

Neo-liberal Conservation and the Cementing of Inequality: Interview with Bram Büscher

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Bram Büscher from the Institute of Social Studies The Netherlands talks to Assistant Editor Laura Fano Morrissey about neo-liberal conservation, energy policies and the Green Economy.

LFM: Your work focuses on neo-liberal conservation in Southern Africa. How have these conservation programmes impacted on people on the ground? Can you give us some examples of how they have changed poor peoples' livelihoods?

BB: Before answering the question it is perhaps good to say what 'neo-liberal conservation' entails. In brief, neo-liberal conservation is the attempt to make the conservation of nature compatible with capitalist market dynamics. It is therefore not a particular programme, but rather a set of mechanisms, practices or interventions that aim to make capitalism and conservation compatible that can be inserted into, or mixed with other forms of conservation (Brockington and Duffy, 2010).

In the area where I have done most research so far, the mountainous Maloti-Drakensberg area between Lesotho and the South African province of KwaZulu Natal, there was one very distinctive effect on local livelihoods of a large, neo-liberal 'transfrontier conservation area' that was being implemented across the borders of the two countries, namely that there were hardly any effect at all, neither positive nor negative. While some people received some small benefits, the overwhelming effect of this US\$15.5 million intervention turned out to be almost negligible because the intervention – despite being planned to lead to impacts 'on the ground' – focused on abstract processes of governance, research, planning and marketing, much of it with the aim to establish the 'enabling environment' for marrying conservation and capitalism through such strategies as 'payments for environmental services' and tourism. I have referred to this outcome as 'derivative nature', which means that 'nature and rural communities (...) are increasingly becoming 'underlying assets' for what has become the primary source of value of neoliberal conservation, namely idealized images within the realms of branding, public relations and marketing (Büscher, 2010: 261). What happened was that much

Development 55(1): Upfront

of the capital injected in the area went into idealized ideas and frameworks that sought to (further) reconstruct the area as an ideal tourist attraction and an 'ecosystem service market', which left little for direct support of people's livelihoods. The project thus ultimately contributed to the further cementing of existing inequalities rather than addressing them or their root causes.

LFM: In your opinion, have neo-liberal conservation programmes also had an impact on global migration, pushing people off their land?

BB: This might relate to a second effect of the transfrontier conservation project, or rather an effect of their support to make the area more attractive for tourism. One of the major tourist developments in the area is the establishment of luxury golf resorts, which boast about their abilities to combine objectives of poverty alleviation, economic growth in impoverished areas and conservation of biodiversity and landscapes.¹ The effect of these projects has been the further enclosing of (access to) land, which – albeit often private before – local people used for grazing cattle and collecting resources. In my research, I have seen how the establishment of golf resorts is accompanied by the strict enclosure of land and the pitting of various local groups against each other in a competition over menial jobs. While providing some income to some people, this again cements existing inequalities rather than alleviating them, particularly as the golf resorts mostly cater to middle-class and elite white golf enthusiasts (Büscher, 2009a).

Obviously, this is but one example where the idea of neo-liberal conservation (and 'development') is used to enclose land and space. Recent literature gives ample more examples. Alice Kelly (2011) provides a very useful overview of neo-liberal conservation as 'primitive accumulation', which she defines as the enclosure of lands, but also 'bodies, social structures or ideas' (Kelly, 2011: 685), all of which lead to the circumscription or radical alteration of livelihoods. Another notable trend is what is referred to as 'green grabbing', on which a special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* will appear early 2012. In their introduction, Fairhead *et al.* (2012, forthcoming) refer to

green grabbing as 'the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends', which the contributors to the special issue show happens in many different contexts, from the imposition of protected areas to forest enclosures under REDD schemes.

LFM: Your work also focuses on the political economy of energy, especially on issues of energy equality and sustainability in Southern Africa. According to your research, how do we ensure that energy policies involve the participation of local communities and pose as little damage as possible to the environment?

