

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE NEOLIBERALISATION OF NATURE IN AFRICA

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#### *Abstract*

*Nature in Africa has long had a special place in the global imagination. Equally, this nature and the imagination surrounding it have long been subject to uneven processes of commodification. Under global neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s, however, these processes seem to have intensified. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of some of the contemporary ways in which Africa's nature is being neoliberalised and to provide an indication of how this neoliberalisation is negotiated by African actors. The chapter argues that this negotiation is exceptionally difficult, as the neoliberalisation of Africa's 'natural resources' goes hand in hand with the framing of those same resources as 'inverted commons': a special type of commons that belongs to the whole globe but for which only Africans pay the real price in terms of their conservation.*

#### *Introduction*

Nature in Africa has long occupied a special place in the global imagination. Images of a 'Wild Eden', rugged, 'pristine' landscapes, and some of the most charismatic global 'megafauna' (elephants, gorillas, rhinos, etc.) are etched in the mainstream connotations attached to the continent (Adams & McShane 1996). Indeed, whereas references to Africa's people are often labelled in negative extremes and associated with war, poverty and famine (Dowden 2008), Africa's nature is habitually framed in positive extremes: nature as it 'should be', 'unspoilt' and 'pure'. Thus, when famous Virgin millionaire-entrepreneur Richard Branson asks the question 'what is Africa?', there seems to be no pun intended in his answer that "Africa is its animals. That is the beauty of Africa, that's what makes it different from the rest of the

world. And to lose those animals would be catastrophic”. Branson squarely lays the blame for ‘dwindling wildlife numbers’ on ‘Africa’s increasing (human) populations’ and argues that Africa should “increase the amount of land for the animals and by increasing the amount of land for the animals, that will help human beings”.<sup>1</sup>

Increasing the amount of land for conservation, particularly through protected areas, is one way in which conservation organisations and powerful individuals have tried to protect Africa’s wild animals and natural landscapes (Büscher & Whande 2007; Brockington et al. 2008). But while this strategy remains the ‘mainstay’ of conservation, it is clear that conservation actors have had to find ways to balance their concern for wild animals and landscapes with people’s land- and natural resource-based livelihoods (Adams & Hutton 2007). Among the many ways in which this has been attempted – most notably through ‘community-based conservation’ – market-based strategies have become increasingly dominant. Under global neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s, conservation in Africa has progressively focused on ways for wildlife and ‘nature’ to ‘pay their way’, so that local and global communities can benefit from their sustained conservation. ‘Imposing wilderness’ – as Neumann (1998) referred to it – persists, albeit no longer through colonial force but through ‘the market’. ‘Neoliberal conservation’ has become the new mantra for global conservation, triggering new challenges for Africa.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of some of the contemporary ways in which Africa’s nature is being neoliberalised and provide a preliminary and partial indication of how this neoliberalisation is negotiated by African actors. The chapter argues that this negotiation is exceptionally difficult, as the neoliberalisation of Africa’s resources is tied to a framing of those resources as ‘inverted commons’: a special commons that belong to the entire globe but for which only Africans pay the real price in terms of their conservation. As such, I update and extend Ton Dietz’s earlier argument about entitlements to natural resources (Dietz 1996) in two crucial ways: first, that a variety of conservation actors, particularly from the West, *actively frame* Africa’s nature as a global commons that deserves protection for all of humanity; and second, that the practical operationalisation of this tactic increasingly revolves around

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pifworld.com/#/projects/TheElephantCorridor/61> (Last accessed: 7 February 2011).

‘neoliberal conservation’: Reinterpreting and reinstitutionalising African natures within ideologies of power and systems of rule dependent on market competition, commodification and intensified capital accumulation (Sullivan 2006, 2009; Igoe & Brockington 2007; Brockington et al. 2008; Igoe 2010; Büscher 2010a, 2010b; Fletcher 2010). In turn, these ideologies of power and systems of rule usually favour those that can back up their claims most effectively and with superior ‘purchasing power’ – sometimes African actors, but most often Western actors concerned about Africa’s nature. By giving an overview of contemporary neoliberalisation of nature in Africa, I aim to investigate the strength but also the limits of this argument.

Before we can proceed to this task, it is important to clarify what ‘nature’ and what ‘Africa’ we are talking about. The answer to this question is not as simple as it seems. The more straightforward answer is that the chapter focuses on the conservation of wildlife and biodiversity. As such, it does not deal with the neoliberalisation of other ‘natural resources’, such as energy, minerals and land (see McDonald & Ruiters 2005; Bond 2007; McDonald 2009). Similarly, as ‘Africa’ is an incredibly large and diverse continent, it is impossible to do justice to all the possible developments occurring across the continent; hence, the chapter focuses predominantly on Southern and Eastern Africa, and less so on Western (Sub-Saharan) Africa. While this clarifies part of our focus, it does not cover what ‘nature’ and what ‘Africa’ we are talking about, as these are not mere biophysical, material entities. We therefore need to first delve into ‘Africa’ and ‘nature’ as they are imagined within the context of global conservation by – mainly – Western audiences, and the colonial connotations these imaginations are often based upon.<sup>2</sup>

### *Africa’s nature in the global imagination*

As stated above, Africa has long triggered global imagination of wild and pristine natures. Many conservation organisations still thrive on this imagination and indeed actively produce it to garner support and goodwill (Adams & McShane 1996; Igoe 2010). In Garland’s (2008:

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<sup>2</sup> While in the rest of the chapter I will not put ‘Africa’ and ‘nature’ between inverted commas, it should be clear that I regard them as problematic categories/signifiers that need to be used carefully so as to make clear they are contested and imagined differently by different actors.

