Nature Reserves and Authoritarian Rule in Egypt: Embedded Autonomy Revisited

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Nature Reserves and Authoritarian Rule in Egypt
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This article explores how Egypt’s system of authoritarian rule initially fostered and subsequently undermined nature conservation efforts. During the 1990s, international donors and local scientists established a well-managed network of nature preserves in the South Sinai region of Egypt. The concentration of state authority in a few executive institutions, such as the military and centrally appointed provincial governors, facilitated the creation of an effective management regime. However, these achievements have come under threat. Executive institutions charged with tourism development have challenged the authority of the protected areas division, and the capacity of the protected areas network has been undermined through systematic underinvestment and diversion of park revenues. In addition, local Bedouin communities that benefited from effectively managed parks remain politically marginalized. Although reformers in the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East can build environmental capacities, some of the economic and political logics associated with authoritarian rule limit the sustainability of these endeavors.

Keywords: authoritarianism; Egypt; conservation; tourism; protected areas; autonomy

How do we explain exceptional moments of environmental policy reform in the authoritarian states of the Middle East? And what can the limitations of these reforms tell us about opportunities for effective environmental governance in the region? This article explores how Egypt's particular system of authoritarian rule first fostered and then impeded the effective management of protected areas. Until recently, Egypt’s protected areas in the Sinai Peninsula were widely regarded as exceptionally well-managed and well-funded parks for the Middle East region (Goldstone, 2000). Over the past few years, however, the limits of these conservation efforts have become evident. Drawing on work by Peter Evans (1995) and

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others, I analyze variation in management effectiveness for protected areas along two dimensions—organizational autonomy and social embeddedness. Based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt, I argue that the economic and political logics associated with authoritarian rule have, over time, undermined both bureaucratic autonomy and the ability of Egypt’s conservation sector to sustain beneficial linkages with key groups in society and the state.

Egypt has increasingly been seen as a regional model for other Arab states in terms of protected-area management and biodiversity protection (Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs, 2002). Yet studies of public policy making in the Arab states of the Middle East, and of environmental governance in particular, have lagged behind analyses of environmental governance in other developing and transitional regions such as Northeast Asia, Latin America, and the former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. This article aims to begin rectifying the lack of research on environmental politics in the Middle East and North Africa. Egypt’s experience establishing a network of nature preserves suggests more broadly how specific forms of authoritarian rule shape the building of environmental institutions in the region.

In the 1980s, local conservation scientists and international environmental organizations helped pressure the Egyptian government to declare the first protected areas in South Sinai. During the 1990s, the European Union supported a series of projects to help establish and manage an expanding network of protected areas (mahmiyaat) in South Sinai, despite a state-sponsored boom in coastal tourism and real estate investment along the Gulf of Aqaba. The emerging protectorates division, later renamed the Nature Conservation Sector (NCS), controlled its expenditures and revenues directly and enjoyed significant autonomy from other governmental authorities. Management activities were characterized by dynamic leadership, long-term retention of rangers, and cultivation of direct relationships with provincial governors, Bedouin tribes, and tourism developers.

These gains, however, came under significant threat after 2000. Although the number of designated protected areas continued to increase, reaching 27, the government systematically underinvested in the protected-area network, resulting in significant shortages for operation, maintenance, and inspection activities (NCS, 2006). The financial and organizational autonomy of the NCS was subsumed under the cumbersome personnel and financial control systems common to Egypt’s central ministries (Child, 2006). As significantly, the NCS proved less influential in coastal land-use decisions, particularly with regard to the current explosion of coastal tourism development along the Red Sea.

To explain these reversals of fortune for Egypt’s emerging protected-area regime, this article revisits the notion of “embedded autonomy” (Evans, 1995). Evans argued that instances of successful policy reform result from the creation of coherent, competent administrative agencies, which are embedded in broader social networks through
formal and informal linkages. I argue that some of these conditions held in South Sinai in the 1990s, resulting in the temporary emergence of a relatively effective, autonomous regime for nature conservation. However, organizational autonomy was circumscribed when EU funding ceased and the central environmental agency subsumed the NCS within its purview. In addition, coastal land-use decisions were increasingly channeled to government agencies mandated to promote tourism development. The informal linkages that local scientists had forged with international environmental networks, and that park managers had created with local Bedouin tribes, were not sufficient to insulate or protect the NCS from these incursions on its authority.

This article makes two contributions to broader questions about conservation under authoritarian rule. First, previous literature on Egyptian politics has chronicled how the Mubarak regime, as part of a strategy of political “deliberalization,” has increasingly curtailed the autonomy of organizations that directly impact the realm of formal politics, such as political parties, civil society organizations, and social movements (Kassem, 2004; Kienle, 2001). Yet the autonomy of nascent regulatory agencies, such as the NCS of the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), is also subject to reversals and erosion, arising from conflicts among executive institutions within the state apparatus. This is particularly the case when regulatory institutions potentially impact key sources of external rent for the regime, such as tourism revenues, generated by an increasingly important political constituency, namely, large private-sector business groups.

The second broad argument made in regards to conservation under authoritarian rule is that community-based conservation efforts are not sufficient when such communities are systematically marginalized by the central government. In South Sinai, the attempt by protected-area managers to cultivate cooperative relations with local Bedouin tribes was in stark contrast to the more exclusionary policies that have generally characterized relations between Cairo and the Bedouin of the Sinai (International Crisis Group, 2007). Local resource-based communities that are marginalized from political decision making are constrained in defending conservation efforts even when these provide direct services and benefits at a local level. This suggests that donor initiatives to strengthen biodiversity conservation should consider how to embed their efforts in broader political constituencies or seek out specific forms of leverage that directly concern the incumbent regime.

