Editorial

Nature 2.0

Over the last decade, conservation organizations have rapidly adapted to web 2.0 and the social media age. Those supporting conservation organizations are urged to 'like' organizations and their projects on facebook, build websites around and for their favorite animals, join interactive conservation debates online and retweet important environmental news and campaign slogans. Nature, it seems, is increasingly 'saved' through mouse-clicks and double-taps. Thus, the Nature Conservancy urges their supporters to create their own my.nature.org page, which is 'the intersection between you & nature',[1] Conservation International asks visitors to 'connect 4 conservation' on an online global map in order to 'show that people need nature to thrive'[2]; and WWF stimulates followers to 'take action online with WWF', promising them that "by adding your voice to our campaigns, together, we can achieve big wins for our planet".[3] All of them sport the now familiar facebook, twitter, stumble, YouTube and other symbols, which offer further ways to interact with these organizations and so 'save nature'. Of course, these organizations are not alone in this trend; these days nearly all (major) conservation organizations are active on social media and offer web 2.0 communication and engagement possibilities to (potential) conservation supporters.

Web 2.0 applications differ from web 1.0 by enabling internet-users to 'co-create' and co-produce the online activities, services and information they consume (Fuchs, 2008; Harrison and Barthel, 2009; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). As such, they create new virtual forms and manifestations of nature and its conservation that intersect with material natures in complex new ways. These new forms and manifestations of nature are what I refer to as 'nature 2.0'. In this editorial, I want to briefly discuss and illustrate two aspects of this 'nature 2.0'. The first relates to how new online media further transform and reimagine ideas and ideals of 'pristine nature'. During the web 1.0 age, conservation supporters were much more dependent on conservation organizations to provide them with ideas and ideals of what pristine nature should look like. New web 2.0 and social media applications allow supporters to have a greater say in what these ideas and ideals might look like, and potentially even co-create them within the limits set by the media platforms within which they act. The second relates to contemporary neoliberal political economy of conservation that increasingly emphasizes the commodification of nature as necessary for its continued existence (McAfee, 1999; Büscher et al., 2012). New media, I argue, both encourage and complicate the commodification of

nature and its conservation. In turn, these two points intersect and frame each other in complex ways.

Before explaining and illustrating this in more depth, I want to clarify my emphasis on conservation within nature 2.0, which is to set it apart from the many other conceptualisations of technologically-mediated nature. White and Wilbert's (2009, p. 6) reference to 'technonatures', for example,

> "seeks to highlight a growing range of voices ruminating over the claim not only that we are inhabiting diverse social natures but also that knowledges of our world are, within such social natures, ever more technologically mediated, produced, enacted, and contested, and furthermore, that diverse peoples find themselves, or perceive themselves, as ever more *entangled* with things – that is, with technological, ecological, cultural, urban, and ecological networks and diverse hybrid materialities and non-human agencies".

While I agree with this general framing, what White and Wilbert seem to miss, or at least not explicitly address, is how within this increasing entanglement of people and things the *conservation* of nature is also being pursued, triggering further imaginations, knowledges, hybrid materialities and contestations. Some of the most important of these, I argue, are over ways of reimagining and commodifying nature.

First, web 2.0 and social media represent a new step within a longer trend that sees conservation and nature increasingly presented to and experienced by people through constructed (and commodified) goods and activities such as wildlife safaris, (eco)tourism adventures, documentaries, websites, animal memorabilia and so forth (Brockington, 2008). Many of these have in common that they are void of (local) people, thus perpetuating a heavily criticized nature/culture dichotomy that has long impacted negatively on local people's livelihoods (Neumann, 2004). Representations and experiences of 'unspoilt' nature, however, have become the capital on which conservation organizations, and increasingly private and governmental actors, depend to engage consumers in issues such as biodiversity loss or to promote a 'green' image and attract tourists. Web 2.0 and social media applications allow them, in turn, to influence, modify or even 'co-create' these representations and experiences to suit their own imaginations of 'pristine' and 'wild' nature. As the Nature Conservancy puts it when promoting their my.nature.org web 2.0 site: "You'll get green living tips, nature images, invitations and conservation news tailored to your interests!".[4]

---

[1] http://my.nature.org/nature/. Last viewed: 25 May 2012.
[2] http://secure2.convio.net/cintl/site/SPageNavigator/Connect4Conservation.html. Last viewed: 25 May 2012.
[3] http://wwf.panda.org/how_you_can_help/campaign/. Last viewed: 25 May 2012.