67) words, conservationists take Africa's 'natural capital' and add value to it "through various mediations and ultimately transform it to a capital of a more convertible and globally ramifying kind". Particular representations of an ideal 'African nature', then, become the lubricant of the circulation of this 'globally convertible capital' that manifests itself interchangeably as money and other types of symbolic, political capital. But this capital needs to be presented in a delicate way, as several examples can illustrate.

A major international non-governmental organisation, the African Wildlife Foundation, states that they are

the leading international conservation organisation focused solely on Africa. We believe that protecting Africa's wildlife and wild landscapes is the key to the future prosperity of Africa and its people – and for over forty-five years we have made it our work to help ensure that Africa's wild resources endure.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Conservation International states that "Africa is a continent of incredible forests and savannas, indispensable plants, and breathtaking animals. By preserving these resources and using them responsibly, each African country can flourish".<sup>4</sup> The focus is on presenting a nuanced view of the need to balance the protection of biodiversity with attention to the needs of African peoples. In line with the 'community-conservation' and 'sustainable development' paradigms, conservation is wedded to and even made the foundation of African developmental aspirations (Ros-Tonen & Dietz 2005; Duffy 2010). But these exercises are not always what they seem. Indeed, much of this is 'marketing-speak' that obfuscates organisations' primary objectives (usually strict conservation) and the politics they employ to reach or implement these objectives. Let us briefly look at some other illustrations of the discourses used by influential conservation organisations working in Africa.

The South African NGO 'Peace Parks Foundation' aims to establish large conservation areas across international state boundaries – so-called 'Peace Parks' because they are said to stimulate international cooperation in addition to conservation and development (Duffy 2006; Ramutsindela 2007; Büscher 2010a). In the organisation's 1999 *Annual Review*, its multi-millionaire chairman Anton Rupert writes:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://awf.org/section/about> (Last accessed: 9 December 2010).

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.conservation.org/EXPLORE/AFRICA\\_MADAGASCAR/Pages/overview.aspx](http://www.conservation.org/EXPLORE/AFRICA_MADAGASCAR/Pages/overview.aspx) (Last accessed: 10 December 2010).

“sinking beneath the weight of war and survival and of exploding populations searching for living space are Africa’s designated protected areas, the crown jewels of a tourism industry which has the potential to provide a sustainable way of life”. He emphasises that “poverty stricken Africa desperately needs alternatives to subsistence living, and the creation of jobs from tourism gives these” (PPF 2000: 2). Lastly, Rupert asserts that:

Embedded deep in the psyche of man is the oldest symbol of all, the Garden of Eden. This is a place of peace and reflection free from divisive barriers and physical constraints. Affluent Western man needs for the health of his soul to take time off from the frenetic treadmill of his existence to return to the Garden for refreshment and contemplation, and the growth of tourism to wilderness areas endorses this (PPF 2000: 2).

This comes much closer to the rhetoric used by Richard Branson at the start of this chapter (which, interestingly, Branson spoke in support of the Peace Parks Foundation). From these quotes it is clear that Rupert and the Peace Parks Foundation see wilderness-based tourism as a way for ‘affluent Western man’ (not woman!) to cleanse his tired soul and for poor black Africans to earn a little money serving whites. Moreover, whereas Africans need to be taken off the land to make a living (‘Africa desperately needs alternatives to subsistence living’), whites apparently need the land (the ‘garden’) to make life bearable. Although critical research continues to debunk these racist,<sup>5</sup> colonial illusions (Sullivan 2006; Dressler & Büscher 2008), they persist in the dominant conservation discourse. As recently argued by David Hughes (2010: 133), “contemporary conservation dabbles in nostalgia for the colonial past” and “continues to produce the aesthetics, symbols, and fables of white privilege”.

A paradox thus emerges, in that colonial suffering and inequalities are superficially recognised in policy and rhetoric of major conservation actors through a focus on ‘community-conservation’ and ‘sustainable development’, while the latter simultaneously retain many of the ‘aesthetics, symbols, and fables’ of conservation as ‘white privilege’. Indeed, as noted by Rosaleen Duffy (2010: 218-9), the focus on poverty by conservation organisations is even convenient – “claiming that poor people poach and trade wildlife to make a living” – as it leaves out the ‘consumption habits of the wealthy world’:

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<sup>5</sup> Note that although technically a racist comment, I here conceptualise racism following Hughes (2010: xviii) as ‘other disregarding’.

it is difficult for NGOs, especially, to turn their attention to their own supporters and point out their role in creating conservation problems; they risk alienating their donors, and supporters may not be willing to accept that their own lifestyles and demand for wildlife goods creates problems far distant from where they live. NGOs might well be acting on the best intentions and have the interests of wildlife at heart, but their failure to tackle the wider context means they perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes of poor people as the enemy of wildlife, and rich people as its savior.

Tourism, Duffy and others point out (see Dunn 2004), therefore also often ends up reinforcing racial stereotypes and ‘aesthetics, symbols, fables of white privilege’. It very rarely, if ever, works to upset these symbols and fables because they involve major capital flows and international investments that few African governments are willing to forego. Nevertheless, every now and then they are challenged, and African ‘Edens’ come under ‘threat’ from African desires to use land and resources differently. When they do, they often rattle global (usually white) emotions. One such prominent occasion recently was the international debate that erupted after the Tanzanian government proposed constructing a highway through its Serengeti National Park.

The Serengeti is arguably one of the most well-known symbols of ‘Africa’s wild nature’ and its wildebeest migration plays an important part in the global imagination. Thus, when the Tanzanian government in July 2010 became serious about an earlier election promise to construct a highway through the northern part of the park, all hell seemed to break loose. International – mainly Western – audiences resisted in numerous ways that are interesting to briefly highlight to make the point that African nature is not only important in the global imagination, but indeed is seen as something that belongs to the entire globe and over which Africans have only partial sovereignty (e.g. Mbembe 2000). As the outpouring was truly prodigious, I present only some of the recent, major initiatives:

- An internet site (<http://www.savetheserengeti.org/>) was established that states, “This ill-conceived project changes all the rules, and would destroy the integrity of a priceless world heritage that has been protected by the people of Tanzania since the birth of their country. It would also cause grave danger to their entire tourist industry”. Like Richard Branson, the website organisers blame population growth: “Areas to the west of the Serengeti are already heavily populated. A highway will add even more human population and development”.