The research presented in this article is based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt during 1998-1999 and 2007. I conducted numerous interviews with government officials, environmental experts, social activists, and private investors. Many of these individuals provided me with unpublished documents and reports, which supplemented primary and secondary sources located in government agencies, press archives, and research centers. In 1999, I also worked as a participant–observer on a donor project at the EEAA.
The argument proceeds as follows. The first section introduces the notion of embedded autonomy as a means to analyze the evolution of environmental institutions. The second section provides an overview of environmental initiatives in Egypt, arguing that Egypt’s system of authoritarian governance limits institutional reforms to particular enclaves to maintain the hegemony of the executive, centered on the presidency. The third section analyzes how reformers sought to establish bureaucratic autonomy and social embeddedness for a protected-areas regime. The third and fourth sections explain the erosion of these capacities under the strains of rapid coastal tourism development and underinvestment in the protected-areas network. The conclusion argues for more robust attempts at embedding environmental reform efforts in broader social and political constituencies and suggests why international donors have been unwilling and unable to hold the Egyptian government accountable for sustaining institutional investments in conservation.

Evaluating Environmental Reform as Embedded Autonomy

An expanding body of development literature has increasingly emphasized that successful environmental governance often depends on building social capital and productive linkages between state agencies and local networks and organizations (Grootaert & van Basterlaer, 2002). Scholars have described instances where civil society enables and supplements the information-gathering, implementation, and enforcement activities of coherent, autonomous public sector actors as a form of “state–society synergy” (Evans, 1996), “co-production” (Ostrom, 1996), or “embedded autonomy” (Evans, 1995). Even where state–society relations have been generally characterized as exclusionary and antagonistic, coalitions of local state officials and engaged citizens have been able to create successful policy reforms (Mernissi, 1997; Tendler & Freedheim, 1994).

Bureaucratic coherence and social embeddedness enable a protected-areas authority to manage parks on the ground, initiate and sustain enforcement actions, and assert authority vis-à-vis other governmental authorities. Bureaucratic autonomy or coherence refers organizations characterized by meritocratic recruitment, reward for long-term service, sustained and predictable funding of operations, and the fostering of organizational cultures that transcend narrow, parochial interests (Evans, 1995). Embeddedness refers to a “concrete set of social ties that bind the state to society and provide institutionalized channels for the continual negotiation and renegotiation of goals and policies” (Evans, 1995, p. 59). The formal legal standing of the protected-areas authority vis-à-vis other executive institutions also matters. In Egypt, an agency endowed with “executive authorities” (sultat al-malak) over the projects or lands under its jurisdiction has more legal autonomy than other kinds of state organizations.
Studies documenting relatively successful conservation efforts in developing countries have highlighted the importance of constructing cooperative relationships with several kinds of social groups. An extensive and convincing literature highlights the need to include local resource users and communities in the design and implementation of conservation efforts (Brandon, Redford, & Sanderson, 1998; Neumann, 1992; Weber, 2003). In Egypt, as elsewhere, protected areas vary greatly in terms of the numbers and kinds of populations who use the resources of newly declared parks. These range from the relatively densely populated areas surrounding freshwater lakes along the northern fringes of the Nile Delta, to remote, sparsely populated desert areas such as Gebel Elba. In the case of the Sinai protected areas, Bedouin tribal groupings have been the primary local resource users in and adjacent to protected areas. This was particularly the case in the St. Katherine’s protected area, where an estimated 7,000 persons live in and around the park (NCS, 2006). Most Bedouin in the Sinai are not nomadic but engage in a variety of economic activities, including tourism, agriculture, and trade. They are largely excluded from representation in both central and provincial administrations and are marginalized in development plans devised in Cairo.

The political demobilization and marginalization of tribal groupings is echoed in the marginal role played by environmental associations in shaping policy initiatives. The Mubarak regime maintains elaborate legal regimes governing the registration, operation, and financing of environmental voluntary associations. Although the numbers of Egyptian environmental associations have proliferated, in part because they are considered a relatively safe form of organization, their ability to mobilize popular constituencies or affect policy making remains minimal (Gomaa, 1997; Kandil, 1997). For similar reasons, no major international environmental advocacy organizations are operational in Egypt.

In contrast to the marginal role of an environmental movement or environmental associations in demanding conservation, that of “bilateral activists” has been crucial in Egypt. As analyzed by Steinberg (2001), these individuals combine access to international expertise and resources with extensive local knowledge of domestic political contexts, thereby bridging the international and domestic spheres of policy influence. They may be nationals or expatriates with long-term standing in the country. In Egypt, such bilateral activists are drawn from the (often overlapping) categories of conservation scientists, environmental consultants, environmental activists, park managers, rangers, and independent activists. As members of broader “policy communities” (Layzer, 2006) or “epistemic communities” (Haas, 1990), these individuals have played an important role in both establishing and sustaining Egypt’s protected-areas regime.

Unlike local resource users and bilateral activists, the role of business groups in shaping the politics of protected areas is often overlooked in the Middle East. Yet Egyptian business conglomerates, through their real estate and tourism investments, have constituted the principal challenge to creating an ecologically viable network
Business groups have interacted with the protected-area management both directly, through the environmental impact assessment process, and indirectly, through their demand for coastal land distributed by state tourism and development agencies.

In light of the preceding considerations, Table 1 disaggregates embedded autonomy as variable attributes that can be used to comparatively analyze the development of environmental institutions. In the next section, we shall see why Egypt’s particular system of authoritarian rule has made achieving environmental reforms that exhibit embedded autonomy particularly challenging.