[4] http://my.nature.org/nature/. Last viewed: 1 August 2012.

Second, web 2.0 and social media add another important element to what has been termed 'neoliberal conservation' (Brockington and Duffy, 2010; Büscher et al., 2012). This term signals that the commodification of nature is seen as necessary to make conservation compatible with capitalism and to show the value of nature in monetary terms. Currently dominant forms of neoliberal conservation are (eco)tourism and 'payments for ecosystem services', but new strategies such as 'biodiversity derivatives' and 'species banking' are rapidly gaining popularity. Nature 2.0, then, allows for new possibilities to turn biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes into capital that circulates through the global digital economy as commodified (online) experiences and representations that (better) suit conservation consumers (Igoe, 2010). In the process, as suggested by Paterson and Stripple (2010), complex totalizing and individualizing governmentalities are created and encouraged (see also Fletcher, 2010).

Yet, Nature 2.0 also complicates the commodification of nature. Following Fuchs (2008, p. 247), we need "a dialectical view that sees cyberspace as a contradictory space that is embedded into societal antagonisms and hence is shaped by various conflicting tendencies of development". One of these antagonisms is between commodity and gift economies (Fuchs, 2008, p. 210; see also Streeter, 2011, p. 72). Fuchs argues that "although the gift model transcends the commodity model, it is also subsumed under capital" (Fuchs, 2008, p. 210). This is because "newer strategies of profit generation (social networking platforms, social software, Google, etc.) in the internet economy make use of information as a gift in order to achieve a high number of users and to build monopolies in certain fields so that they can charge high advertisement rates". These antagonisms that simultaneously stimulate and complicate the commodification of conservation are a critical feature of the developing dynamics of nature 2.0.

One example to illustrate these tendencies is the 'green search engine' Ecosia (http://www.ecosia.org). As a search engine, Ecosia is a web 2.0 application that depends on users to co-create the information they consume. The website describes itself as "a social business dedicated to environmental sustainability via the donation of revenue to the world's most effective rainforest protection programs". They explain how it works:

> "Our best-known service, the search engine mask at Ecosia.org, is powered by Bing and Yahoo. It lets an essential and routine task – searching the web – double as an ecological contribution: not only are Ecosia search emissions offset, but every click on a sponsored ad within Ecosia translates into either cents for the environment - or cents for generating more cents for the environment. Cents may not sound like much, but they certainly add up. From its inception until December 2010, Ecosia was able to generate just under 125,000 Euros (164,000 USD) for its rainforest protection program with the WWF – and that in just the first year!"[5]

Indeed, Ecosia's income has continued to grow steadily, and in June 2012, the website boasted that it had donated 872,380€ to the WWF rainforest protection program, making it a significant political-economic conservation tool. Corroborating Fuchs's (2008) ideas, Ecosia is an interesting case of the internet's antagonism between gift and commodity economies. This is, for instance, captured in Ecosia's 'social business principle', which they explain as follows:

> "Despite at least 80% of its revenue going to help sustain the world's rainforests, Ecosia is not an official non-profit organization – it's a social business. That means Ecosia is run like a normal business, so that it stands to compete with the likes of true

for-profit companies in the development and communication of innovative products, services and expertise. Unlike our revenue-driven counterparts, however, our aims are not higher payouts: our goal is to make the largest contribution possible to the protection of the environment via the world's rainforests. All proceeds generated by Ecosia's products and services are either redirected to rainforest sustainability programs or reinvested in the business. Along those same lines, we abstain from the practice of speculating on profits, and team members do not earn excessive salaries or wages".[6]

Interestingly, several types of gifts and commodities are intertwined and become virtually indistinguishable here. As a search engine, Ecosia provides a free gift to consumers through offering them web searches. They pay for this by selling commercial advertising space. In turn, they use 80% of their revenue to provide 'gifts' to 'rainforest sustainability programs'. Concretely, Ecosia has partnered with WWF[7] to support their efforts in protecting the Tumucumaque Mountains National Park in Brazil, as part of the larger Amazon Region Protected Areas program.[8] While there is no space here to go into the imaginations around this park, it is clear from the website that Ecosia caters to a particular audience (predominantly westerners searching on the net[9]) by espousing familiar 'visions of the Amazon' – as a globally important Eden and 'lungs of our planet' – that Candace Slater (2002: 15) refers to as 'gigantifications'. "Gigantifications are more often exaggerations than outright fabrications" and their capacity to "move viewers owes in part to their success in concealing other facets of a much larger reality", she argues. In turn, visitors are encouraged by Ecosia to actively share these gigantifications: "follow, like, tweet, subscribe, connect: Become part of the worldwide social sustainability conversation".[10] In the process, Ecosia supporters can reimagine and transform these gigantifications to fit their own ideas and ideals of rainforests without necessarily being aware of 'other facets of a much larger reality'.

