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Selling Success: Constructing Value in Conservation and Development

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Summary. — “Selling success” is crucial in conservation and development. Solutions, ideas, projects, and people must actively be constructed as valuable to get donors and policy-makers to buy (into) them. Exactly how success “travels” and becomes capital, however, is not often explicated. Using a southern African conservation and development intervention, the paper compares “positive translation” along the project’s accountability chain with the broader circulation of positive references to the project’s payments for ecosystem services initiative. While both illuminate the construction of value in conservation and development, the paper concludes that a neoliberal context increasingly emphasizes the latter tactic of “epistemic circulation”.

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Key words — value, conservation, development, Southern Africa, payments for ecosystem services, success

1. INTRODUCTION

The Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project (MDTP) was a major Global Environment Facility/World Bank funded project implemented between 2003 and 2008 to stimulate conservation and development in the mountain areas between Lesotho and South Africa. Like many conservation and development projects, the way the MDTP is valued depends almost entirely on who one speaks to or what element of the project is referred to. Most of the important project elements, such as long-term planning, research, community-conservation, and international and inter-institutional cooperation, saw rather mixed or negative responses.¹ During field research from 2005 to 2007, I regularly heard important government and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) stakeholders complain about the “lack of practical results” and how much of the funding was not used for the expected and planned “on-the-ground” implementation but “wasted” on planning and research. This was contrary to the views of the project implementers, who vehemently defended these components as crucial for a lasting positive impact on the Maloti-Drakensberg area.²

At the same time, especially toward the end of and after the project, chants of how the overall MDTP and some of its components were a success started to circulate among international donor and policy communities. Most notably, the project’s payments for environmental services (PES) component was singled out and created a buzz among international donor and policy communities. It was often denoted a “success story”³ and deemed worthy of emulation in other interventions, something that seems curious considering that PES in the MDTP did not get beyond the feasibility stage. This paper analyzes these contradictory dynamics and asks how value is constructed in conservation and development and what mechanisms implementers and consultants employ to “sell success” within relevant policy and donor realms.

To address this question, I combine political economy with what Watts (2001) terms development ethnographies: analyses that aim to understand the “circulation and institutionalization processes” of (expert) knowledge, narratives, and ideas (Bebbington, 2005; Campbell, 2002; Corson, 2010; Goldman, 2001, 2007; Goldman, Nadasdy, & Turner, 2011; Li, 2007;

MacDonald, 2010; Mosse, 2005). This literature has been instrumental in showing the importance of (elite) “transnational policy networks” (Goldman, 2007: 790) for the dissemination and acceptance of particular ideas and practices. *How* exactly this dissemination works is less clear. In particular, development ethnographies are not often explicit about how practitioners imbue ideas and practices with positive connotations of success and how value is constructed across time and space. This, I argue, is crucial in order to deepen our understanding of conservation and development within the neoliberal global political economy, at the foundation of which “are conceptions about (...) space, time and value in all its forms” (Graham, 2006: 20).

The article offers two empirical cases that show how value is created through time and space. The first case builds on and reinterprets dominant ideas around value chains. Value chain analyses typically take a specific commodity as their starting point and trace the socio-environmental connections from production via distribution to consumption. If, then, we see value interpretations in projects like the MDTP as particular commodities, we could apply a value chain analysis to see how these interpretations are produced, distributed, and consumed by actors involved in and dependent on the conservation and development industry. The main difference, it seems, is that instead of focusing on material commodities such as coffee, clothing, or wine (Gibbon, 2003; Ponte & Ewerts, 2009), we are analyzing the *interpretation of value* as a commodity in itself (West, 2010). By investigating how complex community-based conservation realities are given multiple iterations of positive translation within the project hierarchy, the case helps to problematize accountability structures and provides a first intimation of how value travels in the global political economy of conservation and development.

The second case shows another way of selling success, one that I call “epistemic circulation”. Here, the emphasis is on the more general circulation of interpretations of value through

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time and space with a particular focus on Haas's (1989: 384) concept of "epistemic community": "a specific community of experts sharing a belief in a common set of cause-and-effect relationships as well as common values to which policies governing these relationships will be applied". In the case of the MDTP, this specifically concerned the project's "payments for ecosystem services" (PES) initiative. PES is currently part of a global neoliberal push to stimulate market solutions to conservation issues (McAfee & Shapiro, 2010) and the MDTP has, surprisingly considering that only feasibility studies were conducted, been posited as a "successful" example of PES in practice (Blignaut, Aronson, Mander, & Marais, 2008; Blignaut et al., 2010). The paper shows how involved consultants cultivated this success by getting positive interpretations of the PES sub-project to circulate among relevant donor, academic, and policy realms.

Comparing the two cases allows us to more clearly see how those involved in and dependent on the conservation and development industry market value interpretations that work to sell people, ideas, ecosystem services, and themselves.⁴ At the same time, the paper concludes that the emphasis in a neoliberal political economic context is exceedingly on epistemic circulation as this strategy increases the chances for success to become a valuable commodity in the competitive global conservation and development marketplace, and thus, crucially, *capital*, defined as *value in motion*. In order to make this argument, the first thing to do is to place it in broader theoretical discussions on value and capital within the political economy of conservation and development.

2. VALUE IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The concept of value has always been central to political economy and harbors many different theoretical strands and traditions (Graham, 2006). One tradition that has long influenced conservation and development debates is that of value chain analyses (Bair, 2009). While there are many variations on the chain theme, they share a central concern over tracing the "biographies" of commodities to see how different actors are linked and what other social and environmental consequences occur along the chain. Hartwick (1998), for example, shows how production, processing, and consumption dimensions of gold are linked through "vertical" long-distance relationships, but also consist of "horizontal" dimensions of local interrelationships along points on the chain. She argues that multiple chains often co-produce a single commodity, while so-called socio-environmental "halo-effects" are brought about by particular activities along the chain (Hartwick, 1998: 426).

More examples abound, but the majority of value chain studies employs a rather linear idea of chain and do not deal in much depth with value in the political economic context of neoliberal capitalism. Starosta (2010: 435) criticizes this tendency and argues that

"what commodity chain studies do is simply to offer, through an essentially inductive-empirical methodology, a typological description of the immediate outer manifestations of the determinations at stake. This failure firmly to explain the nature of GCCs [*Global Commodity Chains*] is expressed, for instance, in the disjuncture between the portrayal of the particular dynamics internal to each industry and the general dynamics of the "system as a whole"."

In turn, Starosta re-examines the commodity/value chain by emphasizing irregular circulatory dynamics of value over "captive governance structures" to explain how system-wide

dynamics of different capitalist actors force each other and themselves into particular modes of production, processing, and consumption (Starosta, 2010: 455).