- An online petition was organised urging readers to send Tanzanian President Kikwete an email that ends as follows: “The world is watching and expecting good governance, and for you to find a way to preserve your great country’s natural inheritance and future potential for advancement.”<sup>6</sup> Of the 248,500 signatories, the vast majority are from North America or Europe, with hardly any signatories from African countries.
- A major petition and survey was performed by ‘302 international scientists from 32 countries’<sup>7</sup>, which concludes that “the road will result in severe, negative, irreversible impacts, with little mitigation possible.” Again the vast majority of signatories are from Western countries (those that profess to be from African countries are mainly Westerners that live and work in Africa or white South Africans).
- A Facebook group ‘stop the Serengeti Highway’ was established, with over 38,000 ‘friends’ as of March 2011.<sup>8</sup>
- 24 scientists, led by Western conservationists/biologists, published an article in *Nature* entitled ‘Road will Ruin Serengeti’. They write that “the proposed road could lead to the collapse of the largest remaining migratory system on Earth – a system that drives Tanzania’s tourism trade and supports thousands of people” and ask the Tanzanian government to “*explicitly acknowledge and conserve the global benefits* of preserving the Serengeti National Park, one of the world's natural wonders and one of Africa's last surviving pristine ecosystems”<sup>9</sup> (italics added).

In all, considerable pressure has been placed on the Tanzanian government to rethink the road, with even UNESCO threatening it might

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<sup>6</sup> [http://forests.org/shared/alerts/sendsm.aspx?id=tanzania\\_serengeti](http://forests.org/shared/alerts/sendsm.aspx?id=tanzania_serengeti). (Last accessed: 8 December 2010). See also the update:

<http://www.savetheserengeti.org/news/highway-news/world-scientists-petition-for-alternate-highwaywarn-of-dangers/> (Last accessed: 27 December 2010).

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.savetheserengeti.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/SENAPA\\_ENV\\_IMPACT\\_10\\_3.pdf](http://www.savetheserengeti.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/SENAPA_ENV_IMPACT_10_3.pdf) (Last accessed: 8 December 2010).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/pages/STOP-THE-SERENGETI-HIGHWAY/125601617471610> (Last accessed: 5 March 2011).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v467/n7313/full/467272a.html> (Last accessed: 8 December 2010). See also: <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v467/n7317/full/467788e.html>.

take the Serengeti off the World Heritage list if the plan continues.<sup>10</sup> While the above is only the tip of the iceberg and the debate contains diverse viewpoints, it is clearly driven by Western conservationists and often harks back to well-trodden neocolonial arguments about wildlife and local population growth, while few direct links are made to the Western consumerism that is partly responsible for the road (namely, in order to more rapidly transport rare-earth metals from Lake Victoria to the coast for production in China). At the same time, there is hardly any mention of how the Serengeti was produced by evicting Maasai from the area during colonial times and, therefore, that the Serengeti is anything but ‘natural’ or pristine. What is particularly salient is that many of the conservationists and their supporters feel a sense of ‘entitlement’ to the Serengeti (Dietz 1996), or, as I call it, frame the Serengeti as an ‘inverted commons’, a commons that surpasses Tanzanian jurisdiction and whose value can seemingly be appropriately appreciated only by outsiders.

International outbursts over African nature like the one around the Serengeti highway are rare. African conservation politics, heated though they are, seldom attract international headlines. This, however, does not mean that many of the same emotions, arguments and political strategies do not play a role in day-to-day conservation. They do, but involving thousands of different actors across hundreds of sites all across the continent. While this diversity precludes absolute generalisations, this chapter argues that at least one major common dynamic can be identified in that many conservation strategies increasingly depend on the neoliberalisation of nature.

### *The neoliberalisation of nature*

If we want to understand the neoliberalisation of nature, we must first clarify what we mean by neoliberalism. As the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of current ‘neoliberal conservation’ mechanisms, I will only touch on the basic elements of the concept and refer the reader to the burgeoning literature for more in-depth discussions (see: McCarthy & Prudham 2004; McCarthy 2005; Sullivan 2006, 2009; Igoe & Brockington 2007; Brockington et al. 2008; Büscher

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz/component/content/article/37-tanzania-top-news-story/4220-serengeti-faces-axe-from-heritage-body.html> (Last accessed: 8 December 2010).

2008, 2010a, 2010b; Brockington & Duffy 2010; Duffy & Moore 2010; Fletcher 2010; Igoe 2010; Büscher et al. forthcoming).

Neoliberalism has been defined and used in such disparate ways and contexts that James Ferguson (2010) rightly calls for more clarity in its ‘uses’. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as an international project of the ruling class to ‘liberate’ capitalism from social, political and other constraints (especially state intervention) (Harvey 2005). In contrast, I define it as a political ideology (plus related practices) that attempts to subordinate social and political affairs to capitalist market dynamics (see Büscher 2008; Büscher et al. forthcoming). In describing neoliberalism as an ideology, I am not saying that neoliberal practices are of less importance. Rather, I wish to focus attention on neoliberalism as a world-making exercise: its proponents pursue an ideal world where rational markets and rational human beings respond to price signals and economic incentives and so create a balanced global economy and equality between individuals. This immediately emphasises a second important point: namely, the disconnect with neoliberal practices, which are – in the words of Brenner et al. (2010) – extremely variegated and geographically uneven.<sup>11</sup> This reality makes the ideal – the perfect market ‘incentivisation’ of humans in combination with that same ‘incentivisation’ of biodiversity and ecosystems – into such a far-fetched proposition that it requires continuous ideological (re)interpretation (or ‘public relations’ and ‘marketing’, in business lingo) to make it legitimate and believable. But to stress the disjointed, variegated nature of neoliberal practice is not to juxtapose it to some monolithic ideology; far from it. Ideology here is seen as a set of principles and ideals that together form a framework of thought that guides actions. Some pillars of this framework are relatively coherent across space and time, but their exact combination, weight and socio-cultural, ecological and political embeddings can vary wildly (see Castree 2008).

