

# **The (Neo)colonial heart of Wildlife conservation in Southern Africa**

written by Rachael Madore

The issue of wildlife conservation on the African continent has long been debated amongst local wildlife hunters, conservationists, and the international community. Relevant issues in the discourse include who deserves the right to hunt and where, whether conservationists have the right or duty to 'manage' nature and communities, and how best to manage wildlife conservation moving forward. This paper situates itself within the conservation debate, with a particular focus on the effects of Western-imposed conservation in southern Africa. While I agree that conservation has the power to generate income for local communities and actively manage wildlife away from eco-disaster, the neocolonial expression of conservation management in southern African countries moderates its ability to generate positive outcomes for local wildlife and communities. Specifically, this paper will argue that Western-led wildlife conservation in southern Africa, rooted in colonial conquest and propelled by the neocolonial conservation NGO, reproduces colonial inequalities. It does so by taking Indigenous land, excluding Indigenous peoples, and exploiting their resources for profit, with local wildlife poaching merely a mechanism of survival and resistance against these inequalities. Therefore, any solution to the wildlife conservation problem must acknowledge the (neo)colonial heart of African conservation to dismantle it and to propel locally led and local-serving approaches to sustainability.

### **Historical Background: Colonial Conservation**

One cannot begin to debate conservation without understanding its deeply colonial history. Since its inception, conservation in southern Africa has

been powered by the colonial engine of exclusion and exploitation. Prior to colonial conquest, African societies existed in harmony with nature, and hunting of wildlife was done in ways that sustained natural resources for future generations (Films Media Group, 2002a). Colonial conquest by European powers from the late 19th to early 20th century drastically redefined land boundaries and relationships with biodiversity. Settlers allocated the best agricultural land to themselves, while previous landowners became landless labourers or were forced into 'native reserves' (Parker & Rathbone, 2007). With the arrival of colonial administrations, Western ideologies began to permeate African societies, and for the most part with self-serving motives. Colonial administrations prevented ancient hunting practices, denouncing them as stealing or 'poaching', and Indigenous lands were cleansed for commercial hunting, agriculture, and cattle ranching (Films Media Group, 2002a). With the development of agriculture also came advancements in education, medical services, and population growth, which began to put serious pressure on the environment.

When early conservationists established natural parks to protect and restore vulnerable and endangered animal populations, it was done by colonial rulers who claimed tribal land that was previously set aside for rural people. Indigenous peoples were not only dispossessed of their lands, but they were forbidden to hunt on these grounds and excluded from the benefits of development (Films Media Group, 2002a).

## **The Conservation NGO as Neocolonial**

This paper argues that the conservation NGO is the modern vehicle for neocolonialism in southern Africa and uses conservation as a mechanism for the exploitation of African communities. The term neocolonialism refers to “a form of global power in which transnational corporations and global and multilateral institutions combine to perpetuate colonial forms of exploitation of developing countries” (Halperin, 2020). Rather than through the methods of direct rule, capitalist powers (both nations and corporations) dominate subject nations through international capitalism (Halperin, 2020). I will analyze the conservation NGO sector’s role in this discourse using Brockington & Scholfield’s (2011) critical framework termed the ‘conservationist mode of production’. The framework facilitates critical analysis of the ways in which the Western conservation NGO transforms sub-Saharan Africa’s natural capital (i.e., forests, wildlife, protected landscapes) and conservation work into symbolic capital and money. The authors point to the neoliberal beginnings of the sector as the root of this problematic behaviour. With the drastic expansion of conservation NGOs’ size and influence in the 1980s-90s neoliberal era, they deduce that the sector’s ideas and policies are largely those of their neoliberal-minded donors. I acknowledge that Brockington & Scholfield (2011) are making a slight extrapolation here; however, I determine it to be a useful framework in my greater analysis of the neocolonial influence on conservation in southern Africa, hence I will employ their reasoning to make my argument.