### Egypt’s Authoritarian System and Enclaves of Environmental Reform

The authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, many racked by recurrent economic crises and threatened by both internal and external conflict, have generally been considered poor candidates to exhibit embedded autonomy. Most regimes in the region lack the social bases of information and cooperation necessary to successfully implement substantive institutional reform efforts. Many, like the Egyptian government, engage in persistent and sustained attempts to disorganize, weaken, and selectively co-opt nongovernmental organizations (NGO’s), political parties, and business associations.

This system of authoritarian governance, which has often contained and demobilized demands from popular associations, has been variously characterized as “executive...
hegemony” (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] & the Institute of National Planning, 2004) or “personal authoritarian rule” (Kassem, 2004). In each case, what is at stake is capturing the continued dominance of the executive branch—personified by the president, the Cabinet, and executive appointees within the central ministries and provincial governments—over other branches of government, local administration, civil society, and the business sector.

The dominance of the executive branch is exerted through a variety of formal and informal, coercive and noncoercive, means. Executive institutions, particularly those associated with the military and a handful of long-standing ministries, dominate such key government functions as planning, land use, budgeting, and revenue collection. State-owned enterprises, although reduced through two decades of privatization efforts, remain significant in a number of key economic sectors. Local and provincial governments have little control over revenue collection, spending, and planning (Mayfield, 1996). Systemic centralization of decision making and resource allocation limits opportunities for local and provincial governments to experiment with more innovative forms of public–private partnerships (UNDP & the Institute of National Planning, 2005). Influencing policy making depends largely on mobilizing personal and professional networks to access influential aides to Cabinet members, to ministers themselves, or to governors and other local officials appointed by the executive.

Partially as a result, and despite the presence of many well-trained, qualified civil servants at the upper echelons, the Egyptian bureaucracy is generally considered overextended, inefficient, unresponsive to social demands, and plagued by shortfalls of funding, overstaffing, and petty corruption. Both the Egyptian government and international donors have endeavored to overcome these limitations without disturbing the political logics that encourage centralization and inefficiency. Instead, they have built institutional enclaves intended to function as “pockets of efficiency,” to borrow Geddes’ phrase, within the larger state apparatus (cited in Evans, 1995, p. 61).

The result has been a steady proliferation of small-scale reform efforts that do not significantly restructure the larger ministries, provincial governments, or parastatals in which new enclave institutions are nested. Such “enclave reforms” have characterized not only governmental reorganizations but also economic reforms designed to stimulate private investment through the creation of economic-free zones, tourism zones, and industrial zones. These reform efforts have typically been funded by international donors, and like tourism revenues, donor funds constitute a form of external income or “rent” to the Egyptian government.

The development of Egypt’s protected-areas network exhibits similar tendencies for institution-building efforts to be confined to enclaves. Spatially, uneven institutional development reflected an informal division of labor among international donors supporting conservation efforts. The EU, the earliest sustained donor to protected-areas management, supported parks in the Sinai region; the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) carved out its sphere of influence along the Red Sea coast; and the Italian cooperation agency initially focused on...
Fayoum before turning to broader capacity-building projects. The World Bank’s Global Environmental Facility channeled funds through UNDP to establish management plans for the wetland protectorates of the northern Mediterranean coast, as part of the MED–WET initiative. These efforts have varied significantly in terms of their success in creating an on-the-ground management presence. The map in Figure 1 shows the existing network of Egyptian protected areas, even as it obscures the uneven institutional topography that has accompanied the expansion of the network.

Creating Egypt’s Protected-Areas Regime

To explain the uneven institutional development of the protected-area network and the relatively exceptional experience of the South Sinai parks within this network, we must revisit the origins of Egypt’s protected areas. The first protected areas in Egypt were designated in the Sinai Peninsula and reflected a confluence of interests between the Egyptian government, interested in regaining control over Israeli-controlled Sinai, and local and international networks of conservationists, focused on preserving Sinai’s ecological and historical assets. The catalyst for both parties was the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979, which committed Israel to withdraw from the peninsula by 1982.

Wars between Israel and Egypt, and the Israeli occupation after 1967, had kept the Sinai Peninsula in a state of political and economic uncertainty and had prevented large-scale tourism investment. Under Israeli rule, resort development of the Aqaba coast began in Na’ama Bay, near Sharm al Sheikh, and several other small urban areas—namely, Nuweiba and Dahab. Between 1967 and 1981, Israel also zoned parts of the Aqaba and Suez coasts, the Straits of Tiran, the southern mountains around St. Katherine, part of the northern Sinai coast, and parts of Lake Bardawil in the north as protected areas.

With Israel’s withdrawal, Egyptian government ministries and international donors lost no time in preparing ambitious development and settlement plans. More than 176 had been publicized by 1983. The motives were both developmental and strategic. The Egyptian regime hoped that tourism development would serve as the nuclei for new communities to attract population from the densely populated Nile Delta to vacant and strategically sensitive areas. Tourism would also generate employment opportunities and expand foreign exchange reserves. Accordingly, the 1987 five-year plan directed a total of 81% of planned central government expenditures in the Sinai to finance loans for new settlements and the building of basic infrastructure, including roads, utilities, and electricity projects to support settlements. (Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, 1986, p. 1). This goal changed little during the next decade. As an official at the Tourist Development Authority observed in 1999,

Tourism was seen as an activity around which to build new settlements. There wasn’t much else one could do in these areas. We were trying to find an activity to get people to move. We want to inhabit Sinai, with green areas. Keeping it vacant makes it another arena for war. (Interview #102, Cairo, personal communication, March 7, 1999)

At the same time, the ecological attributes of Sinai gathered distinct “epistemic communities” of scientists and laypeople together—transnational networks associated with migratory birds and wetlands preservation in the northern areas; coral reef and marine ecology along the southern and eastern shorelines; and endangered wildlife and natural desert areas. These networks had been particularly active in the marine
environment given the spectacular diversity of the Gulf of Aqaba and Red Sea coral reefs. The first marine research center in the Indian Ocean was established at Egypt’s Hurghada in 1931, followed by the Heinz Steinitz Marine Laboratory in Eilat, Israel.