What then are some of these ‘pillars’? I will focus on just four for brevity’s sake: commodification, competition, economic and methodological reductionism, and reregulation. Commodification encompasses the change from qualitatively defined use or inherent values of

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<sup>11</sup> Brenner et al., however, see neoliberalism solely through regulatory mechanisms which I believe to be a reductionism that does not do justice to the teleological qualities of neoliberalism as an ideal system of societal/social behavior. Moreover, unlike Brenner et al., I distance myself from defining neoliberalism as a mere ‘tendency’.

objects and things to quantitatively defined exchange values (McDonald & Ruiters 2005: 21), while competition refers to an ‘environment’ where different players perpetually strive to outdo each other, to struggle to come out best, on top, with most assets, etc. Together, these two elements form important principles for the regulation of public affairs through devolved governance (McCarthy 2005), or what Foucault would refer to as the ‘discipline of the market’. Of course, these dynamics are much older than the neoliberal project; they are core elements of the capitalist mode of production (Harvey 2006). Under neoliberalism, however, they have received renewed legitimacy as pillars of a system of *governance* that has radically altered human and human-nature relationships as well as landscapes and ecologies across the globe (Moore 2010).

But neoliberalism is not just about emphasising changing relationships *across* reality. Carolan (2005) also points towards our vertical penetrations *into it* by way of the two self-reinforcing dynamics of economic and methodological reductionism. Economic reductionism prioritises ‘private ownership’, ‘market-based management’, commoditisation, and so forth. Methodological reductionism entails the managerial and technical “‘breaking’ of the world down into its constituent parts”. These tactics, he argues, have important consequences: “although science and the market seek to continually dissect reality into its constituent parts, creating in its wake a world full of unitary, unproblematic, and ontologically fixed objects, *such epistemic manoeuvring denies the rooted, emergent, and interconnected qualities those objects have as ecologically embedded entities*. All of which, in turn, leads to activities rife with unintended consequences” (Carolan 2005: 408-9, italics added). Thus, while neoliberal tactics *across* reality change, the way we see, experience and understand reality continues to be pervaded by logics of economic and methodological reductionism, thereby further substantiating neoliberal ‘world-making’ ambitions.

All of this is still very general; what is crucially missing is that these world-making ideas and practices are developed and stimulated by actors – and not just private-sector actors, but actors across the so-called ‘public-private divide’, with special emphasis on the role of the state (Büscher 2010a). Quoting Peck & Tickell (2002: 384):

there seems to have been a shift from the pattern of deregulation and dismantlement so dominant during the 1980s, which might be characterised as “roll-back neoliberalism,” to an emergent phase of active state-building and

regulatory reform – an ascendant moment of “roll-out neoliberalism.” In the course of this shift, the agenda has gradually moved from one preoccupied with the active *destruction and discreditation* of Keynesian-welfarist and social collectivist institutions (broadly defined) to one focused on the purposeful *construction and consolidation* of neoliberalised state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations.

Thus enters the last pillar, reregulation: the crucial acceptance that neoliberal governance depends on governmental mechanisms and regulations to make capitalist markets function.

While these changes can also be seen occurring in parts of Africa (particularly Southern Africa), they often remain tentative and limited to particular (geographic, thematic) areas of intervention. As Ferguson argued, capital does not spread across Africa; instead it ‘hops’, landing only in enclaves of privatised space (Ferguson 2006). This then leaves a lot of space for other (non-governmental, private foreign governmental, individual) actors to exploit the ‘governance gaps’, which is exactly what we see happening in conservation (Brockington et al. 2008). Reinforced by international donor demands and neoliberal global environmental treaties, we see NGOs and private sector organisations (often in unison) taking the lead in neoliberalising nature in African settings. Let us now move to some of the major ways in which this is currently pursued.

#### *Important neoliberal conservation tactics*

While this disclaimer has already been made, it deserves repeating that the neoliberal conservation tactics in the discussion that follows below are being pursued in very different ways across the African continent, with very different outcomes for peoples and nature. Duffy & Moore (2010) stress the importance of Brenner and Theodore’s ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ to remain attentive to the fact that neoliberalism is not all-powerful and monolithic, but variegated geographically, socially, culturally and ecologically. With that in mind, I will elaborate upon what I believe are important neoliberal conservation tactics currently pursued across Africa: the commercialisation of parks’ management, ecotourism, payments for ecosystem services, and carbon trade and the ‘REDD’ mechanism (reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation). Two newer tactics that I believe will play important roles in the coming decade are conservation through Web 2.0/social media and new financial mechanisms such as

conservation derivatives, species banking, and sustainability enhancement investments. All these were chosen on the basis on research on neoliberal conservation in Southern Africa over the last eight years and therefore not the result of a rigorous survey of 'experts' or others. Moreover, the way they will be discussed is tentative, incomplete and partial, touching only on some major developments and issues in an associative manner. Many important issues, caveats and trends are no doubt missing, and I therefore hope this overview will invite readers to extend (empirically/theoretically) and/or amend where needed.