To begin, it is critical to note that the conservation NGO sector is dominated by large Western-headquartered organizations, with half of all NGOs’ headquarters located in Europe or North America, and the top 10 NGOs controlling over 80% of observed expenditure (Brockington & Scholfield, 2011). The sheer level of influence that Western actors have over conservation outcomes in Africa as compared to locals is a cause for concern. With little involvement of the local communities affected, the conservation NGO has bolstered its power as a knowledge- and value-producing institution in southern Africa. Shaping conservation as a Western duty requiring Western knowledge, the conservation NGO positions itself as the authority on the subject and is able to affect public and private decision making accordingly.

Since the early 1900s, NGOs have spearheaded the campaigning and image-creating activities of conservation, conservation science, and policy lobbying. Brockington & Scholfield (2011) assert that these NGOs use their social and political power to commodify African wildlife for financial gain through commodities, such as community wildlife committees, ethical ecotourism, and certified hunting arrangements. With a bias towards profit-generation, their allocation of funds to specific causes legitimates certain kinds of conservation work in places that lend themselves to materialization. By legitimating more commodifiable activities, NGOs can control how value from wildlife is produced in Africa, transforming not only social relationships, but the link between societies and nature (Brockington & Scholfield, 2011). Several examples below demonstrate the transformative effects of such

foreign power on southern African societies.

The ability of conservation NGOs to produce and diffuse authoritative knowledge on conservation to states and donors, together with their investment in close relationships with governments, enables them to inform state decisions which shape land use and economies (Brockington & Scholfield, 2011; Kamuti, 2018). Hodgetts et al. (2019) used a geopolitical lens to explain how “[conservation NGOs] engage in acts of territorialization as they enact spatial strategies to create, expand, and connect protected areas of various scales” (p. 254). In a strong illustration of the weight of these spatial strategies, the Wildlife Conservation Society’s influence led the Gabonese President to convert 11% of the country’s land into national parks (Brockington & Scholfield, 2011). This case demonstrates clearly how, because of the will of a Western NGO, a large area of Gabon land is now designated for the commodification of wildlife and the simultaneous exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the associated benefits.

In another example, conservation NGOs were given the duty of instating wildlife management areas on village land in Tanzania. The project paid off villagers, through safari companies, for the right to demarcate village land areas near protected areas for wildlife use/tourist lodging (Brockington & Scholfield, 2011). This decision, similarly informed by the Western conservation NGO, has dramatically altered the way communities and land use are organized. In a definitive display of neocolonial power rebalancing, the conservation NGO’s creation of value in the ecotourism industry has taken land (and wealth) from local Tanzanians and effectively transferred it to Western

tourists under the guise of conservation. Hence, it becomes clear that the Western NGO’s capacity to influence the division and use of African land plays a key role in the greater neocolonial domination of African nations, with serious implications for Indigenous communities.

Kamuti’s (2018) discussion of wildlife ranching in South Africa illuminates the neocolonial implications of legitimizing certain activities in certain places for the commodification of conservation. Since the 1960s, private wildlife ranching has grown throughout southern Africa (especially Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa) as governments have granted owners of land that is home to wildlife full legal control over animals on their property. The resulting lucrative industry is one in which hunters and ecotourists commodify wildlife by paying farmers to keep certain animals on game farms for their hunting or enjoyment (Kamuti, 2018). To contextualize this industry, 80% of all major conservation in South Africa are now in the private sector, and over 9,000 registered game ranches cover 20% of South Africa’s land area (Films Media Group, 2002b). Hunters pay R7 billion a year to maintain the farms, populations, and reserves, and thus consider themselves conservationists. However, in an interview, a representative of the KwaZulu-Natal Hunters and Conservation Association (KZNHCA) revealed the important point that, “if there was no monetary link I do not think that hunting could have contributed to conservation” (as cited in Kamuti, 2018, p. 198).