Like Starosta, I wish to emphasize how the chain concept can lead to narrow ideas about how value travels in the global neoliberal political economy. The emphasis on "neoliberal"—here defined as an ideology geared toward substituting social and political dynamics for capitalist market processes—is important as it clarifies the function of particular value judgments such as success, namely to render them *capital*. Value in neoliberal capitalism (which in Marxian terms brings together use and exchange value) is the "universal equivalent"; it finds its general expression in money, occasionally taking the shape of commodities that embody particular use-values (Marx, 1976).⁵ In turn, money or commodities become capital only when they circulate and move, meaning capital must become "an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement" (Marx, 1976: 253). Marx therefore logically defines capital as "value in process", "value in motion". These processes and motions, as Harvey (2006) is keen to emphasize, do not follow linear paths, but intersect and circulate through highly complex and uneven geographical developments.

This is not to say that the chain approach is not useful. It can be instructive, as we shall see, to follow commodities (as particular, useful forms of capital and thus of value) along value chains to study the effects of their production, distribution, and consumption (Guthman, 2008). Yet, the chain approach remains a limiting way of understanding how value travels, particularly in a global political economy that has undergone profound changes over the last decades. Leading commentators stress that we have entered a knowledge or finance economy where many of the goods and services produced are less tangible, more ephemeral, and often purely financial (Castells, 2000). This should obviously not be exaggerated, as knowledge and financial commodities depend on and are integrated into the "real" or "material" economy. But it is clear—particularly after the recent financial crisis—that a shift has taken place in global value production from material to knowledge or financial commodities (Harvey, 2010).

Interpretations of success as particular types of commodities or capital in the conservation and development arena fit the emergence of a knowledge economy. Graham (2006: 4) describes the knowledge economy as an "economy of meaning", arguing that "the emergence of a "knowledge economy" in policy is nothing more than a political acknowledgment that certain classes of meaning are privileged: that there are more and less valuable meanings; that access to these meanings is restricted; and that meanings can in fact be owned and exchanged, if not entirely consumed". As a consequence, in the knowledge economy, (the idea of) value has become the ultimate commodity and therefore an object to be managed and manipulated.

Examples can be found all around: the UK Institute of Value Management aims to "develop and promote the professional practice of managing sustainable value to secure and ensure economic and social wellbeing",⁶ while Price Waterhouse Coopers aims to "build relationships" and "create value".⁷ Exactly what is meant by "value" remains unclear, often to the frustration of "value managers" themselves.⁸ Value seemingly can be found in almost any material or non-material commodity; as long as it conjures up performances, ideas or knowledges that consumers want to buy (into), it can become a source of profit and hence *capital*. Value, in Baudrillard's famous conceptualization, has become a sign or a signifier, which confer meaning, "prestige and

signify social status and power” (Sidaway, 2002: 264). From this perspective, truly “the production, exchange, and distribution of values” should be “the central focus of any political economic understanding” (Graham, 2006: 5). Hence, if we want to understand the political economy of conservation and development, we need to understand how—especially in contexts of sharply contradictory realities—value interpretations of “success” come about and how they become symbolic capital for those that wield them (see Bourdieu, 1984: 291).

Obviously, this problem has been recognized and discussed intensively in the conservation and development literature, albeit not always with an explicit conceptualization of value (see Goldman et al., 2011; Zimmerer, 2007). For example, in his incisive article about Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM), Blaikie (2006: 1954) concludes that CBNRMs success

“is reproduced within a network of multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies, international NGOs, in-country NGOs and a limited number of senior government officials in recipient countries. The discursive power of the theoretical benefits to environment and community of CBNRM, the need to proclaim success to other international audiences, and the diffuseness and range of the social and environmental objectives, all lie behind representations of this “success.” Success, in turn, is defined in ways that will allow it to be found. Success stories prevail against criticism that comes from other quarters (particularly local people who have experienced CBNRM, and independent commentary from scholars)”.

This echoes Mosse’s conclusion that “‘success’ and ‘failure’ are policy-oriented judgements that obscure project effects” (Mosse, 2004: 662). In other words, success (or failure) is a peculiar commodity with real effects for people and natures involved in or subject to an intervention. But whether this commodity is actually bought (into), I argue, depends on the marketing capabilities of those primarily responsible for implementing or in some way linked to or dependent on the success of an intervention (e.g., states, donors, consultants, but also communities). Success, in short, needs to be sold, especially in the context of contradictory and complex empirical realities.

With marketing I mean a strategy to change people’s perceptions about issues or things in line with predetermined objectives and so create buy-in and legitimacy for a particular product, idea, or political agenda (Büscher, 2013). While Goldman (2007) and MacDonald (2010) do not use the term in this way, it is clear from their analyses that particular “elite transnational policy networks” use marketing tactics to sell the idea of a “global consensus” on the need for neoliberal water policies and neoliberal biodiversity conservation practices respectively. Marketing is thus inherently political and a key tactic in creating knowledge commodities as particular forms of capital. It also further clarifies what is meant with value, namely “more or less ephemeral productions of evaluation” (Graham, 2006: 4) that can be influenced, changed, and tweaked through political action. Understanding the selling of success as capital, then, allows us to understand in greater depth how interests of actors are tied up with particular value interpretations across time and space.

But if the attribution of evaluation to a conservation or development intervention becomes a commodity that travels according to complex geographies of value, how to analyze it empirically? Graham (2006: 5) assists us by conceptualizing knowledge commodities as

“a very strange class of commodities: they conflate the problems of meaning (the production of socially exchangeable knowledge), mediation (the processes through which meanings are distributed and exchanged), and evaluation (the situation of various classes of

meanings within hierarchies of social significance and desirability). To understand the implications of our knowledge economies we need to understand the processes by which meanings are produced, exchanged, and evaluated, and how such processes shape the political character of any given social system”.

Following Graham, we need to analyze how conservation and development actors attribute meaning to interventions and how they mediate and evaluate these, especially in relation to acquiring legitimacy or (future) funding. In other words, performances, ideas, or ways of meaning-making in the marketing of interventions need to be directed at particular donor or policy audiences, namely the ones that matter most given a particular topic. It is in this context that I prefer the notion of “epistemic community” over “elite policy networks”; the former is conceptually more precise because of its emphasis on a shared “belief in a common set of cause-and-effect relationships as well as common values to which policies governing these relationships will be applied” (Haas, 1989: 384). The task ahead, then, is to trace the meanings, mediations, and evaluations around an intervention in relation to particular epistemic communities in time and space so as to clarify how ideas about success become capital or “value in motion”.