Prominent Egyptian scientists, such as the Cairo University botanist Mohamed Qassas, were acutely aware of the national security and economic imperatives driving the regime’s plans for rapid development of the Sinai after the Israeli withdrawal. He and others focused their efforts on coordinating with international environmental advocacy networks and using peak positions within multilateral environmental institutions to highlight the need for conservation of these areas. As “bilateral activists,” they combined extensive knowledge of local political conditions with access to international sources of funds and expertise. Qassas headed the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) from 1978 to 1984; in 1981, the IUCN Annual Congress adopted a general resolution calling on member commissions to provide financial and technical assistance to Egypt to conserve designated areas of the Sinai. By 1982, an informal coalition of overseas organizations advocating protection, conducting field surveys, and popularizing Sinai’s unique ecological attributes included the Friends of the Earth, the World Wildlife Fund, the U.S. State Department, the Smithsonian Institution, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Holy Land Conservation Fund (US), the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, Birds of Egypt (U.K.), Friends of the Red Sea (U.K.), the Sinai Conservation Group (U.K.), the International Council for Bird Preservation (U.K.) and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (U.K.; see Holy Land Conservation Fund, 1989).

Egypt’s bilateral activists worked to make international concerns viable domestic policy choices by emphasizing the developmental benefits of protected areas. Reports by Egypt’s scientific and educational institutes called for development plans that would exploit the Sinai’s unique resources but “protect environmental balance” (Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, 1979, p. 2). Nature protection should “realize national goals . . . considering a core goal in the process [is] attracting settlements” (Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, 1986, p. 1). Conservation scientists interpreted “national goals” to include safeguarding biodiversity through the creation of a network of protected areas that would cover the full range of Egypt’s habitats, flora, and fauna. As early as 1981, Egyptian scientists prepared a draft national action plan for biodiversity that heavily emphasized preserving Egypt’s ecological “inheritance” (wiratha). Insuring this inheritance (ta’min al-wiratha) meant protecting water and soil from pollution and contamination, establishing genetic banks, experimental farms and plots, and managing protected areas as reservoirs for future genetic resources (National Committee to Preserve Nature and Natural Resources, 1981, pp. 5-8). Egypt’s 1998 Biodiversity Action Plan and the 2001 National Environmental Action Plan further enshrined the notion that protected areas would be the principal mechanism used to conserve Egypt’s biodiversity (Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs, 2001; National Biodiversity Unit, 1998).
In addition to generating domestically resonant justifications for the creation of protected areas, conservation scientists arranged for personal appeals to the president, using their knowledge of Egypt’s authoritarian system. The declaration of Ras Mohamed as the first protected area was accelerated by personal appeals to President Sadat from two internationally respected marine biologists who had worked in the Red Sea area (Interview #36, Cairo, personal communication, June 2, 1998). Similarly, in 1984, Dr. Qassas and Prince Philip, in his capacity as president of the World Wildlife Fund, sent a joint appeal requesting that Gebel Elba, a large area on the Red Sea Coast, be granted protected status. The Gebel Elba petition itself was the culmination of earlier work done by a range of international, Egyptian, and Sudanese scientific teams under sponsorship of the World Wildlife Fund.

Conservation scientists also ensured that protected areas would be high on the agenda of the new EEAA, created in 1982 by presidential decree (No. 631/1982). One of the first proposals of the EEAA’s board, on which several conservation scientists served, was a protected-area law, issued in 1983 as Law 102. The executive regulations for the law, issued separately by Prime Ministerial Decree, contained several remarkable provisions compared with other environmental laws and reflected the access that Egypt’s bilateral activists had attained. The key provision was that the competent authority to implement the law was the EEAA. Law 102 also established an Environmental Fund to collect entrance fees and donor funds. The executive regulations specified that EEAA would control this fund and that part of the proceeds would go toward improving the reserves. Law 102 further gave EEAA “executive” authority not only over protected areas but also over setback areas adjacent to marine and coastal reserves, which considerably expanded the spatial jurisdiction of the protected-area regime.

In contrast, in other environmental policy arenas, the EEAA is still characterized by limited statutory autonomy. The 1982 decree generally established an agency (gihaz) to coordinate the environmental initiatives of other ministries, rather than a Cabinet-level ministry (wizara). The government further blurred lines of environmental accountability by also establishing a Minister of State for Environmental Affairs to represent the environmental portfolio at the Cabinet level. Designating a Minister separate from the implementing agency created two potentially rival bureaucratic entities from the outset. Attempts to change the agency’s statutory standing have sparked ongoing debate within the executive ministries, the Cabinet, and the Parliament during the agency’s subsequent legal reorganizations in 1985, 1991, and 1994 (Gomaa, 1997, p. 7). The most recent iteration, in 1994, added a few executive functions to EEAA but did not change the basic mandate of the agency to coordinate the efforts of other ministries.4

**Donors Build Autonomy, 1989-2000**

Although Egyptian bilateral activists established a legal basis for the environmental agency to manage newly designated protected areas autonomously, active management
awaited EU funding, which began in 1989. Focused initially only on Ras Mohamed National Marine Park, the EU projects soon created a network of protected areas across southern and central Sinai. The EU-supported projects were distinctive from many other donor environmental projects in that they focused on building the corporate coherence and, therefore, the de facto autonomy of the NCS.