A Films Media Group (2002b) documentary praises the use of the trophy hunting business model to convert game farmers into conservationists, mentioning that the

need to control animal populations exists anyway. While I can understand the argument of commodification as a means to a good end, I maintain that this position fails to critique the consequences for Indigenous peoples of a neocolonial model of conservation. A major consequence in South Africa is that the value attributed by the state and NGOs to commodified game reserves has emboldened white farmers to bolster their hold on the land, which they justify under the guise of 'conservation' (Kamuti, 2018). Fences constructed to protect game deliberately exclude Blacks, displace farm dwellers, and often deprive people of alternative means of livelihood. Of course, I do not discount the valid reasons for which these fences may be built. In iSimangaliso Wetland Park in northern KwaZulu-Natal for example, fences were used to reduce human-wildlife conflict, protect animals from escaping, ensure individual ownership, and prevent intruders (Kamuti, 2018). However, in my analysis I aim to highlight the neocolonial motivations and outcomes of the creation of enclosed game ranches within the larger context of the 'conservationist mode of production'. In South Africa, the conservation NGO's allocation of value to lucrative wildlife ranching as a conservation activity has exacerbated unequal power relations between white farmers and Black community members by once again perpetuating the exclusion of Indigenous Africans from the benefits of conservation (Kamuti, 2018).

The obvious rebuttal to my argument against designating conservation land might assert that setting land aside for wildlife conservation is a noble cause with necessary and positive outcomes for biodiversity. This would be the argument employed by adherents of

Deep Ecology, an environmental school of thought which advocates a shift from anthropocentrism (placing value on humans) to biocentrism (placing value on all living things), as well as a focus on preserving and restoring pristine wilderness over all other environmental issues (Guha, 2017). However, in line with Guha's criticisms, I caution against the use of Deep Ecology rhetoric as it fails to acknowledge the very real human dimensions of environmental problems, including the power dynamics which moderate how environmental issues and actions affect stakeholders differently. Proven by the initial colonial allocation of conservation land in southern Africa, Western-designated conservation land effectively transfers resources from the poor to the rich, and thus may cause more harm than good. Of course, having exploited the world's resources, Americans have the privilege of advocating the co-existence of 'unspoiled nature' and 'civilization', and hence believe that their conservation parks model should be exported worldwide (Guha, 2017). However, the reality is most aptly expressed by Brockington & Scholfield (2011) who reveal, referring to Nature Unbound, "conservation, they said, does not so much save the world as remake and recreate it" (p. 556). As conservation parks accrue wealth to the Western elite and impoverish Indigenous populations, they reproduce colonial inequalities, a factor which cannot be separated from the conservation debate.

### **Poaching as Survival and Resistance**

Central to the conservation debate is the problem of locally led wildlife poaching and the conflict resulting from the bolstering of militarized anti-poaching

forces. I argue that wildlife poaching is an outcome of the colonial system that was designed to exclude Indigenous Africans from development. To provide the historical context, as African nations fought a number of independence wars in the mid-20th century and the continent became largely militarized, so did the management of conservation lands (Films Media Group, 2002a). This has led to serious conflict between Africans wanting to reclaim conservation lands and state-led anti-poaching forces ruthlessly killing poachers with automatic weapons (Films Media Group, 2002a; Fynn & Kolawole, 2020). This conflict is now at the center of contemporary debate on conservation in southern Africa, with the international community widely denouncing poachers as criminals, and opposing scholars suggesting more nuance to the controversy.

First, it is important to understand that poaching is “the illegal shooting, trapping, or taking of game, fish, or plants from private property or from a place where such practices are specially reserved or forbidden” (Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2020). While I agree with many authors in the literature who regard the poaching problem as an existential threat to biodiversity, I will pull largely from the analyses of Fynn & Kolawole (2020) and Rudolph & Riley (2017) in advocating a more critical analysis of both the definition of poaching and the historical factors that led to the problem. I assert that it is only with this critical interpretation of the poaching problem that we can develop sustainable and inclusive solutions.