3. THE MALOTI-DRAKENSBERG TRANSFRONTIER PROJECT

The Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project is part of a wider conservation trend in Southern Africa and beyond that aims to establish Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs): conservation areas across international borders, commonly managed by the involved nation-states (Duffy, 2006; Ramutindela, 2007). TFCAs have long roots but have become especially popular in conservation/development circles since the mid-1990s. Regarding the MDTP, the idea to protect the rich biological and cultural diversity and the important water catchments of the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains between Lesotho and South Africa dates back to the early 1980s. Small-scale at first, it was only during the mid-1990s that more structural donor support for the collaborative effort emerged. The World Bank, in particular, became a crucial supporter of the initiative and with its help, key stakeholders (most notably the Lesotho National Environment Secretariat and the provincial South African Natal Parks Board, which later became Ezemvelo KwaZulu Natal Wildlife) successfully applied for funding from the Global Environment Facility. After some delay due to problems in attaining the conditions set for (alleged) successful implementation, the 15,5 Million US\$ Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project officially started early 2003.

The institutional set-up of the MDTP was very complex, particularly because the project area encompassed many different levels of jurisdiction in Lesotho and South Africa. To aid implementation, both countries employed independent “Project Coordination Units” (PCUs), to facilitate and support the official “implementing agencies” (mostly the provincial conservation parastatals or departments). The two PCUs became the focal points for activity and initiative in the project, as they comprised of full-time and highly-trained specialist staff. Their working conditions, however, were anything but straightforward. Conflicts between and within different population groups in the area, intense social, economic, and political inequalities, historical apartheid-related injustices, a fragile historical relationship between Lesotho and South Africa and a fast-degrading alpine environment all made for an extremely tense and difficult implementation context (see

Ferguson, 2006; Jeffery, 1997). It also made the probability for a successful intervention highly uncertain.

Yet, as argued above, value statements are malleable “productions of evaluation”, and different political processes signifying this “production” within the MDTP can be discerned. The below two cases became particularly significant during and after my fieldwork. They comprise the issue of local socio-economic complexities within the overall set-up of the intervention and the development of a PES initiative. Due to its unforeseen and (officially) unplanned emphasis on planning and research, the MDTP (especially the South African PCU which, in the words of its coordinator, was responsible for turning the MDTP around from an implementation to a “planning project”⁹) received much criticism from key government stakeholders for not doing enough to benefit local communities (for details, see Büscher, 2013). This made the imperative for a successful community intervention all the greater, and the below case shows how local contradictory dynamics in the MDTP—particularly as they related to the project’s flagship community-conservation project on the South African side—were reinterpreted along the projects accountability chain into an overall construction of the project as successful (while, as noted above, many actors and the official World Bank evaluation were mixed or rather negative). The second case discusses the marketing of the project’s PES initiative, again predominantly by the South African PCU and the (South African) consultants they hired. The case shows that while PES in the MDTP consisted of two studies and associated reports—a baseline and a feasibility report—and was as such not implemented, it was rather effectively marketed as a success by the MDTP consultants.

Before moving on, I want to emphasize that these were not the only cases of constructing value in the project. Rather, they stood out during and after the fieldwork as processes familiar to conservation and development more generally, so enabling a comparison and deeper understanding of different ways of “selling success”.

4. CASE 1: MARKETING ALONG THE VALUE CHAIN

Due to the large size of the project area, the MDTP intervened only in selected areas and issues of special concern. On the South African side, the MDTP set up pilot-projects ranging from protected area management to environmental education and community-conservation. Due to the pressure to be seen as locally relevant and community-based, one of the most important and largest pilots was a community-based conservation project called “Amagugu Esizwe”—Zulu for “Treasure of the Nation”. An unpublished project brief to participating communities in 2004 stated that the MDTP aimed at getting them, together with other stakeholders, “actively involved in coordinated efforts to ensure the long term sustainability of conservation, and land use practices in the region”.

Amagugu Esizwe was supposed to fulfill this vision for two “tribal” areas in the northern part of the South African KwaZulu Natal province, the AmaGwane and Amazizi areas. The pilot-project’s core activities were capacity building and the establishment of committees. These dealt with issues such as dongas (erosion gullies) and land care, rock art monitoring, “wilderness”, livestock, handicrafts, tourism, fire, and grazing. Capacity building was tagged onto these issues, but also included committee skills, computer literacy, English skills, and financial management. The implementation of the two-year project was contracted out to two local NGOs and a

university department, who had a history of working together in the project area. According to one NGO employee at the start of the project, they were happy to work for the MDTP as it meant they could continue their previous activities.¹⁰

Through subsequent interaction with the Amagugu Esizwe implementers from 2005 to 2007, however, I observed how this “happiness” often made way for irritation and frustration with the strict implementation criteria set by the MDTP and, indirectly, by the World Bank. Equally clear from interviews and observations was that project implementation was all but smooth (Büscher, 2010a). One of the local conflicts even led to a three-month suspension in the implementation of the project. Finally, the connection between the establishment of committees and capacity building and the overall MDTP objective of the conservation of the mountain ecosystem remained tenuous at best. One important issue was that local people were ultimately more concerned with ensuring sources of livelihood than conservation and hence, for example, they stopped activities such as gully management soon after the project ended (Büscher, 2010a).

While more can be said about the dynamics in Amagugu Esizwe, this community conservation pilot-project is taken as a starting point in this section to analyze value interpretations of the *overall* Maloti-Drakensberg intervention through various layers of the official project accountability chain. This chain, then, starts with the Amagugu Esizwe implementing organizations’ accountability toward the MDTP and moves on to the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility, and finally to GEF member countries’ governments as the ultimate authorities and funders. These accountability structures ensure that interpretations of Amagugu Esizwe and the MDTP are mediated and evaluated several times over and allows for “positive translation”. The start of the chain is what the Amagugu Esizwe project achieved in the communities in AmaGwane and Amazizi during the implementation period.

The outcome of the dynamics outlined above was a clash of political agendas that in the end reified the unequal status quo of the local communities and had some, mostly unintended, positive, and negative outcomes (see Büscher, 2010a, 2013). In the official project evaluation, these are mentioned, but the emphasis is on the cultivation of success, as is clear from the following passages of the official evaluation report and the final report by the MDTP:

“It is therefore clear that many community members, if not whole communities, are in a better position now, at the end of Amagugu Esizwe, to take the management of their resources and therefore their lives into their own hands than they were at the beginning”.

[[Sisitka, 2007: 1–2]]

“The most important feature of these [*project*] activities, however, may not be in their actual, direct impact on the land (which in the case of the donga rehabilitation is inevitably on a small scale within the vastness of this landscape), but in illustrating the possibilities for change and improvement in land management, and in demonstrating people’s own agency in effecting such change. This is a very potent impact, which can be seen in the pride people take in showing visitors the work they have done, and their enthusiasm to continue to do such work, even on a voluntary basis”.

[[MDTP, 2007a: 29]]

“With regards to livelihood changes, these are less easy to detect, except for the obvious direct benefits to people employed in the project, the community facilitators, and the compensation paid for voluntary work. There is no doubt that the capacity being built in various skills has the potential for improving people’s livelihoods, and this may manifest in the longer term” (MDTP, 2007a: 29).