Nature 2.0, as this one example shows, is already having a significant impact on the global political economy of conservation. Yet, this one illustration obviously triggers more questions than it answers. Amongst these are questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of the WWF programme, the limits of the commodification of conservation, the extent to which users are aware of 'larger realities', and the nature of the spaces that conservation consumers inhabit, employ and imagine on Ecosia and its sharing facilities on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. Furthermore, Ecosia is just one platform amongst a plethora of Nature 2.0 possibilities, many of which are only beginning to take off, triggering similar and other questions. Research into Nature 2.0 developments and dynamics will be crucial in the years to come in order to better understand its effects on the reimagining and commodification of nature and by extension, the political economy of global conservation and the 'social natures' and 'hybrid materialities' to which they lead.

---

[5] http://ecosia.org/about.php. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.

[6] http://ecosia.org/values.php. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.

[7] On their website, WWF state that "Ecosia donates 80% of the revenue generate from "paid searches" to WWF's Tumucumaque project in the Amazon. Ecosia also compensates all the carbon associated with each search made. For a quick and easy way to help the planet, Ecosia offers everyone with an internet connection the chance to help their one and only planet!". http://wwf.panda.org/how_you_can_help/campaign/ecosia_search/. Last viewed: 20 June 2012.

[8] See: http://www.worldwildlife.org/what/wherewework/amazon/WWFBinaryitem5243.pdf. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.

[9] On the website, Ecosia shows the statistics of the 'distribution of searches per country: 95.56% of all searches originate in western Europe or the USA (with Germany alone taking up 64.06%), making it safe to say that their target audience is 'western'. See: http://ecosia.org/statistics.php. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.

[10] http://ecosia.org/share.php. Last viewed: 2 August 2012.

References

Brockington, D., 2008. Powerful environmentalisms: conservation, celebrity and capitalism. Media Culture Society 30, 551–568.

Brockington, D., Duffy, R., 2010. Capitalism and conservation: the production and reproduction of biodiversity conservation. Antipode 42 (3), 469–484.

Büscher, B., Sullivan, S., Neves, K., Igoe, J., Brockington, D., 2012. Towards a synthesized critique of neoliberal biodiversity conservation. Capitalism, Nature Socialism 23 (2), 4–30.

Fletcher, R., 2010. Neoliberal environmentality: towards a poststructural political ecology of the conservation debate. Conservation and Society 8 (3), 171–181.

Fuchs, C., 2008. Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age. Routledge, New York.

Harrison, T.M., Barthel, B., 2009. Wielding new media in Web 2.0: exploring the history of engagement with the collaborative construction of media products. New Media & Society 11 (1&2), 155–178.

Igoe, J., 2010. The spectacle of nature in the global economy of appearances: anthropological engagements with the spectacular mediations of transnational conservation. Critique of Anthropology 30 (4), 375–397.

McAfee, K., 1999. Selling nature to save it? Biodiversity and green developmentalism. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 17 (2), 203–219.

Neumann, R.P., 2004. Moral and discursive geographies in the war for biodiversity in Africa. Political Geography 23, 813–837.

Paterson, M., Stripple, J., 2010. My space: governing individuals' carbon emissions. Society and Space 28, 341–362.

Ritzer, G., Jurgenson, N., 2010. Production, consumption, prosumption: the nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'Prosumer'. Journal of Consumer Culture 10 (3), 13–36.

Slater, C., 2002. Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Streeter, T., 2011. The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet. New York University Press, New York.

White, D., Wilbert, C., 2009. Introduction: inhabiting technonatural time/spaces. In: White, D.F., Wilbert, C. (Eds.), Technonatures: Environments, Technologies, Spaces, and Places in the Twenty-First Century. Wilfried Laurier University Press, Waterloo, pp. 1–32.

Bram Büscher

Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University,
The Netherlands

Department of Geography, Environmental Management & Energy
Studies, University of Johannesburg,
South Africa

Address: Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands.
Tel.: +31 (0) 70 4260 596; fax: +31 70 426 0799.
E-mail address: buscher@iss.nl
Received 9 August 2012

Available online 27 September 2012