To critique the single (Western) narrative of poachers as ‘bad’, it should be emphasized that the conflict surrounding poaching in southern

Africa can largely be traced back to external influence. The very definition of poaching in the African context derives its meaning from colonialism. By imposing exclusive restrictions around who could hunt and where, colonial rulers transformed what was once ‘traditional hunting’ by the locals into illegal ‘poaching’. Moreover, at the time of conquest, the seizure of Indigenous lands and exclusion of locals from hunting left Indigenous peoples impoverished and often lacking sources of food (Films Media Group, 2002a). It is only logical that wildlife poaching became necessary as a means to sustain people’s livelihoods, and at the same time a means of resistance against the colonial rulers who stole their lands (Rudolph & Riley, 2017). Colonial influence further contributed to the upsurge in poaching by bringing Western hunting methods and weapons to Africa, which have eliminated the need for traps and made hunting both easy and commonplace (Films Media Group, 2002a).

Rudolph & Riley (2017) apply a conservation criminology lens to understand the individual motivations behind illegal wildlife harvesting. According to their analysis, personal motivations include the need to directly feed one’s family or to earn money from the sale of wildlife. Indirect motivations include retaliating for or preventing negative human-wildlife interactions (i.e., crop damage, livestock depredation, competition with predators for game, or human safety threats), resisting against the government, or challenging certain agencies or policies which constrain traditional practices or rights (Rudolph & Riley, 2017). To dispel any myths of poachers’ greed, I must emphasize that Africans who engage in poaching earn little money and risk their own death because they

feel they have nothing to lose (Films Media Group, 2002a). It is thus clear that poaching is not an activity borne of greed, but rather a mechanism of survival and resistance which has become necessary as a result of colonial oppression.

Fynn & Kolawole (2020) add that, despite the significant oppositional military force, local populations comply and even cooperate in the illegal wildlife trade because of the socio-economic benefit to the community from the sale of items like bush meat, ivory, and rhino horn. Through informal rural social networks, locals hide and encourage poachers and middlemen to benefit from the trade (Fynn & Kolawole, 2020). We can similarly view this large-scale collusion amongst local communities as a means of survival and resistance against colonial regulation. With this alternate understanding of how conservation and 'poaching' came to be, it becomes apparent the need to re-evaluate the overwhelming Western view that the poaching problem is the fault of poachers themselves.

It is also important to recognize that the representation of poachers as criminals to be eliminated is an ideology created by colonial powers during the time of colonial rule. There is inherent bias as well as hypocrisy in this representation; it is biased because the colonizers stood to gain from shaming and excluding Indigenous peoples from hunting, and it is hypocritical because settlers replaced ancient hunting practices with their own commercial hunting and cattle ranching (Films Media Group, 2002a). One can therefore conclude that the Western perspective on poaching is inherently biased, as it stems from an ideology designed to exploit the resources of the 'conquered'. The modern discourse around poaching is no exception,

coming largely from the animal rights movement which both originate from, and serves the interests of, the Western elite. It would follow that it is unfair to assume the loudest (Western) voice in the poaching discourse is the only valid one, because the discourse itself has been shaped almost entirely by that Western voice.

Given that a key element in the poaching discourse is the violent conflict between military officers and poachers, it is also relevant to consider the factors that led to the militarization of the African continent. Eleazu's (1973) re-consideration of the army's role in African politics provides the basis for my argument that Western intervention played a key role in militarization, and that this should be factored into the poaching discourse. During the 1960s period of continent-wide decolonization, the US deemed the army (over civil bureaucracy) to be the most capable institution for driving African economic development from which the US could profit (Eleazu, 1973). In alignment with this neoliberal profit-maximizing strategy, the US trained a massive number of people to 'modernize' Africa. Training officers in Western countries, purchasing modern Western weapons, and recruiting illiterate people from different socio-economic backgrounds only to ethnically divide them were all strategies that enabled the West to disseminate neocolonial Commonwealth ideologies throughout Africa. At the same time, constant Western military intervention left African civilian political institutions with no opportunity to bolster their own problem-solving capabilities and counter the increasing dominance of the military. Moreover, the Western provision of military weapons for African nations' 'internal security' only

prompted change-seekers, like the guerilla, to find weapons from enemy countries, in an 'arms race' that militarized and destabilized many regions (Eleazu, 1973). Hence, the current violent conflict between military patrollers and poachers cannot be criticized without also criticizing the Western greed that created the militarization.