Overall, both reports are quite detailed and give a fair account of major project dynamics. However, the conclusions drawn can be debated. One of the main problems was one familiar to many conservation/development projects, namely that the interpretation of project dynamics by local communities differed substantially from those of the Amagugu Esizwe and MDTP implementers, partly because the latter continuously needed to (re)frame the project objectives and its outcomes such that it fitted the predetermined and donor-approved MDTP implementation plans and “logistical frameworks” concerned with conservation, while local people were more concerned with their livelihoods (see below and Büscher, 2010a).¹¹ Hence, for these types of reports, filtering the grounded realities during project implementation and trying to tip the balance toward success is probably most difficult, yet still attempted (cf. Droog, 2008). Thus we have the first, small step in the production of positive evaluation.

The next step in the accountability chain is that from the MDTP to the World Bank as it were the PCUs that had to interpret local realities such that they fitted the World Bank management and project evaluation structures. This entailed *translation*, according to a South African PCU member: “as managers we translate and are in between log-frames and indicators on the one hand and communities on the other”.¹² She told me that each MDTP pilot-project has to contribute to the roughly 13% of the area that needed to be “under conservation management” at the end of the GEF funding, so “we are playing with numbers, so that the World Bank can tick”. The PCU staff member added that because of this she was learning, not only about the process, but also about being outcome oriented, “because the heat is on the project now”.¹³

This “heat on the project” around mid-2005 came especially from South Africa’s national Department of Environmental Affairs and the World Bank, who wanted to ensure that the official projected outcomes of the MDTP were met. These outcomes were supposed to be measured in concrete, specific, and measurable indicators. In fact, during the preparation phase of the MDTP, earlier versions of the official “Project Appraisal Document” had received GEF criticism that “the logframe is very general, and the indicators are very aggregate”. In response, a letter from the World Bank GEF executive coordinator to the GEF chief executive officer explained the changes made to the Project Appraisal Document¹⁴:

“The PAD now contains eight outcome indicators, and no less than forty-four (44) different output indicators. No component has less than three indicators. The output indicators are usually quite specific: “Recruitment of 1 social ecologist/country.” They are often easy to measure in quantitative terms: “Number of kilometres of hiking trails established.” They are time-bound in several cases: “At least 100 community entrepreneurs and 10 civil servants trained each year starting in year 2.” Other indicators are by nature more general: “Completed biodiversity surveys in priority areas” is one example. Greater precision in such cases can only be provided by sound expert judgment pertaining to the complexities of a particular output.”

The letter continued: “No indicators can replace the need or a sensible, holistic interpretation of project implementation. The institutional structure that has been designed, enhanced by the Bank’s supervision, is meant to ensure a transparent and accountable system where lessons from implementation are continuously interpreted and incorporated in the execution of the project”. Yet, despite this waiver, the World Bank, like many donors, remained fixed on technical and measurable outputs, for instance on the percentage of the area that needed to be under some form of conservation management at the end of the MDTP. In turn, the MDTP implementers tried hard to

live up to these “indicator outputs”, but a South African PCU staff member noted that unintended external influences always occur; something that according to her “you cannot say to funders”. As an example, she mentioned that the South African deputy president stated that only 8% of local government staff has the capacity for the job. The MDTP has to “mediate” this reality to get the project implemented, but since this was not part of the project’s conceptualization, she felt it could not be said to funders. She concluded that the “gap” between proposals and reports and reality is often big, as reality is often “sugar-coated” to make it suitable for smooth implementation of donor projects (cf. Ferguson, 1994).¹⁵

Interestingly, while the South African PCU was successful in this (sugar-coated) translation between grounded realities and World Bank indicators, the Lesotho PCU was less so. Toward the end of 2004, the World Bank and the South African PCU believed that Lesotho was lagging in achieving the project indicators and that something needed to be done to correct this. From various interviews and observations, it became clear that the World Bank representative had tried to do this, but in a way that upset the Lesotho PCU and government tremendously: by downgrading the project approval rate to “unsatisfactory” without following the proper procedures for doing so.¹⁶ Indeed, it was through an accidental exchange between two PCU staff members that the Lesotho coordinator found out his team’s performance had been downgraded. In response, the Lesotho PCU mobilized the Lesotho government and even the Prime Minister, who put such pressure on the World Bank that they rapidly restored the project approval rate to “satisfactory”. What this illustrates is that positive interpretation or translation is not a given, nor the only way to influence positive project evaluation. On the Lesotho side, concerted political action was used effectively to tip the evaluation in a positive direction, despite the fact that actual project implementation had not changed.¹⁷

These (and other) complicated and contradictory dynamics had to be interpreted by the next actors in the accountability hierarchy, the World Bank and the GEF, and communicated to the actors they depend on: the member governments funding these institutions. As both institutions are responsible for many different projects, they necessarily have to shed much detail in their reporting to member governments. Thus in the World Bank’s “Status of Projects in Execution” report on page 370, the evaluation of the MDTP comes down to the following five sentences for fiscal year 2005¹⁸:

“The project is making progress towards achieving its development objectives. Trans-frontier cooperation and development is taking place with Lesotho to identify threats to biodiversity and to support planning for the area. In South Africa, protected area planning is advancing well and community based natural resource management is taking place. On the ground, investment is taking place in rehabilitation of degraded areas. A Geographical Information System capability has been established to support the project and good linkages have been forged with all implementing agencies concerned.”

The following three sentences were noted for fiscal year 2006 (page 288)¹⁹:

“The project is on track towards achieving its development objective, despite slow implementation and disbursements. Work has primarily focused on assessing how best to address trans-frontier cooperation and development with South Africa including preparation of a trans-frontier plan, addressing transfrontier issues, conserving biodiversity and supporting district plans, the conservation of protected areas, tourism strategy development and support to range management. Capacity building has taken place for officials from the government and tourism parastatal entities.”

Lastly, the fiscal year 2007 saw one sentence for Lesotho (page 298)²⁰: “After initial implementation delays, the following critical milestones have been achieved: a 20-year transfrontier conservation strategy with a 5-year action plans; and improved conservation of 136,000 ha of off-reserve land”; and two sentences for South Africa (page 564)²¹: “The 20-year transfrontier development strategy and the associated 5-year action plan has been completed. The tourism strategy and tourism book highlighting the tourists attractions and activities in the region have also been completed”.

These paragraphs do not say much due to lack of detail, but they are undeniably exaggerated in important respects. To say that CBNRM is taking place in 2005 is tenuous, because there was little going on “on the ground” in 2005, while stating that good linkages have been forged with all implementing agencies was simply untrue. In South Africa, for example, the linkages with the Free State and KwaZulu Natal implementing agencies were in 2005 better characterized as “absent” and “tension-ridden” (see Büscher, 2010a, 2013). For fiscal year 2006, the report is more careful and notes that implementation and disbursements have been slow. Yet, it continues with more positive sounding, very general sentences that aim to leave the reader feeling good about the project being “on track”.

