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Inverted Commons: Africa's Nature in the Global Imagination¹

Nature in Africa has long occupied a special place in the global imagination: the prevailing images associated with the continent are of a “wild Eden,” of rugged, “pristine” landscapes, and of some of the world’s most charismatic “megafauna” (elephants, gorillas, rhinos, etc.) (Adams and McShane 1996). Indeed, whereas references to Africa’s people are often negative and associated with war, poverty, and famine (Dowden 2008), Africa’s nature is habitually framed in positive terms: nature as it “should be,” “unspoiled” and “pure.” Thus, when the famous Virgin millionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson asks the question “What is Africa?” there seems to be no irony in his answer, “Africa is its animals. That is the beauty of Africa, that’s what makes it different from the rest of the world. And to lose those animals would be catastrophic.” Branson lays the blame for “dwindling wildlife numbers” squarely on “Africa’s increasing (human) populations,” and argues that Africa should “increase the amount of land for the animals and by increasing the amount of land for the animals, that will help human beings.”²

The purpose of this short piece is to argue that nature and natural resources in Africa are framed as “inverted commons”: a special commons that belongs to the entire globe, but for which only Africans pay the real price in terms of their conservation. Updating and extending Ton Dietz’s earlier argument about entitlements to natural resources (Dietz 1996), I argue that this happens in two crucial ways. First, a variety of conservation actors, particularly from the West, *actively frame* Africa’s nature as a global commons that deserves protection for all of humanity. Second, the practical manifestation of this tactic increasingly revolves around “neoliberal conservation”: reinterpreting and re-institutionalizing African natures within ideologies of power and systems of rule dependent on market competition, commoditization, and intensified capital accumulation (Sullivan 2006, 2009; Igoe and Brockington 2007; Brockington et al. 2008; Igoe 2010; Büscher 2010a, 2010b; Fletcher 2010; Arsel and Büscher 2012). As there is no space to develop these arguments in depth, I will present one example—that of the Serengeti—followed by a brief discussion and conclusion.³

1 This piece is a summary of my article, “The Neoliberalisation of Nature in Africa,” in *New Topographies of Power? Africa Negotiating an Emerging Multi-polar World*, ed. Ton Dietz et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 84–109.

2 “The Elephant Corridor,” Pifworld, accessed 7 February 2011, <http://www.pifworld.com/#/projects/TheElephantCorridor/61>.

3 I refer the interested reader to Büscher (2011), where the argument is worked out in full.

The Serengeti: Threats to an “African Eden”

As David Hughes recently argued (2010, 133), “contemporary conservation dabbles in nostalgia for the colonial past [and] continues to produce the aesthetics, symbols, and fables of white privilege.” This is particularly true for tourism to the African continent (Dunn 2004; Duffy 2010), which in its marketing and advertising often ends up perpetuating stereotypes of African nature as devoid of people and reinforcing the “aesthetics, symbols, and fables of white privilege.” It very rarely, if ever, works to upset these symbols and fables, because they involve major capital flows and international investments that few African governments are willing to forego. Nevertheless, they are occasionally challenged, and African “Edens” come under “threat” from African desires to use land and resources differently. When this happens, there is frequently a global outcry, largely from white Westerners. One such prominent occasion recently was the international debate that erupted after the Tanzanian government proposed to construct a highway through its Serengeti National Park.

The Serengeti is one of the best-known symbols of “Africa’s wild nature,” and its wildebeest migration figures prominently in global conservation imaginations. Thus, in July 2010, when the Tanzanian government followed up on an earlier election promise to construct a highway through the northern part of the park, it triggered a massive global outcry. International (mainly Western) audiences resisted in numerous ways, showing that African nature is not only important in the global imagination, but is also seen as something that belongs to the entire globe and over which Africans have only partial sovereignty (Mbembe 2001). As the outpouring was truly prodigious, I present only some of the major initiatives.

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

- An online petition was organized, urging readers to send Tanzanian President Kikwete an email that ends as follows: “The world is watching and expecting good governance, and for you to find a way to preserve your great country’s natural inheritance and future potential for advancement.”⁴ Of the 248,500 signatories, the vast majority are from North America or Europe, with hardly any signatories from African countries.
- A major survey was carried out, involving “302 international scientists from 32 countries,”⁵ which concludes that “the road will result in severe, negative, irreversible impacts, with little mitigation possible.” Again, the vast majority of signatories are from Western countries. (Those that profess to be from African countries are mainly Westerners that live and work in Africa, or white South Africans.)
- A Facebook group called “Stop the Serengeti Highway” was established, with over 46,500 “friends” as of June 2012.⁶
- Twenty-four scientists, led by Western conservationists/biologists, published an article in *Nature* entitled “Road will Ruin Serengeti.” They write that “the proposed road could lead to the collapse of the largest remaining migratory system on Earth—a system that drives Tanzania’s tourism trade and supports thousands of people.” They ask the Tanzanian government to “*explicitly acknowledge and conserve the global benefits of preserving the Serengeti National Park, one of the world’s natural wonders and one of Africa’s last surviving pristine ecosystems*”⁷ (italics added).