#### *Commercialisation of park management*

One of the most obvious but often ignored ways in which the neoliberalisation of nature is pursued is the commercialisation of the management of protected areas (but see Child 2004). Even Brockington et al. (2008) – in their otherwise very complete overview of conservation, capitalism and protected areas – only touch indirectly on this aspect through a focus on private parks (pp. 182-5). Park management structures in many countries in Africa are often long-standing state institutions, though capacity, experience and organisational and institutional capabilities differ enormously. One of South Africa's provincial conservation agencies, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, for example, is better funded, better organised and has more capacity than many similar institutions throughout West Africa combined. The point is that many of these public institutions, especially in Southern Africa, have commercialised park management – for example, through the outsourcing of catering and facilities, introduction of 'new public management' principles in financial and organisational management, and the overall reconstitution of parks as 'business units'. In South Africa, especially, this has been going on for quite some time. Dressler & Büscher (2008) describe how South African National Parks, the national parks authority in South Africa, has systematically changed park management, particularly that of its major 'cash-cow', Kruger National Park, to fit the neoliberal mantras of commercialisation, competition and economic reductionism (see also Child 2004). This change, however, is no easy or linear process. South African National Parks was recently (October 2010) forced to take back 'in-house'

their ‘Wildcard’ reward programme after the private company, Infinity, reneged on their contract.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these ‘hiccups’, a clear trend is visible in several parts of Africa to neoliberalise public park management. This is accompanied by a strong surge in the establishment of private parks (see Brockington et al. 2008). Again, mainly in Eastern and Southern Africa, private protected areas have seen rapid growth over the last decade, both in numbers as well as total area of land under conservation. In South Africa, a rapidly growing industry has developed around the conversion from farmland to private wildlife farms and parks (Spiereburg et al. 2011). Another model of private park development is the ‘buying up’ of public parks and reconstituting them on business principles. The ‘classic’ example here is the organisation ‘African Parks’. Founded by millionaire Dutch wildlife enthusiast Paul Fentener van Vlissingen in 2000, African Parks communicates their mission as follows:

Many of Africa’s national parks and protected areas face an uncertain future. Governments have committed large tracts of land to the establishment of national parks to conserve their natural heritage, but suffer from the same constraints – a lack of financial resources and limited management expertise and commercial skills that drive successful businesses worldwide. At the same time there is pressure from surrounding communities who often derive little benefit from the existence of parks and hence often use the resources unsustainably. The African Parks Network was established as a solution to this situation. It manages parks in public-private partnerships with Governments on a long term basis, by combining world class conservation practice with business expertise.<sup>13</sup>

African Parks is also a ‘classic’ case in another sense: it neatly fits Hughes’ remark that conservation still dabbles in colonial nostalgia,<sup>14</sup> while – contra rhetoric – they do not always take local communities seriously as ‘partners’. In 2004, African Parks caused a major uproar by being implicated in the displacement of several thousands of

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.sanparks.org/about/news/default.php?id=1550> (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.african-parks.org/apffoundation/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=71](http://www.african-parks.org/apffoundation/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=71) (Last accessed: 27 December 2010).

<sup>14</sup> See the unashamedly neo-colonial introduction video on the African Parks website, with its representation of black people as poachers and workers, and whites as the ‘saviors’ of African wildlife: [http://www.african-parks.org/apffoundation/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=128&Itemid=159](http://www.african-parks.org/apffoundation/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=128&Itemid=159) (Last accessed: 4 February 2011).

Mursi people living in and around Ethiopia's Omo National Park.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, African Parks withdrew from Ethiopia completely, and now concentrates on DRC, Rwanda, Malawi and Zambia.

While African Parks may be an extreme case, they are not alone. Private parks often feel they need to dabble in colonial nostalgia in order to attract those that supposedly provide the solution to many problems: tourists.

### *(Eco)tourism*

“In the last two decades tourism has become the key rationale used to underpin the maintenance of protected areas through claims that conservation will ‘pay its way’ via the development of tourism” (Brockington et al. 2008: 131). While there is no space to go into this subject in depth, the one point that needs to be made is that tourism is by no means a ‘neutral’ force balancing conservation and development in Africa. Rather, as argued by Duffy & Moore (2010: 743), “the tourism industry is one means by which nature is neoliberalised, since it allows neoliberalism to target and open up new frontiers in nature”. This is especially achieved through ecotourism, which “has even greater claims attached to it: that it is *the* environmentally sustainable form of development for Africa” (Duffy 2006: 131, emphasis in original). What it also does is tie biodiversity closer into the continent's increasingly neoliberal political economy: “Tourism and ecotourism are underpinned by a market oriented strategy that neatly fits with the outlook of neo-liberalism” (idem).

In the literature, it is often pointed out that ecotourism depends on certain constructions of ‘Africa’, which, as argued by Dunn (2004: 487), are reminiscent of colonial times: “It is clear that Africa is often presented as an exoticised destination in which to see and consume both ‘nature’ and the ‘native’. This disposition, informed by and built upon colonial travel narratives and tropes, entails the practice of commodifying Africa and marketing it for Western consumption”. Similarly, Nelson argues that “the emotional power of these images for European and American audiences is not in doubt; nor is their usefulness for fund-raising purposes” (Nelson 2003: 80) – and, one can add, for tourism purposes. This ‘usefulness’ has steadily increased in the last two decades to the point where tourism has become

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<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.conservationrefugees.org/takeover.html> (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

one of the fastest growing industries and foreign exchange earners in many countries in Africa.<sup>16</sup> In 1999, the UN World Tourism Organisation already indicated that “the great international interest in wild-life conservation will place Sub-Saharan Africa in an advantageous marketing position if conservation programs are pursued in the region”.<sup>17</sup> This was prescient, at least from a profit-oriented perspective: while tourism numbers across the world plummeted during the 2008-9 financial crisis, they remained stable in many African countries, sometimes even increasing.