Finally, the report for fiscal year 2007 just tries to give the very basic “facts” in terms of “completed milestones”, whereby a 20-year strategy and a tourism book were indeed the main outcomes (though unplanned, and thus not part of the earlier “indicators” that were to decide whether the MDTP was officially successful or not). But to state that there has been “improved conservation of 136,000 ha of off-reserve land” is quite astonishing as no consensus exists on how to measure “improved conservation” in complex local commonage settings, while a detailed measurement had not been executed under the MDTP around the time of the report.

The point here, however, is not whether the project was actually successful in reality, or even according to the officially approved indicators (which, as noted before, was mostly not the case). The point is that in spite of contradictory and even negative project realities, the World Bank and GEF were able, through several levels of the above accountability chain, to effectively sell the project as a success. This last piece of the puzzle became clear to me on July 27, 2007, when I gave a presentation on my research findings to the South African PCU and other stakeholders. Also attending the presentation was a Swedish consultant, sent by the Swedish government to assess the effectiveness of GEF projects. In the presentation I mentioned the idea of positive translation along accountability chains and that—like Chinese whispers—the MDTP seemed to have been interpreted much more positively on higher accountability levels than on the local level or as experienced by many stakeholders. Little did I realize that there was yet another layer to the story, namely that the GEF had specifically recommended the Swedish government to assess the MDTP because they considered it a success.

After the presentation, I talked to the consultant. He told me that he had been introduced to various project elements and was visibly impressed. I asked him whether it was his first time to Southern Africa, and he said yes. He added that this is why his wife had accompanied him, as they had planned to take some holidays after the one-week evaluation of the project. I was quite surprised and asked him whether he thought he could sufficiently understand this enormously complex project in such a short time. The Swedish consultant answered that he did not see the problem. He emphasized that he was an experienced evaluator and had done many of these evaluations before and could see that progress in this project had

been impressive and why the GEF labeled the MDTP a success.

In all, this case shows how different levels of accountability provided space for “sugar-coated” interpretations of the project, whereby details, contradictions, different values, or alternative views were often filtered out. It also ascertains views from the literature that evaluations of success and failure are a constant struggle throughout every conservation/development intervention (Dressler, 2009; West, 2006) and indeed have been in bureaucracies generally for much longer (see Downs, 1967; Quarles van Ufford, 1988). In turn, this provides space to interpret interventions in ways beneficial for those involved, which in turn helps careers or the “flow of resources” (Mosse, 2004). What we see, then, is that interpretations of value become symbolic capital that help to legitimate interventions and those involved in and dependent on them. Yet, in a project accountability hierarchy, the possibilities for different interpretations of value are constrained: they follow the timeline of the project and usually include a selected group of key stakeholders.²² For evaluations to truly become capital and thus “value in motion”, it is crucial that they circulate outside of bounded space/time hierarchies.

5. CASE 2: MARKETING PES THROUGH EPISTEMIC CIRCULATION

A substantial amount of the MDTP budget went into constructing neoliberal conservation discourses and projects such as “payments for ecosystem services” (PES) and tourism (see also Büscher, 2010b). This case focuses on PES, which was increasingly posited as the magic bullet that was to conserve biodiversity and promote development in the Maloti-Drakensberg bioregion. According to the baseline study commission by the MDTP,

“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)]

Clearly, then, PES as conceptualized here fits the definition of “neoliberal” as an ideology that substitutes political and social dynamics for capitalist market developments. Interestingly, and as is often the case with market development, it takes a publicly financed intervention to develop the “enabling environment” and practical mechanisms necessary to make PES work (McAfee & Shapiro, 2010). According to the final World Bank evaluation of the MDTP (World Bank, 2010: 28): “The MDTP was used to spearhead the introduction of “Payment for Ecosystem Services” as a concept to South Africa. A baseline study was commissioned to identify the full suite of ecosystem services in the MDTFCA with a view to undertaking a more detailed study into the feasibility of the PES system”.

The PES baseline study that the MDTP commissioned early in the project makes the same argument. After boasting about the potential of PES systems, the report states that

“The Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Programme offers a window of opportunity to implement such a payment system. The mountain ecosystem has the capability to make a significant impact on mountain communities’ well-being and on

distant urban residents well-being if resources are managed appropriately and strategically. *The resources available to this project (MDTCDP), both internally and externally (by means of partners), and the willingness of the MDTCDP to use economics for conservation action, generates a practical opportunity to initiate a market development process in the next three years*".

[(Diederichs & Mander, 2004: 46, emphasis added)]

It is clear from these quotes that resources available to the MDTP were employed to strengthen the neoliberalization of the Maloti-Drakensberg polity. It is therefore not surprising that the subsequent feasibility report—written partly by the same consultants as the baseline study—concludes that “the eco-hydrological/economic assessment has shown conclusively that it is feasible and indeed economically desirable for a payment for ecosystem services system to be established in the Maloti Drakensberg” (MDTP, 2007b: 98). Significantly, under the project only a base-line study and a more extended “feasibility study” were conducted; PES was never actually implemented. Nonetheless, a group of consultants affiliated to the MDTP and whose careers were heavily invested in the upcoming PES paradigm started marketing PES in the Maloti-Drakensberg area as a “success”. Indeed, I argue that the resources that the MDTP geared toward setting up a PES system helped these actors to use their own evaluations of this system to acquire new resources and “symbolic capital”. This can be ascertained by analyzing how the marketing of PES in the Maloti-Drakensberg area has remarkably quickly been circulating in relevant epistemic policy and academic communities such as donors, global environmental NGOs, United Nations agencies, and (mainstream) environmental economic circuits.

An example from the policy world is a report by the NGO “Swedish Water House” (Forslund et al., 2009). According to the document, “The report is a joint collaboration between member organisations of The Global Environmental Flows Network”, which includes such organizations as IUCN, WWF, The Nature Conservancy, the United Nations Environment Program, UNESCO, and others. Remarkably, since the MDTP PES project had not yet been implemented, the report concludes:

“PES has proven to be a viable option to enhance supply in the catchments of the Maloti Drakensberg Mountains on the border between Lesotho and South Africa. Land use in the surrounding grassland has reduced stream flow in the dry season and intensified flow in wet season. This has resulted in seasonal water shortage, reduced water quality, soil erosion, reduced productivity and increased water vulnerability. The Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Project showed that implementing a PES system (...) would be an economically and institutionally feasible way to incorporate ecosystem services into water management. There are significant benefits to be gained by both local ecosystem services producers (the mountain communities) and by the broader user or catchment community: less water vulnerability, more jobs in the region, and improved land quality that can stimulate the development of other economic options, such as tourism, game farming, improved grazing, and natural products harvesting. The Transfrontier Project also showed that such a system is desirable from a rural development and social equity perspective, rewarding those who maintain a water supply engine but who are spatially and economically marginalised”.

