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Perspectives

How to cite:

Taylor, Bron. "Dangerous Territory: The Contested Space Between Imperial Conservation and Environmental Justice." In: "The Edges of Environmental History: Honouring Jane Carruthers," edited by Christof Mauch and Libby Robin, *RCC Perspectives* 2014, no. 1, 117–22.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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Deutsches Museum 



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Dangerous Territory: The Contested Space Between Imperial Conservation and Environmental Justice

There are many ways to design a conservation area. Ideally, environmental scientists and managers demarcate such areas using conservation biology models, where ecologically-important core areas are connected by natural corridors, and these core areas and corridors are surrounded by buffer zones that allow more intensive human use than do the cores.¹ Surrounding these are more densely populated areas that enjoy no special protection. This ideal is rarely realised, however, because most protected areas were established before this model had been developed.

Protected areas are demarcated not only by *physical boundaries* but by differing, and sometimes incompatible, *perceptions*.

For some, protected areas are the remnant of a commons (or represent a restored commons), lost as agriculture, enclosures, and private property regimes spread. Protected areas may also be expressions of democracy and spaces of social equality. John Muir famously went further, consecrating such places as sacred.² Perceptions of what constitutes the sacred, however, vary widely. Such places can be understood, for example, as abodes of ancestors, essential pathways for communication or communion with the divinity or with divine beings, or they can be considered refuges for endangered species that are perceived to be so precious that, implicitly or explicitly, they and the habitats upon which they depend assume a numinous character.³

For others (perhaps especially for scholars engaged in postmodern and postcolonial criticism), conservation areas have been expropriated by imperial peoples for their exclusive economic benefit. Moreover, and what is worse, according to such views the

1 See, for example, Reed F. Noss and Allen Y. Cooperrider, *Saving Nature's Legacy: Protecting and Restoring Biodiversity* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994).

2 Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: the Life of John Muir* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9–10, 465; Bron Taylor, "Resacralizing Earth: Pagan Environmentalism and the Restoration of Turtle Island," in *American Sacred Space*, eds. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 97–151.

3 *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London: Continuum International, 2005), Vol. 2, 1444–62.

deracination of the original peoples from these places has been legitimated through appeals to either the “natural” superiority of the thieves, or even through appeal to some supposedly universal ideal, such as the dependence of all people on such places for their physical, emotional, aesthetic, spiritual, and moral development and well-being. In this reading, protected areas were birthed in injustice and are maintained by deceit. With such perception protected areas may even be desecrated places, defiled by the presence and practices of those who usurped the land and destroyed the cultures that knew better how to be in proper relationship with it.⁴

The first cluster of perceptions about protected areas I will label *the romantic narrative*, for it has an affinity with a longstanding tradition of felt loss and longing for biologically intact and diverse ecosystems prevalent before the expansion of agro-industrial societies. The second cluster of perceptions I will label the critical narrative for its tendency to reject *the romantic narrative*, considering it a mask for elite if not imperial power, privilege, and subjugation.

Jane Carruthers refuses to embrace uncritically either of these narratives. Instead, she recognises that there is a dialectical relationship between the romantic and the critical perspectives and that creative and progressive possibilities can and do emerge from fraught and tragic histories. As a scholar living and writing near Pretoria, the heart of the former apartheid state, she has had a valuable analytic vantage point. On the one hand, she has documented the shadow side of the establishment and management of protected areas during the colonial period—the deracination of Africans from their homelands and their exclusion from newly-formed preserves that were indeed reserved for the colonizing elites.⁵ On the other hand, she has illuminated the profound changes and possibilities that have emerged as the country transitioned to African majority rule.

4 Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1998); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jim Igoe, *Conservation and Globalization: a Study of the National Parks and Indigenous Communities from East Africa to South Dakota* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004); Mark Dowie, *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009); Bram Büscher, *Transforming the Frontier: Peace Parks and the Politics of Neoliberal Conservation in Southern Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

5 Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: a Social and Political History* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995).

Carruthers has shown that parks and protected areas are not simply places with repressive histories but that they reflect the societies in which they are situated. They are thus dynamic places with progressive possibilities. As she has noted, these lands and the revenue they generate “serve local interests and, in this way, are integrated into national ideology and agendas, as has been the case in the past. Their history mirrors the transformations in society.”⁶ They can even be unusually opportune places for rectifying previous injustices, including cases wherein the land has been usurped by imperial interlopers. As she puts it: “National parks are favoured spaces for reclaiming—perhaps even reinventing—the cultures of formerly disadvantaged peoples as well as for publicising aspects of indigenous knowledge to a wider audience.”⁷ While documenting in important ways the histories in which the establishment and management of protected areas have victimised many, Carruthers is also gently suggesting that an exclusive focus on “ideas of ‘victimhood’ [that] have been the prevalent trope in the emerging world” can erode the sense of agency upon which political mobilization depends.⁸

In a related thread focusing on environmental activism and land conservation in Australia and South Africa, Carruthers has examined the cultural processes in which bio-regional initiatives and environmental campaigns can transform “land” into “place.” With such transformation nature becomes valuable not as a commodity or resource but for aesthetic and moral reasons. Such values are increasingly integrated in contemporary resource management in which “all elements of a system, including the cultural are included.”⁹ So, in Carruthers work, we find fearless examination of protected area conservation—from tragic and terrible histories to contested and fraught, but sometimes positive, contemporary developments. I have found similar dynamics during my own fieldwork. Park interpreters, for example, increasingly describe in a positive way the traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples and the ways it is embedded in their cultures, explaining to the publics drawn to parks and

6 Jane Carruthers, “Environmental History for an Emerging World” (keynote address, 6th Symposium of the Latin American and Caribbean Society for Environmental History, Colombia, June 2012).