#### *Payments for ecosystem services*

While the commercialisation of parks and tourism are by far the major neoliberal conservation tactics pursued across Africa, others are also making inroads. One of the main, new trends is Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), the idea that the value of ecosystems should be captured in monetary terms and conserved through market dynamics. Where tourism relies on *outside* investments from tourists, PES aims to create a market from existing socio-ecological settings by reconstituting social relationships in neoliberal terms. A report published by the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project, a major conservation initiative across the border of Lesotho and South Africa, explains PES as follows:

Payment for environmental services provides an incentive for directing landowners towards environment management actions that address priority environmental services, such as water security. As a payment system directly links buyers and producers of environmental services, it builds relationships between people who are economically linked and allows market based transactions to take place, reducing the need for further state regulation. Furthermore it focuses on measurable deliverables and consequently sharpens the performance of conservation actors (public, private or communal) (Diederichs & Mander 2004: 5).

This is an obvious case of economic reductionism, where social relations, individual behaviour and their environmental effects are reduced to market incentives, calculated in quantitative monetary terms. Moreover, PES relies on elements of commercialisation and competition as ways to ‘efficiently’ share costs and benefits of

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<sup>16</sup> For figures, see [www.world-tourism.org](http://www.world-tourism.org).

<sup>17</sup> <http://pub.unwto.org/WebRoot/Store/Shops/Infoshop/Products/1116/1116-1.pdf>, page 11 (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

conservation. However, how PES actually functions in various African settings is largely unknown, as few cases have been empirically investigated. As such, the debate focuses mainly on the conceptual level, with proponents and opponents in often heated exchanges (see Redford & Adams 2009). What is certain, however, is that PES in Africa is stimulated by many influential actors. An example is the Katoomba Group, an 'international network' "working to promote and improve capacity related to markets and payments for ecosystem services", supported by major international organisations, donors, conservation NGOs and private companies, including UNDP, the World Bank, FAO, DFID, Conservation International, IUCN, The Nature Conservancy, Tokyo Electric Power Co and the Zurich Bank.<sup>18</sup> Four of its recent events were held in Africa, the last one (October 2009 in Ghana) seeking to "incorporate the value of nature's services into West Africa's economy".<sup>19</sup>

### *Carbon trade and REDD*

One of the major threats to conservation in Africa and across the world is climate change. With ever more carbon pumped into the global atmosphere, it is obvious that ecosystems across the globe are under increasing and sustained pressure and might lose many of their so-called 'services' that PES initiatives aim to conserve. But, as Brockington et al. (2008: 176) point out, "the conservation and policy responses are fascinating because they demonstrate that concerns about carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases are becoming yet another means for conservation and capitalism to work closely together". Indeed, instead of questioning the system responsible for producing the enormous greenhouse emissions that trigger climate change, the neoliberal response is to see this challenge as another frontier for commodification, market competition and economic reductionism. Two major tactics are carbon trading, where carbon polluters can 'offset' their emissions by buying 'stored carbon' in other parts of the world, and REDD (reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation), "a proposal to provide financial incentives to help developing countries voluntarily reduce national deforestation rates and

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.katoombagroup.org/sponsors.php> (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

<sup>19</sup> See: [http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/article.page.php?page\\_id=7144&section=home](http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/article.page.php?page_id=7144&section=home) (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

associated carbon emissions. Countries that demonstrate emissions reductions may be able to sell those carbon credits on the international carbon market or elsewhere” (Gibbs et al. 2007: 2).

REDD and carbon-trade-based off-setting schemes are being pursued throughout Africa, including west and northern Africa. While REDD projects are mainly focused on forests, off-setting schemes come in many different formats. The majority of projects also focus on forests and plantations, but energy efficiency schemes such as cooking stove replacements are also popular.<sup>20</sup> While Africa is responsible only for 3% of the global carbon trade (Bond et al. 2009), this percentage is likely to increase as African countries are increasingly seen as attractive places for carbon off-setting. Moreover, after the recent (though half-hearted) endorsement of the REDD scheme at the 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties of the Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancun, REDD projects are likely to increase across Africa, making this another neoliberal conservation tactic which Africans, particularly local peoples that are the focus of many NGOs’ worries about REDD, will have to negotiate.

#### *Web 2.0, social media and new financial mechanisms*

The foregoing neoliberal conservation tactics are all fairly well established, though PES, carbon trading, and REDD are still in their early stages. While these already seem enough to deal with in terms of understanding and negotiating their technical and political complexities and actual impacts on peoples and nature, further strategies are continuously added to the mix. Two are worth mentioning: new internet-based conservation strategies and new financial conservation mechanisms.

Social media and Web 2.0 applications allow people to share, form and rate online content, and have become crucial new ways for conservation organisations to reach audiences and – vice versa – for concerned citizens to take action and be ‘green’. An example of a Web 2.0 site that supports conservation initiatives in Africa is Pifworld, a website that argues that ‘doing good’ can be done by ‘Playing it Forward’. One can “Join Pifworld and invite three friends to do the same. If your friends also invite three friends and these friends invite three others we will reach the number of ten million people in

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<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.forestcarbonportal.com/> and <http://www.carboncatalog.org/projects/africa/>.

no time”.<sup>21</sup> ‘Doing good’ involves many things: “enable kids to go to school, free child slaves, protect endangered animals or even build a massive wildlife park”.<sup>22</sup> This wildlife park is the Kavango-Zambezi transfrontier conservation area between Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and the money from Pifworld goes directly to the Peace Parks Foundation (see above). While no doubt the claims made by Pifworld are exaggerated, these new technical-communication and information-sharing mechanisms provide conservation organisations with new means to pursue support, legitimacy and – especially – funding.