The EU projects worked directly with local conservation scientists and also recruited expatriate managers with significant experience managing protected areas in the political contexts of the Middle East and Africa. For example, the overall program manager moved from working on protected areas in Tanzania and stayed in Egypt for more than a decade (Interview #132, Cairo, personal communication, June 15, 1998). The project manager for the St. Katherine protected area had worked in protected areas in Saudi Arabia, Ghana, Sri Lanka, and Kuwait and as of 2007, was still heavily involved in advocating for Egypt’s protected areas (Interview #100, Cairo, personal communication, January 12, 1999; Interview #5, Cairo, personal communication, June 6, 2007). The EU project manager for Ras Mohamed had worked in 32 countries on protected areas and had prepared portions of the Mediterranean Action Program related to protected areas (Interview #48, Cairo, personal communication, June 12, 1998).

These managers focused on building corporate coherence in the NCS by working toward meritocratic recruiting, a reward-and-incentive structure for long-term service, and corporate identification with the organization’s mandate. Funding for the protectorates division was controlled directly by project managers, allowing them to make decentralized decisions about staffing and operations. The department obtained exemptions from public-sector hiring rules, which typically required government agencies to hire laid-off, older public-sector workers, so that managers could employ young, well-trained, and committed graduates. EU-supported salaries for the protectorates division were competitive enough that several park rangers had returned to employment in Egypt from the United States or Canada (Interview #50, Sharm el-Sheikh, personal communication, June 5, 1998).

Negotiating With Executive Institutions: The Military and Provincial Governors

While managers sought to build bureaucratic autonomy within the newly established department, they also sought to leverage existing political and fiscal resources to establish authority vis-à-vis other executive institutions. The two most significant counterparts for the emerging protected-areas regime in South Sinai were the Egyptian military and the provincial governors appointed directly by the President. Park managers informally referred to their interactions with the military and governors as “educating the state” (Interview #34, Cairo, personal communication, May 4, 1998).

Although the Camp David Accords set limits on the numbers and kinds of forces stationed in the peninsula, the military retained use-rights to large tracts of land in
the Sinai. In addition, the Mubarak regime appointed a number of military retirees to top managerial positions at the EEAA and within the NCS itself. The first head of the EEAA was an ex-general from the Branch of Chemical Warfare. Another retiree served as the project liaison between the Protectorates Division and the EEAA, and the brother-in-law of the Minister of Defense was designated the Egyptian manager of Ras Mohamed Park. Not surprisingly, these former military men viewed their military counterparts as “the best organization to deal with.” “We have high connections,” observed one, “so we just approach the military by telling them that the protectorates will benefit the country, and then we’re set” (Interview #35, Cairo, personal communication, January 12, 1998).

Despite generally cordial relations between the Protected Area Division and the military, the EU did not hesitate to intercede when the military contested the nascent institutional autonomy of the Protectorates Division. When the Third Army Brigade laid mines inside Ras Mohamed and then billed the protectorates for their removal, the EU Delegation wrote directly to the Minister of the Public Sector, Atef Abeid, who interceded personally with the Ministry of Defense, which removed the mines (Interview #32, Cairo, personal communication, June 15, 1998). In turn, the park administration compromised on several military requests. Military exercises were allowed within the park twice a year as requested, and the military retained control of an area within the park, promising to transfer ownership once they had no further need for it (Pearson, 1990, p. 8).

These compromises helped to neutralize potential objections from the armed forces to further expansions of the protected-areas network. Ras Mohamed was expanded in 1989 and again in 1991 to include coastal zones up to the highest equinox tide line. In 1992, two “multiple-use” areas were designated on the Gulf of Aqaba, raising to 40% the area of coastline formally protected. With the creation of the St. Katherine’s Protected Area, which encompassed most of the interior southern mountains, more than a third of the territory of the South Sinai governorate was under protected status. The entire system of offshore coastal reefs was declared protected when the 1994 Environmental Law required review of any development fewer than 200 feet from the highest tide line.

As the protected-areas network expanded, provincial governors played an increasingly prominent role in facilitating or constraining the de facto autonomy of the Protectorates Division. The considerable ability of governors to affect the implementation of protected areas stemmed from the highly centralized system of local government. Governors were appointed by the regime, and thus their accountability was directed upward rather than directly linked to the welfare of local communities. Like other local authorities in Egypt, the South Sinai governorate and city budgets were centrally allocated, with no mechanisms to assess the costs of services, local needs, or the impacts generated by the influx of luxury tourism developments (EU, 1998).

Protected-areas managers sought to win cooperation from appointed governors by creating personal connections and highlighting the economic contributions that
protected areas could make to the governorate’s development. These efforts sometimes ran into difficulty when protected-area managers clashed with existing local state–business networks profiting from resource exploitation. For instance, the South Sinai governor wrote directly to the Minister of Environment in 1998 to argue that attempts by protected-area managers to control quarrying in the St. Katherine protectorate hindered mineral exploitation, blocked development, limited employment, and led to the depopulation of the Sinai in favor of nature conservation. (Pearson, 1990, p. 3). In fact, the protectorates division had relocated only a small number of quarries and denied permits to only 3 out of 51 sites inspected.

Embedding the Protected-Area Network: Bedouin Tribes

As the network of protected areas consolidated itself across the landscape of south and central Sinai, park managers turned their attention to two sets of social actors whose activities and interests directly impacted the viability of the preserves: Bedouin tribes and tourism investors. With both, park managers sought to establish informal ties and offer concrete services. When these arrangements worked, park administrators benefited from voluntary provision of information about investor plans and Bedouin perspectives and increased compliance with land-use and marine restrictions.

