among plants, primates and birds in abandoned cocoa plantations.

And in Indonesia, he worked with Conservation International, PT Medco Energi and government officials to develop strategies to protect much of the habitat in the remote Meruake district. The company owns the rights to plant tree crops for paper pulp and biofuel and build associated infrastructure there.

Initially, Sarkar and the others aimed to protect at least 30 percent of each of the distinct habitats in the Meruake savanna and rainforest. Ultimately, they developed models that could protect 50 percent of the region from deforestation and development. The company is considering those models.

About a half dozen local communities need to maintain access to that land to hunt, gather food, build shelters and visit their sacred sites. Their needs were at the heart of the different proposals that Sarkar developed.

"Sahotra brought a mathematical brain, to the extent that philosophy is mathematics," says Chris Margules, vice president of the Asia Pacific Field Division at Conservation International. "He also brought an ethic that says we should live as sustainably as we can, given that sustainability really is a metaphor for how we should live our lives."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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