[(Forslund et al., 2009: 31, emphasis added)]

Not only does the report insinuate that the results of the PES project have already been ascertained (“has proven”, “has reduced”, “showed”), some of the language is exactly the same as that of the MDTP report, providing evidence of the power of epistemic communities that apparently take the message of the MDTP reports at face-value.

Similarly, on the national level in South Africa, several of the MDTP consultants (and others) wrote a policy paper for the influential “Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies” that

supports government agencies through research activities. The policy paper came out under its “2nd Economy Strategy Project” and is verbosely entitled “*Making Markets work for People and the Environment: Employment Creation from Payment for Eco-Systems Services Combating environmental degradation and poverty on a single budget while delivering real services to real people*”. Using the PES feasibility report as a reference and while acknowledging that ‘the stability of the trade is unknown’, it concludes: “the eco-hydrological economic model shows that it is financially feasible and economically beneficial to trade baseflow augmentation, sediment reduction and carbon sequestration from areas of high rainfall in the Maloti-Drakensberg”.²³ A last example from the policy world here mentioned²⁴ is a United Nations Environment Program report that argues:

“In the Drakensberg mountains, local communities depend heavily on various ecosystem services for their livelihoods. By restoring degraded grasslands and riparian zones and changing the regimes for fire management and grazing, early results suggest that it may be possible to increase base water flows during low-flow periods (...) by an additional 3.9 million m³. Restoration and improved land use management should also reduce sediment load by 4.9 million m³/year. While the sale value of the water is approximately € 250,000 per year, the economic value added of the additional water is equal to € 2.5 million per year. The sediment reduction saves € 1.5 million per year in costs, while the value of the additional carbon sequestration is € 2 million per year. These benefits are a result of an investment in restoration that is estimated to cost € 3.6 million over seven years and which will have annual management costs of € 800,000 per year. The necessary ongoing catchment management will create 310 permanent jobs, while about 2.5 million person-days of work will be created during the restoration phase.”

While the language is rather cautious, the overall message is clear: PES is the way to go, and delivers tangible, measurable ecological, and social outcomes. Whether these measurements are based on tenuous and one-sided assumptions as argued elsewhere (Büscher, 2012, 2013) is not the most important issue here.²⁵ The point here is about creating beautiful win-win discourses that can sell, in this case through what Igoe (2013) calls an idea of “ecofunctional nature”, a nature that can best be managed into “optimal” and measurable social and ecological outcomes through technocratic, rationalist interventions.

The “success” of the PES system under the Maloti-Drakensberg project has also been making the rounds in the academic world. The most obvious examples are articles in the journals *Ecological Restoration* and *Ecological Economics*, again written by some of the same authors as the MDTP reports. The former, published in 2008, is still rather careful and concludes that PES in the Maloti-Drakensberg provides “a key way to finance natural capital restoration work” and “incentives to pursuing more sustainable practices” (Blignaut et al., 2008: 143, 147). The authors conclude by praising the potential of PES to “restore natural capital”, while calling for international partnerships to further pursue “emerging markets” for a variety of “ecosystem services”:

“we see this project as one of a number taking place around the world that exemplify the strength of an RNC [restoring natural capital] strategy for achieving the interlinked goals of combating climate change and desertification, protecting and augmenting biodiversity, and sustainably developing human communities. We hope that this RNC project will serve as a model for large-scale projects elsewhere, since the PES approach provides a key way to finance programs like this. We are currently seeking international investment in the Drakensberg Project in emerging markets for carbon, water, and biodiversity credits. All partners must understand, however, that food, water, energy, and income security for local people remain as top priorities. Restoring natural capital and keeping it intact long-term requires restoring social capital as well”.

[(Blignaut et al., 2008: 148–149)]

In a follow-up article, some of the same, and other authors conclude more forcefully that PES, “under certain conditions”, “is definitely viable, not only financially but also institutionally” and, moreover, is “desirable from both a rural development and a social equity perspective” (Blignaut et al., 2010: 1322). Elsewhere the assumptions underlying both articles are criticized (see Büscher, 2012, 2013). What matters here is that they not only aim to plug the Maloti-Drakensberg PES case into appropriate epistemic communities, but also that they are a prime example of how a broad mix of different commercial interests are implicated in and stimulated by attempts to give PES in the Maloti-Drakensberg “scientific” credibility.

Another, less straightforward example from the academic world is an article by Turpie et al. (2008) in *Ecological Economics* that again includes some of the same authors as the MDTP PES baseline and feasibility reports. While the article deals with the South African “Working for Water” program, it clearly aims to advance PES in South Africa in general. The article is entitled “*The Working for Water Programme: Evolution of a Payments for Ecosystem Services Mechanism that addresses both poverty and ecosystem service delivery in South Africa*” and approvingly refers to the MDTP as a one of the “conservation initiatives” where “conservation planners in South Africa are currently looking to PES as potentially playing a major role” (Turpie et al., 2008: 796). After stating this, it cites the MDTP base-line study of 2004 (Diederichs & Mander, 2004), again showing how this report circulated within epistemic communities that are invested in the success of PES.

A final example is an article in the popular scientific magazine *Environmental Scientist*, co-authored again by one of the same consultants hired by the MDTP (Mander & Everard, 2008: 33). They argue that

“South Africa’s innovative water laws, which enshrine the principles of equity, sustainability and efficiency, have enabled the development of some of the most advanced approaches to PES in the world. The Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Project, published in 2007, explored hydrological and economic linkages between uplands that ‘produce’ water and the consumption of water lower down in selected river catchments, progressing this into the design of market mechanisms for payment from consumers for the protection, restoration and management of upper catchment areas critical for dependable run-off of clean water”.

What emanates from these examples is that the actors involved in and dependent on interventions such as the MDTP actively try and influence the interpretation of their own work and cultivate this as a “success” that deserves emulation and support. This is clear from the way in which publications by and for important donor, policy and academic communities were co-authored by people involved in the MDTP PES project, and that this project was habitually positively referred to. Stated differently, given the relative obscurity of project reports, the only way the “success” of the MDTP PES project could have been circulated so widely is through active cultivation by those involved in or dependent on the success of those same reports. Hence, it must be concluded that the same consultants hired by the MDTP to pursue PES worked to circulate this “success” among academic and policy realms and to put their PES case on important funding and knowledge maps.