Finding financial means is a constant pressure on conservation organisations and in order to connect these financial needs with – mainly Western – consumers and companies’ needs to contribute to solving environmental problems or off-set their environmental impacts, an increasing number of new financial mechanisms are being developed. Examples are conservation derivatives, species and wetland banking, and sustainability enhancement investments.<sup>23</sup> Like the carbon market, all these turn the conservation of nature into quantifiable financial mechanisms that allow consumers, developers and others to ‘off-set’ their impact on species, wetlands and ecosystems by buying credits that guarantee ‘no net loss’ of what was destroyed (Pawliczek & Sullivan, forthcoming). These mechanisms are also in the beginning stages and are highly dependent on ‘reregulation’ to develop standards for quantification and trading. Interestingly, although it is unclear whether these mechanisms have any impact, they have already attracted institutional speculators betting on the survival of species or ecological integrity of wetlands. This, however, is mainly in the US and Europe – but they are also finding their way into African spaces, as is evident from progress tracked through the [www.ecosystemmarketplace.com](http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com) website.

Both these mechanisms – Web 2.0 and new financial conservation constructs – drastically complicate the ways in which biodiversity and nature are turned into capital that circulates through the global economy, in terms of both finance and the imagination that link Western consumers to African environments. All this will happen with uncertain and uneven effects; but if history is anything to go by, we

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.pifworld.com/#/aboutpifworld> (Last accessed: 11 May 2010).

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/> for an overview of such financial conservation mechanisms.

should be profoundly sceptical of solutions based on the same logic that created the problems in the first place. However, to confirm this scepticism, the conceptual and empirical study of these new mechanisms will be of utmost importance.

*Negotiating neoliberal conservation?*

As is clear from the foregoing, neoliberal conservation is developing rapidly in Africa, with different outcomes for people and nature. Moreover, it is clear that, despite the recent financial crisis, they are thriving, even intensifying (Büscher & Arsel, forthcoming). All this leads to the question of how this barrage of neoliberal conservation is negotiated by Africa and Africans? This is a very difficult question that cannot be answered in a short chapter. Therefore, this section merely aims to outline some major issues at stake, in the hope that they will add to the other arguments presented in this volume.

The first point is that it is obviously not only non-Africans who put forth neoliberal conservation. As we have seen, some of the strongest proponents are Africans themselves, such as the Peace Parks Foundation. Nevertheless, these remain the minority. Overwhelmingly, many of the neoliberal conservation proposals are proposed, stimulated and financially backed up by – mainly Western – non-Africans, making it safe to say that the vast majority of African actors (individuals, organisations, governments) need to find ways to respond to and deal with the various tactics. Therefore, whereas the variations in ‘actually existing neoliberalisation’ are enormous, and generalisations about the particular outcomes of the neoliberalisation of nature in particular places across the continent cannot be made (Duffy & Moore 2010), what can be generalised is the need for Africans to negotiate the tidal wave of neoliberal conservation.

One important way of negotiation is simply welcoming and/or accommodating neoliberal conservation mechanisms that bring in funds, potential jobs and so forth. Many African governments actively work together with international donors, companies and NGOs to accommodate PES, carbon trading, commercialisation of park management and – especially – tourism. From Kenya’s coasts to The Gambia’s beaches, from South Africa’s wildlife parks to Uganda’s reserves, tourism is pursued on a substantial scale across Sub-Saharan Africa, with massive new infrastructure developments taking place. At the same time (as is clear from other contributions to this volume),

many if not all of these schemes are appropriated locally, caught up in local, regional and national politics and necessarily involve many contradictory dynamics and struggles. Like capitalist development more generally, neoliberal conservation developments are inherently geographically uneven (see Harvey 2006), and this unevenness is likely even more pronounced in many African settings (Ferguson 2006). Moreover, this unevenness is perpetuated by new ways in which ‘outsiders’ can lay claims on and entitlements to African nature, particularly through the above-mentioned Web 2.0 and new financial mechanisms. All this provides opportunities for negotiation and appropriation, as well as new challenges. The major challenge is that power structures in neoliberal conservation settings are incredibly diffused (Peck & Tickell 2002).

This is not to say that there is no resistance to neoliberal conservation in Africa; on the contrary, there are many active NGOs, particularly in South and Southern Africa, resisting the neoliberalisation of nature in Africa. One major example is the Climate Justice Now! Network, which in 2004 launched the Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading (see Bond et al. 2009): “As representatives of people’s movements and independent organisations, we reject the claim that carbon trading will halt the climate crisis. This crisis has been caused more than anything else by the mining of fossil fuels and the release of their carbon to the oceans, air, soil and living things”.<sup>24</sup> The network is very clear about what the type of conservation mechanism they are dealing with:

History has seen attempts to commodify land, food, labour, forests, water, genes and ideas. Carbon trading follows in the footsteps of this history and turns the earth’s carbon-cycling capacity into property to be bought or sold in a global market. Through this process of creating a new commodity – carbon – the Earth’s ability and capacity to support a climate conducive to life and human societies is now passing into the same corporate hands that are destroying the climate.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Africans are becoming increasingly active on the internet, one of the major public spaces where ideas are formed, support garnered and information spread. Here also, resistance to neoliberal conservation can be heard, albeit the African voices often drown in a cacophony of non-African comments. But while most of the com-

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.durbanclimatejustice.org/durban-declaration/english.html> (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

<sup>25</sup> *Idem.*

ments on [www.savetheserengeti.org](http://www.savetheserengeti.org) are from Westerners condemning the ‘destruction’ of the Serengeti, a Tanzanian commentator writes:

As a Tanzanian I find the comments here ... to exemplify the hypocrisy that is western conservation ... where many exhibit a love of African landscape, resources and wildlife but not its people ... I believe this is a conspiracy not only against Tanzania and Tanzanians but Africa in general, ... designed to create conditions where the continent and its people continue to subsidise the rest of humanity and thus help restore the sanity of the western world as the quintessential custodians of the environment. I have heard statements such as “I love the Serengeti, ... it’s the last heaven on earth; but in truth, these views are narrow and hollow sentiments emanating from the sensation you westerners and your allies get upon regaining a sense of humanity following a site visit to Serengeti or any similar protected area in Tanzania or Africa”<sup>26</sup>

While these acts of resistance target the heart of the matter when it comes to Western-imposed neoliberal conservation, other acts of resistance/negotiation are less clear about what they are targeting. An example comes from Nobel-prize winner Wangari Maathai. She authored the manifesto ‘Africa Speaks up on Climate Change’, which states:

Africa is the continent that will be hit hardest by climate change. Unpredictable rains and floods, prolonged droughts, subsequent crop failures, and rapid desertification, among others, have in fact already begun to change the face of our continent. Africa must not remain silent as rich nations fight over ways to stop climate change. Africa must speak up against activities that accelerate the looming climate crisis, and it must do so loud and clear!<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Maathai endorses carbon trading, something that earned her criticism from grassroots organisations, activists and academics.<sup>28</sup>

One could go on listing examples of different negotiation tactics by African actors, but the overall argument I wish to make is that this negotiation is exceedingly difficult because the neoliberalisation of Africa’s resources works through global ideologies of power and systems of rule where African actors have historically had – and continue to have – a weak position. This goes for international environ-

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.savetheserengeti.org/issues/stop-the-serengeti-highway/> (Last accessed: 27 December 2010).

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.boell.org.za/downloads/afrikas\\_stimme\\_gegen\\_klimawandel.pdf](http://www.boell.org.za/downloads/afrikas_stimme_gegen_klimawandel.pdf) (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

<sup>28</sup> See: <http://www.tni.org/article/africa-and-climate-finance-controversy> (Last accessed: 28 December 2010).

mental fora, but also for many local situations between unequal 'partners'. This is particularly poignant when neoliberal conservation is brought in via the 'back door', as 'sustainability initiatives' by big companies that wreak environmental and social havoc. An example is the conservation work by mining corporation Rio Tinto in Southeast Madagascar. As shown by Seagle (2009), Rio Tinto – in response to the pollution of water, the limiting of access to land and other negative socio-environmental impacts – began several 'integrated compensation packages' revolving around ecotourism, conservation management, plantations, etc. About these measures, Seagle (2009: 66) notes:

By working with local leaders to enforce conservation, Rio Tinto creates divisions within communities, reminiscent of the French colonial State's political tactic of "divide and rule" (turning the population against each other in order to better control them). The *dina* (a Malagassy tradition to acquire social obligations) also puts added responsibilities on local communities in terms of natural resource management and policing protected areas, creating tensions within the village.

From Seagle's study, it is clear that power differences made negotiating neoliberal conservation more difficult, as Rio Tinto has a powerful position owing to the resources and political connections it commands. Moreover, the company pursues conservation as something 'good' in a reaction to its own profitable actions which are regarded as environmentally and socially negative for local Malagassy. This takes attention away from the fact that conservation itself can also have negative impacts on how Africans can relate to or keep control over their land, cultures, and livelihoods.

But the real 'big picture' here is that African nature is often framed as 'inverted commons': a special type of commons that belongs to the whole globe but for which only Africans pay the real price in terms of their conservation. The last section will briefly dwell on this while providing some concluding thoughts.

### *Conclusion*

Through tactics such as the commercialisation of parks' management, ecotourism, payments for ecosystem services, and carbon trade and 'REDD', Africa's nature is being reconstituted in neoliberal terms. While this neoliberalisation of nature in Africa is variegated, profoundly uneven and never linear, this chapter has argued that, on the

whole, this neoliberalisation is a sea-change in the relations between Africans and their biodiversity and wildlife, one that will have massive implications for both. It has also showed that there is resistance to and appropriation of some of these processes, but these are mostly localised and unconnected. In the face of the potential power that capital is placing behind the neoliberalisation of nature in Africa, the odds are extremely uneven and stacked against ordinary, local Africans. This reality, however, is obscured behind a peculiar ‘politics of neoliberal conservation’ that depends on win-win consensus constructions and anti-political rhetoric (Büscher 2010a). Most especially, as argued in this chapter, Africa’s nature is being commodified through a rhetorical strategy that I refer to as ‘inverted commons’: a common resource whose global ecological, political and emotional importance trumps desires and rights of local African actors. This tactic is cynical, particularly in the light of historical and contemporary world politics, which has consistently violated African rights and desires. Moreover, the framing is ironic in that ‘inverted commons’ statements about Africa’s nature do not say under what type of regimes these are governed. When these governance regimes are increasingly neoliberal, they even function to further wrest control of African ecosystems and wildlife from Africans themselves, as African nature – that global commons – is increasingly sold to Western, white investors.

While this framing makes it very difficult to negotiate the neoliberalisation of nature in Africa, it is important to remember that notions of ‘inverted commons’ can be deflated quickly when the argument is turned around. While doing fieldwork in Zimbabwe, I once heard a Zimbabwean colleague make the comment that if – in this case – Dutch people were so concerned with African elephants and wanted to conserve them so badly, then Zimbabwe could put all their elephants on several mega-ships and transport them to Rotterdam harbour, adding they would do this ‘free of charge’. Dutch people could then do with them whatever they wanted. These types of ‘turn-arounds’ bring the message home quite vividly: the pressure put on African actors to conserve their wildlife and biodiversity often omits the role of outside actors in these pressures and the sacrifices local Africans have to endure living with (often dangerous) wildlife. It is time to put the spotlight back where it belongs.

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