BB: That is a good but difficult question, especially in the light of current energy dynamics in the region. I have just last summer (2011) done a research trip across Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique and the overwhelming issue that came out is the intensification of energy-development antagonisms. Particularly in Tete province, northern Mozambique, the developments are dire with people being displaced en masse to make way for coal mining for international energy markets, and soon the building of a new major dam, Mphanda Nkuwa, which is supposed to help provide the electricity that the booming industrial developments in the province will require. While I am yet to think through the implications of these dynamics, it is clear that governments like that of Mozambique face a stark choice between continued exploitation by foreign companies that leave little legacies but dispossession and displacement or putting the needs of their own people first. So far, it seems they have opted for the former, as many interviewees repeatedly stated that the Mozambican government has not only opened the door for exploitative foreign investments, it is highly implicated in these as well – again – through the appropriation of land that can in the future be sold to coal prospectors. Obviously, these are highly complex and contested processes that cannot be summed up in a couple of sentences, let alone changed through 'policy advice'. I believe that the only realistic way to address this is through an explicit focus on the 'political economy of energy' which challenges 'both the political-economic system of capitalist production and social relations,

as well as the political–ideological framework that supports and legitimates it’ (Büscher, 2009b: 3954).

LFM: How has the global systemic crisis impacted on environmental conservation? Have people been forced to pillage more natural resources in the hope of scrambling a better living?

BB: I believe there are two interesting trends going on in response to the global systemic crisis, which can be summed up as the contradictory intensification of both extraction *and* conservation (see forthcoming special feature of the *Journal of Social and Economic Geography* on this topic – Büscher and Arsel, 2012). Industrial resource extraction seems to be going on as before, and has even intensified, while conflicts over resources and land between parks and local people also seem to continue unabated in many parts of the world (Dressler and Roth, 2012). Conservation, particularly through protected areas, has in fact been under sustained pressure to the extent that a group of conservation biologists from the mid-1990s felt that they had to ‘defend’ the ‘barriers’ and move back to old colonial-style ‘fortress conservation’ approaches that relied on ‘fences and fines’ (Hutton *et al.*, 2005). At the same time, as stated above, we see an intensification and proliferation of neoliberal conservation initiatives, mechanisms and projects. Some of these have been around for some time, especially tourism but also payments for environmental services, but new mechanisms, particularly financialized conservation initiatives and (associated) ‘green grabs’, are booming. Examples here are ‘species banking’, ‘wetland credits’ and of

course initiatives based on carbon credits (Sullivan, 2011). The impacts of livelihoods on these trends are highly variegated and context specific, but they certainly let many people ‘scramble’ in order to make some kind of, let alone a ‘better living’.

LFM: The term Green Economy has become a new mantra. Do you think it can bring about genuine positive change for poorer people or it will hardly impact on the sources of social injustice?

BB: The way it is currently operationalized, certainly not. In fact, the Green Economy at the moment is meant to cover up the fact that contemporary capitalism promotes systemic inequality and worsens global environmental problems. But as with so many of these ‘umbrella initiatives’, things in practice are rarely – if ever – black or white, and thus it remains important to track the actual effects of the rolling out and performance of the Green Economy, or more precisely specific green economic initiatives. I am very excited to be part of a project led by Catherine Corson and Ken Macdonald who are planning to do exactly that: to try and track the roll-out of the Green Economy in major meetings and how these meetings shape policies and practices. The first big next step for the green economy is of course Rio+20, where proponents aim to ‘scale up the focus on natural capital’ (Macdonald and Corson, 2012) which is meant to further legitimize the idea that capitalism can remedy its own environmental contradictions through ‘neoliberal conservation’. I’ll be happy to report on the outcomes of the project to *Development* in due course!

Note

1 See <http://www.champagnesportsresort.com/> or <http://www.royalmaluti.com/> for just two examples.

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Development 55(1): Upfront

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