6. DISCUSSION

The cases differ in important ways. The first case was more internal to the project’s accountability hierarchy and focused on the marketing of a positive interpretation along the

accountability chain. At the same time, as the chain progressed upward, knowledge constructions changed and became more external, open to, and aimed at broader audiences. This is important as it means that the more nuanced and detailed assessments are often not readily accessible to outside observers unless one is able to retrieve this material through long-term ethnographic research, connections or otherwise. It also means that the knowledge constructions available to the outside are more positive than an intervention may seem from an inside or local perspective.

The second case emphasized marketing beyond the project hierarchy and showed how (an element of) the MDTP was used to create and stimulate goodwill, legitimacy, and interest from particular epistemic communities, namely those involved in the academic and policy worlds around (neoliberal) conservation/development. The whole point of the PES sub-project was to boast PES as a viable knowledge construct. Hence, while still in the feasibility stage, the MDTP consultants started marketing this knowledge construct as successful within the MDTP with an aim at selling both the idea of PES and themselves as (successful) experts (see also Lave, 2011). Strategic agencies within a larger PES (or more broadly neoliberal) conservation/development epistemic community were targeted and helped to further enable the circulation of the “success” of the PES project as a knowledge commodity. Importantly and different from the first case, this included circulation of knowledge constructs almost in the exact form in which they were produced.

Despite the differences, a similar idea of value emerges in both cases, namely the *interpretation of value* as a valuable commodity. This conception goes beyond what Thrift (2006: 288) argues is a “reworking of what is meant by the commodity from simply the invention of new commodities to the capture or configuration of new worlds into which these commodities are inserted”. The commodity here *is* these new worlds. Referring back to how Graham (2006: 5) understands knowledge commodities in terms of meanings, mediations and evaluations, the cases show that conservation/development interventions are significantly shaped by the ways in which “meanings are produced, exchanged, and evaluated”. If politics is about the mediation of interests, then it is clearly in the interest of project implementers and consultants to produce and exchange particular meanings and values about the types of interventions they participate in and depend on for their own livelihoods. And as a voluminous literature shows, these meanings often revolve around technical cultivation of “success”, ownership, participation, “win-win”, and so forth (Campbell, 2002; Goldman, 2007; Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Li, 2007). In both cases, complex realities, problematic assumptions, and incommensurable relations and ideas were “translated” into stable interpretations that needed to convince particular audiences of something valuable—e.g., that the project had achieved important, yet ephemeral and often intangible objectives such as development and conservation.

While the production of these interpretations and meanings are well documented, what is less well covered is how they travel across time and space. The two cases contrasted a value chain approach with what I call epistemic circulation. In the first case, a rather linear line of (re)interpretation was followed through project hierarchies. In this chain, the exchange of interpretations and meanings as knowledge commodities works both ways: both actors that need to engage in continuous acquisition of projects to guarantee their own livelihoods (consultants, researchers, NGOs, etc.) and actors that fund interventions (UN, World Bank, NGOs, among others), need similar types of interpretations to legitimate their existence

and interventions. This is not to say that the interpretation of intervention realities is a smooth affair within project hierarchies. To the contrary: these are continuous struggles and reflect positions of power, as was clear from the downgrading of the Lesotho part of the project. Moreover, cultivations and interpretations are never actually stable; they require continuous work and monitoring (Mosse, 2005).

Yet, if interpretations of value are to have longer-term effects and strengthen the political interests of conservation and development practitioners more broadly, they need to move outside of project hierarchies, toward broader societal stakeholders, particularly those who can provide legitimacy, funding, etc. In other words, they need to be exchanged with, circulated among, and be a signifier to broader epistemic communities. This became partly visible in case one, but was the main point in the second case. This process of epistemic circulation fits especially well within our neoliberal capitalist political economy where capital as “value in process”—exemplified most poignantly by financial derivatives, futures, and so forth—increasingly depends on ephemeral sign forms and the velocity of its own circulation.

In turn, Lee and LiPuma (2002: 192) argue that “circulation is a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them”. In the second case, the interpretation of the success of PES became “capital” for the consultants and they needed to circulate this capital for it to truly become “valuable”. Through this circulation, a critical mass of stakeholders is built up that buys into and co-depend on the same success of PES in the Maloti-Drakensberg, which ultimately should translate into capital of a more material kind, namely funding, remuneration, contracts, and so forth. Moreover, as this circulation moves through time and space, the connections with the source become less clear, which enables a self-referential space where members of epistemic communities cite and reinforce each other’s interpretation and make them (even more) valuable.

Thus, after the publication of the two PES reports in 2004 and 2007 one can see positive references emerging: one or two in 2008, and several more in 2009 and after. The spaces in which these references started circulating were very strategic, from academic and popular scientific journals to policy spaces such as the South African state and those to do with international donors and NGOs. Importantly, this is not a closed process. As Graham (2006: 5) argues: “knowledge commodities are “self-valorizing”: the more widely and rapidly they are circulated, the more they appear to accrue value independently of the people who produce them”. Space and time, in effect, become blurred in these representations of value. What matters is their seemingly “independent” circulation, which in turn serves as a reference point for the producers of these representations in order to attract more tangible (monetary) capital.

7. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that value interpretations such as “success” function as knowledge commodities and forms of capital for those involved in and dependent on conservation/development interventions. Two important contributions to the literature came out of the discussion of the empirical material on the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project, namely to illustrate how value travels and to show important

distinctions in the forms in which knowledge commodities are produced, applied, and circulated.

The article distinguished between a value chain approach and “epistemic circulation”, the latter of which I have argued seems to be emphasized in particular when it comes to value creation in the neoliberal political economy of conservation and development. Importantly, these ways in which value travels are not exhaustive. What the above brings to the debate is to show and contrast some of the mechanisms and forms at work in making value move through space and time. Contrasting the two approaches helps us to better understand how those involved in and dependent on the conservation and development industry market solutions that work to sell solutions, ideas, “ecosystem services”, and themselves.

In turn, tracing knowledge commodities through time and space helps us to understand the power and politics of value creation in contemporary conservation/development, while appreciating the complex nature and forms of this value. Guthman (2008: 201), with respect to value chains around ethical food labels, makes a similar point by stating that in settings where explicit moral concerns and “desires to be just and ethical” become part of the commodity to be sold, value “becomes pretty slippery”. In the second case, where moral concerns for and a particular technology around “just behavior” toward the natural environment becomes the capital to be released to and circulated among epistemic communities, value becomes even “slippier”. As the connections between sign, value, commodity, and their origins become fuzzy and self-referential, it is hard to hold specific actors accountable or trace power relations. This, however, seems to be a broader feature of the contemporary neoliberal political economy as argued by Peck and Tickell: “one of the fundamental features of neoliberalism is its pervasiveness as a system of *diffused power*” (Peck & Tickell, 2002: 400, emphasis in original). Epistemic circulation, then, is about tapping into this diffused power, and making use of it, which is why I argue that a neoliberal context emphasizes this tactic in particular.