In all, considerable pressure has been placed on the Tanzanian government to rethink the road, with even UNESCO threatening to take the Serengeti off of the World Heritage

4 “Action Alert: Tanzania’s Proposed Serengeti Highway Threatens Greatest Wildlife Migration on Earth,” Forests.org, accessed 8 December 2010, http://forests.org/shared/alerts/sendsm.aspx?id=tanzania_serengeti. See also the update “World Scientists Petition for Alternate Highway / Warn of Dangers,” Bwana, Serengeti Watch, accessed 27 December 2010, <http://www.savetheserengeti.org/news/highway-news/world-scientists-petition-for-alternate-highwaywarn-of-dangers/>.

5 “Environmental Impact Statement: Effects on the Ecology and Wildlife of a Proposed Commercial Route through the Serengeti National Park,” accessed 8 December 2010, http://www.savetheserengeti.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/SENAPA_ENV_IMPACT_10_3.pdf.

6 Accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/STOP-THE-SERENGETI-HIGHWAY/125601617471610>.

7 Andrew Dobson et al., *Nature* 467: 272–73. See also: Katherine Homewood, Daniel Brockington, and Sian Sullivan, “Alternative view of Serengeti road,” *Nature* 467: 788–789.

List if the plan continues.⁸ While the above is only the tip of the iceberg, and while the debate is ongoing and contains diverse viewpoints, it is clearly driven by Western conservationists and often harks back to well-trodden neocolonial arguments about wildlife and local population growth. Few direct links are made to the Western consumerism that is partly responsible for the road (it will be used to transport rare-earth metals more rapidly from Lake Victoria to the coast for production in China). At the same time, there is hardly any mention of how the Serengeti was produced by evicting Masaai from the area during colonial times and how, consequently, the Serengeti is anything but “natural” or pristine. What is particularly salient is that many of the conservationists and their supporters feel a sense of “entitlement” to the Serengeti (Dietz 1996), or, as I put it, frame the Serengeti as an “inverted commons”—a commons that surpasses Tanzanian jurisdiction, and whose value can seemingly be appreciated only by outsiders.

Inverted Commons and the Neoliberalization of Africa’s Nature

International outbursts over African nature, like the one around the Serengeti highway, are rare. African conservation politics, heated though it is, seldom attracts international headlines. However, many of the same emotions, arguments, and political strategies play a role in day-to-day conservation, involving thousands of different actors across hundreds of sites all across the continent. While this diversity precludes absolute generalizations, I argue that one major common dynamic can be identified: many conservation strategies increasingly depend on the neoliberalization of nature. Under global neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s, conservation in Africa has progressively focused on ways for wildlife and “nature” to “pay their way,” so that local and global communities can benefit from their sustained conservation. “Imposing wilderness”—as Neumann (1998) referred to it—persists, albeit no longer through colonial force but through “the market.” So-called neoliberal conservation has become the new mantra for global conservation, triggering new challenges for Africa.

Through strategies such as the commercialization of the management of parks, ecotourism, payments for ecosystem services, carbon trade, and REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation), Africa’s nature has been increasingly

8 “Serengeti faces axe from heritage body,” Lucas Liganga, *The Citizen*, accessed 8 December 2010, <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz/component/content/article/37-tanzania-top-news-story/4220-serengeti-faces-axe-from-heritage-body.html>.

reconstituted in neoliberal terms.⁹ While this neoliberalization of nature (conservation) in Africa is variegated, profoundly uneven, and never linear, I argue that, on the whole, this process constitutes a sea change in the relations between Africans and their biodiversity and wildlife—one that will have massive implications for both. Yet, as I argue above and elaborate on in Büscher (2011), Africa’s nature is being commodified through a rhetorical strategy that I refer to as “inverted commons”: the discursive creation of a common resource whose global ecological, political, and emotional importance trumps the desires and rights of local African actors. This tactic is cynical, particularly given how African rights and desires have been and continue to be violated (Mbembe, 2001). Moreover, the framing is ironic in that “inverted commons” statements about Africa’s nature do not say under what type of regimes these are governed. When these governance regimes are increasingly neoliberal, they function further to wrest control of African ecosystems and wildlife from Africans themselves, as African nature—the global commons—is increasingly sold to Western, white investors.

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

9 Here defined as a political ideology (plus related practices) that attempts to subordinate social and political affairs to capitalist market dynamics.

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