7 Jane Carruthers, “Past and Future Landscape Ideology: The Kalahari Gemsbok National Park and Uluru-Kata Tjuta compared,” in *Social History and African Environments Past and Present*, eds. William Beinart and Joann McGregor (Oxford: James Currey and Cape Town: David Philip, 2003), 255.

8 Carruthers, “Environmental History for an Emerging World”.

9 Jane Carruthers, “From ‘Land’ to ‘Place’: Landscape Conservation and Environmental Activism in the Magaliesberg, South Africa and Cooper’s Creek, Australia,” in *Shades of Green: Environmental Activism around the Globe*, eds. Christof Mauch, Nathan Stoltzfus, and Douglas Weiner (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 69–100.

protected areas the ways in which such knowledge has enabled people to adapt and flourish. Moreover, this revaluing of such knowledge is, in some areas, leading to mutual learning between local peoples and those trained in western sciences, as well as greater reciprocal respect for the cultures of those involved. In some cases, the valuing of traditional ecological knowledge by western scientists is leading to a re-valuing and the preservation of such knowledge by those from non-western traditions.¹⁰

Complicated histories, including those still unfolding, illuminate the perils and promise inherent in the ways human beings relate to one another, to other organisms, and to the diverse environments they inhabit. Understanding these histories enhances our ability to avoid past mistakes and work toward more positive futures.

Similar positive trends have emerged within the California State Department of Parks and Recreation, where I worked throughout college and graduate school as an Ocean Lifeguard, Peace Officer, and Ranger. Through my work on its Equal Employment Opportunity Committee, I learned that the State Personnel Board had directed my department to improve its workforce mix so that it better reflected California's ethnic diversity.¹¹ Racist beliefs held by some employees involved in hiring processes (some of which I witnessed) contributed to the poor record. But the problem was more cultural and structural: ethnic minorities were more likely to live in less affluent urban areas away from parks, and people of colour had fewer opportunities to develop swimming skills through living near the surf, where real estate was expensive.

As a result of the departmental sanctions we developed processes to produce ethnically diverse applicant pools and to eliminate discriminatory hiring practices. Parks officials recognised that the long-term flourishing of parks depended upon a population that knew and valued these conservation areas. Educating and serving California's increasingly diverse urban population became another aspect of caring for parks.

Broad societal and ideological changes were reflected in the make up and mission of the parks. California's affirmative action programs of the 1980s represented an early example of environmental justice. As the state has become more diverse, those who work in

10 Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 189.

11 Bron Taylor, *Affirmative Action at Work: Law, Politics and Ethics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 75.

and enjoy its parks have diversified as well. This in turn has provided an opportunity for parks employees and others who value these places to shape in the public an aesthetics and ethics that will lead to their being valued and protected in the long term.

What sort of environmental ethics were being exemplified and taught in these pioneering programs? Today there is a significant commitment to the conservation of the state's biological diversity, which is threatened by growing numbers of people with their widening ecological footprint. Such concern was only nascent when I went through the State Park's interpretive training academy in 1984. Here we learned about the mission of the park service and how to interpret the park to visitors through museum and campfire programs.¹² Although at the time I was also an advanced graduate student studying ethics and social justice movements around the world, it was in the ethics module of our interpretive training that I first encountered Aldo Leopold's land ethic.¹³ In my class of some 40 rangers and lifeguards, only a few were already aware of anthropogenic species losses. I doubt that any of us had heard of Leopold before the course. So the parks courses had begun to draw on the nascent field of ecological ethics. Such ethics would increasingly be reflected in management practices and campfire programs alike in subsequent decades.

Protected areas materially and philosophically reflect the societies in which they are situated. This pattern provides ample opportunity for criticism and regret about past injustices and failings, as well as for optimism that there can be a synergy between positive ethical developments in the society at large and the efforts of those involved in protected area conservation. Even where problems remain today, as a result of efforts to monetise these places in ways that serve neoliberal economic models, positive models for more inclusive conservation management have emerged.¹⁴ Realising the full potential of today's commons areas, of the planet's protected and conservation lands and waters, requires increasing recognition that the flourishing of all organisms is mutually dependent and that neither environmental justice nor a biodiversity ethics can fully develop in the absence of the other.

12 Bron Taylor, "Wilderness, Spirituality and Biodiversity in North America: Tracing an Environmental History from Occidental Roots to Earth Day," in *Wilderness Mythologies: Wilderness in the History of Religions*, ed. Laura Feldt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 293–324.

13 Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, first published 1949), 201–226.

14 Büscher, *Transforming the Frontier*.

Carruthers has argued that environmental history, because of its broad, multi-faceted approach, provides analytic insights to illuminate a socially inclusive way forward. For this to be the case the discipline must do more than criticise past failings and injustices. It must contribute to understandings of the human processes, lifeways, and livelihoods that promote healthy and resilient biocultural systems. In this way environmental history can illuminate paths toward a more equitable and sustainable future.