However, while I showed that different actors from influential agencies and institutions take the message of the MDTP consultants at face value and are therefore implicated in the “cause-and-effect relationships” also taken for granted by these consultants, I was not able to clearly delineate and trace the connections between members of this epistemic community. Further research could enhance our understanding of value in conservation and development by more clearly delineating particular epistemic communities that bring knowledge constructs into being and enable their circulation (cf. Goldman et al., 2011).

Importantly, this should include the realm of academia, which is not devoid of the above-described dynamics. To the contrary: the neoliberal university or “academic capitalism” has become the rule, and thus are academics often equally busy “creating value” in much the same way as conservation and development professionals (see Castree & Sparke, 2000; Lave, Mirowski, & Randalls, 2010; Sidaway, 2002). In the global knowledge economy “universities are increasingly seeing knowledge as having an economic value that can be exploited in order to generate new revenue and funding streams” (Allen & Imrie, 2010: 2) while academics are increasingly absorbed by the “sign/symbolic values” of publications in highly ranked and rated journals (Paasi, 2005). These processes are as opaque and ephemeral as the geographies of value described above, but even though the “range of academic subject-forming processes” is “partially unknowable”, this, according to Sidaway (2002: 266), should not be “a call to abandon all

attempts at reflexivity”. Indeed, “a critical consideration of how the fields of academic discourse interact is an essential starting point from which to challenge the more negative manifestations of such interactions and to develop practices of accountability which do not simply reduce reflexivity to the logics of accounting”.

Perhaps an advantage for critical academics is that they are in a position to make a more conscious choice to get deeper into the contradictions of our time through which, as Marshall

Berman (1988) has argued, they experience them more deeply, which can also enable deeper understanding. It is, in turn, perhaps this type of understanding, together with new “practices of accountability”, that could and should more actively be sought and encouraged in contemporary conservation and development lest we continue to lose sight of how the values that “float” around in a system of diffused power connect to the very real and structural effects these processes have on nature and peoples.

NOTES

1. The official World Bank evaluation argued that the project was neither an unequivocal success nor a complete failure. In World Bank language, the ratings ranged from “moderately unsatisfactory” to “satisfactory” (World Bank, 2010).
2. This antagonism between the project implementer’s emphasis on research and planning, particularly on the South African side, and the desire by many important project stakeholders in governmental and NGO circles to have more “implementation on the ground” became a defining feature of the intervention (Büscher, 2013).
3. See, among others, Forslund and et al. (2009); Nellemann and Corcoran (2010: 5, 28); <http://bankofnaturalcapital.com/2010/10/06/688/>; <http://www.teebweb.org/national-and-international-policy-making-report/> (chap. 9). Last viewed: June 28, 2012.
4. To be sure: I am not arguing that actors in conservation and development are only “selling success”, as it regularly happens that failure is also reported. The pressures regarding “selling success” or “reporting failure” are of a different nature, though, with the former arguably more pronounced considering the stakes involved in being associated to either success or failure.
5. This of course relates to Marx’s famous M-C-M’ movement of capital.
6. See <http://ivm.org.uk/about/>. Last viewed: January 31, 2013.
7. See <http://www.pwc.com/>. Last viewed: October 5, 2010.
8. For example on this blog: <http://www.comminit.com/en/node/201084/36>.
9. MDTP project coordinator interview, September 2005.
10. NGO staff member interview, May 2005.
11. See, among others, MDTP project coordinator interview, March 2007 and DEAT staff member interview, February 2007.
12. MDTP project coordination unit socio-ecologist, interview, May 2005.
13. MDTP project coordination unit socio-ecologist, interview, May 2005.
14. Quotes from “World Bank Office Memorandum”, dated April 11, 2000. Retrieved from http://www.thegef.org/gef/sites/thegef.org/files/repository/Regional_Maloti.pdf, Last viewed: January 13, 2013.
15. MDTP project coordination unit socio-ecologist, interview, September 2005.
16. See, among others, MDTP project coordinator interview, May 2005; World Bank staff member interview, September 2005.
17. MDTP project coordinator interview, May 2005; October 2005.
18. Retrieved from: <http://www1.worldbank.org/operations/disclosure/SOPE/FY05/SOPEreportFY05-Final.pdf>. Last viewed: December 15, 2012.
19. Retrieved from: <http://www1.worldbank.org/operations/disclosure/SOPE/FY06/AFRSOPEreportFY06.pdf>. Last viewed: December 28, 2012.
20. Retrieved from: http://www1.worldbank.org/operations/disclosure/SOPE/FY07/SOPE_FY07_FINAL.pdf. Last viewed: December 28, 2012.
21. Retrieved from: http://www1.worldbank.org/operations/disclosure/SOPE/FY07/SOPE_FY07_FINAL.pdf. Last viewed: December 28, 2012.
22. Albeit not always, as Lesotho’s defense of its implementation of the project illustrated.
23. See <http://www.tips.org.za/publication/making-markets-work-people-and-environment-employment-creation-payment-eco-systems-servi>, page 37. Last viewed: July 2, 2012.
24. See Nellemann and Corcoran (2010: 5, 28); <http://bankofnaturalcapital.com/2010/10/06/688/>, for more examples where the MDTP is mentioned as a success. See also the TEEB for cities report, page 13, where some of the same consultants refer to the MDTP PES initiatives as “an extremely effective policy intervention” (http://www.teebweb.org/wp-content/uploads/Study%20and%20Reports/Additional%20Reports/Manual%20for%20Cities/TEEB%20Manual%20for%20Cities_English.pdf). Last viewed: October 21, 2013.
25. In short, these tenuous and one-sided assumptions relate to ideas about land management and “institutional structures” and the fact that climate change, which is likely to have a major impact on the area, is not accounted for in the PES reports (Büscher, 2012). Regarding land management, the PES reports problematically blame poor land management on one type of actor, namely “mountain communities”, leaving aside other actors like major golf courses, farmers, industry, etc. And even if “mountain communities” do have a disproportionate impact on the land (and related “water services”), it is not spelled out who these communities are, how heterogeneous they are, and how difficult it is to change their practices according to technical, rational outside plans—something that is heavily criticized in the broader development literature (see, among others, Dressler, 2009; Fairhead & Leach, 1996; Ferguson, 1994, 2006; Li, 2007; Rohde et al., 2006; West, 2006). Regarding institutional structures, the PES reports make key assumptions about relevant South African institutions being able to effectively and rationally work together which seemed ironic given that the same Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier

Project that paid for the reports was to a great extent unable to do so (see Büscher, 2013). More generally, there are many issues and problems in inter-institutional cooperation in South Africa—including race, inequality and class legacies of apartheid—that make any assumption about “multi-

institutional and collaborative efforts”, which is what PES depends on according to the MDTP PES reports and associated academic articles (Blignaut et al., 2008, 2010), highly tenuous, especially considering that these issues and problems are ignored in the reports.

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