As noted previously, Bedouin tribes in the Sinai and other “frontier” governorates enjoyed little standing with the central or provincial administrations. Cairo’s development plans and land privatizations focused on attracting elite investors and migrants from the Nile Delta (International Crisis Group, 2007). The state also appointed tribal sheikhs as intermediaries, limiting the field of tribal leadership to those approved by the central government (Interview #5, Cairo, personal communication, June 5, 2007). Not surprisingly, therefore, field surveys conducted by the NCS in 1996 found that “the relationship between Sinai Bedouin and Egyptian authorities is poor now, and communication is almost nonexistent” (Hobbs, 1996, p. 1).

The approach of Egyptian authorities was epitomized by their treatment of Bedouin coastal camps; as the real estate and tourism market heated up along the Gulf of Aqaba during the 1990s, bulldozers and truckloads of soldiers forcibly displaced a number of existing small Bedouin camps, established to service tourists (Bortot, 1999). Ironically, these relationships of mutual distrust opened a window of opportunity for protected-area managers; surveyed tribal members suggested that the protected-areas administration might offer them some opportunities for employment and participation, in contrast to the generally hostile reception accorded them from other state agencies (Hobbs, 1996).

The NCS sought to build cooperative relationships with Bedouin tribes by providing employment and services and by explicitly recognizing Bedouin land uses. The two coastal multiple-use areas, Nabq and Abu Gallum, formally recognized existing land claims, including seasonal Bedouin settlements and traditional fishing
areas, in contrast to the land-use maps used by the central ministries in Cairo. The St. Katherine protectorate employed 48 Bedouin out of its 66 employees by 2002, including 30 community guards. Based on surveys conducted regarding Bedouin priorities, the protectorate helped to establish a veterinary clinic, mobile health care services, and the building of an eco-lodge owned by 27 Bedouin families (NCS, 2006, p. 41). EU support also helped to establish a handicraft collective, FanSina, which employs 300 women and is now privately held by the participants.

Tourism and the Politics of Coastal Land Use

In contrast to the relatively amicable relationships that evolved between the Sinai protected-area and local resource users, relations with tourism investors along the Red Sea and Aqaba coastlines challenged the bureaucratic autonomy of the NCS. The spectacular coral reefs, desert landscapes, and historical-cultural attractions that galvanized efforts to establish protected areas in Sinai and along the Red Sea coast have also served as the basis for highly lucrative, rapidly expanding tourism markets.

Tourism receipts—or “rents”—serve as a strategic source of foreign exchange for the Egyptian government, helping the government balance its otherwise chronic imbalances in the current and trade accounts (Richter & Steiner, 2006). Between 1990-1991 and 2003-2004, tourism receipts grew by 592%, concentrated largely along Egypt’s Sinai and Red Sea coasts (Richter & Steiner, 2006, p. 21). Coastal tourism investment represented a relatively secure investment outlet for the large family-held business groups that have dominated Egypt’s economic liberalization. Tourism investment brought rapid returns, usually within 18 months (Sowers, 2003, pp. 220-231). As of 2002, the Ministry of Tourism reported that Red Sea and South Sinai governorates accounted for approximately half of all tourism receipts and half of all tourist arrivals in the country (Meade & Shaalan, 2002, pp. 3-4). The combined hotel capacity exceeded 63,000 rooms, far exceeding any other region of the country, and the government has authorized another 70,000 rooms under construction (Meade & Shaalan, 2002, p. 2).

The government facilitated this explosion in coastal tourism investment through a newly created agency, the Tourism Development Authority (TDA), located under the Ministry of Tourism. Following a blueprint provided by the USAID and the World Bank, the TDA was created in 1991 by presidential decree (No. 274/1991), to expedite investment applications and coordinate infrastructure development from local and international funding sources. As an economic authority analogous to those created to oversee land reclamation and the creation of new desert communities, TDA was granted an autonomous budgeting system and authority to distribute vast tracts of land along the Red Sea and Aqaba coastlines (TDA & Ministry of Tourism, 2002). In practice, this meant that the agency wielded considerable discretionary powers to approve investment applications and collect revenues from land sales. To
encourage investment, land prices were set extremely low, ranging from $1 per square meter along the Sinai coastline, where offshore reefs are some of the most spectacular in the world, to $10 per square meter near St. Katherine’s monastery and Gebel Mousa (Sowers, 2003, p. 225). Land was similarly priced along the Red Sea coast. In addition, investors enjoyed payment schedules of 10 years and 10- to 25-year tax holidays (Investment Law 8, 1997).

Park managers in South Sinai initially sought to cultivate direct, personal connections with the first wave of investors building resorts along the Gulf of Aqaba, as they had done previously with the military and with appointed governors. Drawing on their authority to review developments that impacted coastal setbacks, the NCS asked investors to submit project designs for resorts in advance to identify problems and recommend mitigation measures. Program managers offered investors input into the design of lagoons, marinas, construction works, setback use, and disposal methods and in return obtained information about investment projects otherwise unavailable to them (Interview #132, Cairo, personal communication, June 15, 1998). This informational benefit was significant, as across Egyptian environmental-policy sectors, lack of information on both private and public–private business activities has significantly hindered nascent regulatory efforts.

As the numbers of investors accelerated, however, these outreach efforts encountered several obstacles. Investors often provided inadequate project designs and assessments. TDA approved investment applications regardless of the status of environmental impact assessments, and the pace of construction soon strained the small numbers of protectorates staff qualified to monitor investor compliance.

To complicate matters, in 1999 the USAID began a 6-year initiative to promote “environmentally sustainable tourism” along the Red Sea, with the TDA as its principal partner. The project promoted the voluntary adoption of “best practices” in resort construction; according to USAID’s project documents, “the design of an individual property is a personal and private decision based on the values and information held by the investor or developer (TDA, 1998, p. 7). USAID’s focus on investor preferences marked a significant shift from that of the EU, which attempted to strengthen the regulatory capacities of the NCS vis-à-vis coastal-tourism investors.

As the first wave of resort investment accelerated along the Gulf of Aqaba in the mid-1990s, the NCS shifted from personal negotiation with investors to litigation to call attention to indiscriminate land allocations by TDA and the increasing number of violations by private developers. On behalf of the protectorates, the environmental agency’s attorney successfully prosecuted several court cases against leading investors, but only minimal fines were imposed. The prosecutor reported that he had filed more than 200 cases against investors on the Red Sea and Aqaba coasts, but that without a system of civil liability in place, prosecutions were difficult (Interview #82, Cairo, personal communication, December 27, 1998). In lieu of civil charges, he had to file
criminal charges, which could be dismissed by the president, any minister, or the centrally appointed governors. The prosecutor further reported that he was increasingly under pressure from his superiors not to file cases involving elite investors.

Although efforts to sue elite investors had only minimal impacts on those charged, the cases were widely publicized, setting a precedent for domestic environmental associations to follow suit. Several NGO’s soon filed court cases under the 1983 Protected Areas Law. In one such case, that of the protected area of Wadi Sennour, the Land Center for Human Rights sued the EEAA itself, claiming that the agency had not enforced restrictions on illicit quarrying in the marble caves (Saber & Abu Zeid, 1998).

In sum, the NCS made strides toward establishing institutionalized, iterative forms of engagement with Bedouin tribes and tourism investors. In the latter case, however, efforts by the protectorates to create sustained exchanges of information with business actors and enhance environmental capacities were challenged by a rival executive agency, the TDA, which offered investors few if any restrictions on development activities. In response, the protectorates’ authority was among the first agencies in Egypt to initiate sustained environmental litigation.

Reversal of Fortune: Undermining Embedded Autonomy

By the end of the 1990s, the South Sinai protected areas were recognized throughout the Middle East as exceptionally well-managed parks (Gladstone, 2000). Yet the elements of embedded autonomy that underpinned these achievements were increasingly eroded in subsequent years. The emerging autonomy of the NCS was challenged by both the central environmental agency and by the TDA. In turn, the protectorates’ capacity to establish credible commitments and linkages with local resource users and tourism investors was diminished.

Several factors precipitated this relative decline in fortunes of the NCS. The end of the 1990s marked the beginning of rapid turnover and relatively weak leadership at the EEAA. There was little continuity in environmental priorities among appointed ministers, and many well-qualified staff resigned or were fired (Interview #1, Cairo, personal communication, May 30, 2007; Interview #2, Cairo, personal communication, June 3, 2007). Even before the cessation of EU funding, the operational, budgeting, and management systems of the NCS were increasingly subsumed into the standardized, cumbersome, and centralized civil service procedures governing the EEAA. Field operations became increasingly difficult as management decisions were centralized in Cairo. As one ranger in Ras Mohamed put it, “The problem is that every decision now has to go to Cairo, and Cairo doesn’t know what is happening here” (Interview #50, Ras Mohamed, personal communication, June, 5 1998).

The lack of adequate financing for the protected areas soon emerged as the principal manifestation of the decreasing autonomy and stature of the NCS vis-à-vis
both the central environmental agency and other executive institutions. Both Law 102 of 1983 and the EU-supported projects envisioned that entrance fees from more lucrative parks and fines levied for reef damages would be returned to the NCS. However, as an EEAA consultant noted, over the past decade the Environmental Protection Fund was increasingly used to support other areas of environmental protection, with limited transparency and largely at the discretion of the Minister of State for Environmental Affairs (Interview #7, Cairo, Egypt, personal communication, June 12, 2007). Recent attempts by Dannida, the Danish development agency, to improve transparency and operational management of the fund have not challenged the premise that it now serves as a subsidy from protected areas to other environmental protection priorities. The manager for the fund observed that the current political directives are for projects addressing air pollution in Cairo, preferably implemented in conjunction with the private sector (Interview #6, Cairo, personal communication, June 12, 2007). Although the majority of the fund’s revenue derives from protected areas, through the collection of entrance fees and fines, the NCS does not have a seat on the fund’s management board. Instead, representatives from other branches of the environmental agency and the Ministry of Finance constitute the fund’s oversight committee (Interview #9, Cairo, personal communication, June 12, 2007).

Investments in the NCS from the state budget have, therefore, not amounted to even half of the revenues generated from the South Sinai protected areas, and thus the protected-area network has been, in essence, subsidizing other governmental activities (Child, 2006). Total revenue from all participating protected areas in 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 totaled LE 40 million, whereas expenditures were only LE 23 million (El-Sokkari, 2005). In 2006, Egypt spent approximately $19 per square kilometer on its protected areas; in contrast, mean expenditures in the Middle East and North Africa in 1999 were $74 per square kilometer, while developing countries as a whole spent $157 per square kilometer. (Child, 2006, p. 7).

These aggregate figures reflect more specific trends in underinvesting in the Sinai protected areas and undervaluing Egypt’s natural assets. Three of the South Sinai protected areas levy entrance fees; these are significantly lower than fees for comparable natural attractions in other developing countries. For instance, St. Katherine’s protected area was allowed to charge entry fees of $3.00 for foreign visitors in the latter half of FY 2004-2005; the park, which attracts 330,000 visitors per year, promptly generated US$500,000 in the remainder of the year. However, less than $100,000 was reinvested in maintenance and management for that year, in contrast to the annual investments of US$490,000 when the parks were supported by the EU (Child, 2006, p. 7). Ras Mohamed Marine Park generated US$1.972 million in FY 2004-2005, of which US$200,000 was reinvested in the park (Harper, 2006, p. B-69). In contrast, the recreational value of the Ras Mohamed coral reefs for the Egyptian economy was estimated at between US$142 to $191 million per year, not including ecosystem services or tourism-related employment (Tawfik, 2004). For
many within the protectorates authority, the culmination of governmental underfinancing was the deaths of four rangers within a 6-month period in some of the more isolated protected areas, incidents marked by equipment failures and inadequate training (Interview #2, Cairo, personal communication, June 2, 2007).

Egypt’s bilateral activists—scientists, park managers and rangers, environmental consultants, and activists—have clearly documented the deteriorating situation but have been unable thus far to persuade either the central environmental agency or the top echelons of the government to intervene. They have proposed an array of institutional solutions, ranging from the creation of a holding company to a new executive agency. They have also sought hearings with the Minister of State for the Environment, the executive officer of the EEAA, and the staff of the Prime Minister’s Office. To date, there has been little response.

The results of this diminution of authority and organizational capacity have been evident along the Red Sea coast. Unlike the Gulf of Aqaba, where the South Sinai parks established some legal and practical jurisdiction over coastal reefs and setbacks along the entire coastline, the NCS has been unable to establish similar claims over the Red Sea setbacks outside of protected areas. Indeed, the TDA increasingly claims ownership of the coastal setback region, and no formal protection has yet been extended to the reefs outside of protected areas (Interview #10, Cairo, personal communication, June 17, 2007). Although more investors receive approval of environmental impact assessments before beginning construction than was the case during the 1990s, neither the NCS nor TDA are currently adequately staffed to conduct follow-up compliance and monitoring activities. As a result, resort construction, intensive diving, and oil contamination have contribute to a reduction in coral cover of up to 30% in some portions of the Red Sea reefs (Pilcher & Abou Zaid, 2000).

Conclusion

We can explain the initial success of the EU-supported parks in South Sinai by adapting the notion of embedded autonomy to Egypt’s specific authoritarian context. Conservation scientists and other bilateral activists mobilized international environmental-advocacy networks and established the legal and practical bases of institutional autonomy for a protected-areas regime. Managers leveraged long-term financial and technical support from the EU to establish authority on the ground vis-à-vis other executive institutions—namely, the military and provincial governors. The NCS also cultivated a limited form of embeddedness with Bedouin tribes, seeking to establish predictable forms of interaction that generated trust and improved the welfare of local communities. These linkages were significant in that they departed from long-standing state–society relationships characterized primarily by mistrust. The NCS further set a precedent for environmental litigation that has been used by NGO’s to contest land uses in and around protected areas.
Yet the erosion of embedded autonomy that subsequently marked the NCS provides a cautionary tale about the ability of donors, expert networks, and state reformers to create effective environmental institutions in authoritarian contexts where the state deliberately disorganizes and disempowers civil society. The NCS has been unable to draw on broader constituencies, in the form of populist environmental associations, local resource users, or international environmental advocacy networks, to defend its autonomy or capacity. The generally cooperative relations prevailing with local Bedouin in the Sinai were not relevant to political calculations at the center, which has largely marginalized Bedouin tribes from planning, development, and land-use considerations. Therefore, although influential bilateral activists and well-designed international assistance can establish environmental capacities under authoritarian regimes, these are not sufficient to ensure durable institutions.

International donors also face their own obstacles in ensuring that their assistance to protected areas is sustainable. In the case of the South Sinai protected areas, the EU projects established mechanisms for self-financing and institutional autonomy with the permission of the central government. As these mechanisms have been eroded by the EEAA, the TDA, and other executive institutions, the EU Commission in Egypt has done little but proceeded with new project financing for a large integrated development project in South Sinai (Interview #5, Cairo, personal communication, June 6, 2007). Similarly, one of the principal achievements of USAID’s Red Sea Sustainable Tourism Initiative was a comprehensive land-use plan signed by various governmental stakeholders that included protected areas and ecotourism as key elements. In interviews, some USAID consultants reported that this land-use plan has been quietly relegated to the sidelines of planning for the Red Sea. As the largest bilateral donor to Egypt, USAID has shown little inclination to condition further infusions of assistance on the government meeting past commitments.

As a result, international donors have indirectly undermined the autonomy and capacity of the very environmental institutions and procedures that they helped to establish. During the years of foreign and Egyptian cooperation in administering development programs, donor operations and the state’s executive agencies have arguably merged into what Ferguson (1994) termed “the development apparatus.” In Egypt, the personnel and institutions of the central government form the backbone of the development apparatus, onto which expatriate consultants and their projects are temporarily grafted. In these circumstances, the effective management of protected areas is likely to remain limited to spatial and temporal enclaves.

Notes

1. See, for example, the works by Schreurs and Dennis (1998), Economy (2004), and Hochstetler and Keck (in press). The partial exceptions for the Middle East are accounts of environmentalism in Turkey and Israel; see Adaman and Arsel (2005) and Tal (2002), respectively.
2. For a discussion of differential regulatory regimes and enclave development, see Gallagher and Zarsky (2007) and Ong (2006).

3. International agencies funding development plans for the Sinai after the Israeli withdrawal in 1981 and 1982 included the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, and a seven-volume study by the USAID subcontractor Dames and Moore for the Egyptian government.

4. The new executive functions included establishing pollution standards, implementing pilot projects, setting procedural guidelines in such areas as environmental impact assessments, and generating national reports and action plans. (Gomaa, 1997, p. 49). The Minister of State for Environmental Affairs retained the authority to fine or temporarily close firms, but this authority did not extend to the EEAA.

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