In making the above arguments, I will caution that I am not advocating the unregulated hunting of wildlife in southern Africa. While the prohibition of ancient hunting practices upon conquest was unjustifiable on all accounts, I acknowledge that current poaching levels and methods are not necessarily comparable to those of pre-colonial eras. With increasingly efficient technology and mounting pressure on the natural environment, allowing unregulated hunting today could be potentially catastrophic for wildlife and community livelihoods. The final section of this paper will explore local-serving solutions to the conservation dilemma. Here, my intention has been to provide the overlooked context of Western interference along with the critical lens needed to analyze poaching as a symptom of a greater (neo)colonial problem.

## **Solutions**

I will herein briefly outline potential and existing solutions, informed by many scholars, which I determine to be local-led and local-serving. It is critical to note that any solutions to the conservation problem must begin with a working understanding of the colonial basis of conservation and its inequalities. My analysis until this point

has revealed the colonial heart of conservation and proven that current conservation problems can largely be traced back to Western interference. As treating symptoms does not solve the root problem, increasing state-led anti-poaching forces will not solve the poaching problem, since poaching is deeply tied to the colonial history of the African continent (Fynn & Kolawole, 2020). If local poachers and their supporting networks are acting based on the need to survive and resist (neo)colonial oppression and are willing to risk their lives to feed their families, then clearly what needs to be addressed is the (neo)colonial power structure which has been constructed to exploit African nations while excluding locals from the benefits of development.

From a conservation criminology lens, Axelrod et al. (2017) compare two different governance frameworks to reduce conservation risks: strict enforcement and people-centered approaches. Noting that strict enforcement alienates stakeholders and can actually encourage undesirable behaviour, they argue for people-centered approaches such as providing alternative livelihood opportunities to locals so that poachers can change their behavior without risking financial devastation or food insecurity.

Through the same criminology lens, Rudolph & Riley (2017) highlight three public policy instruments which can be used to affect behaviour. For one, economic instruments can reduce poaching by providing payments or levying and exempting taxes and have been linked to reduced carnivore poaching when in the form of economic incentive and loss compensation programs. Secondly, communication can be used to raise awareness of conservation imperatives, persuade

locals to support conservation efforts, and transfer knowledge about conservation. Rudolph & Riley (2017) note that some countries resent the influence of NGOs lobbying for increased wildlife protection, which I gather is due to NGOs' neocolonial ignorance of conservation consequences for the locals. I mention this local opposition to caution that, depending on the motivations of the spokesperson, communication has the power to reinforce neocolonial conservation ideologies or conversely dismantle them. The third lever for behaviour change is regulation. The historical effects of colonial hunting regulations have proven that regulation has enormous power to change conservation outcomes. According to Rudolph & Riley (2017), people's evaluations of whether regulatory goals align with their personal goals (goal agreement) and allocate resources fairly (equity or distributive justice) will greatly affect their compliance with regulations. With governments increasingly using collaborative governance approaches that bring together the resources, expertise, and influence of multiple governments, agencies, and organizations, one can only hope that more inclusive regulations will follow.

To go a step further than using policy instruments to eliminate poaching behaviour, I will advocate approaches that reconcile colonial and neocolonial inequalities by returning stolen land to Indigenous communities. Fynn & Kolawole (2020) are proponents of this approach, further advocating giving local communities decision-making rights over wildlife management and allowing them to conserve and derive benefits from wildlife conservation. Under this proposed scheme, communities rather than governments choose tourism partners, forcing tourist

companies to partner with and pay communities directly. This solution rightly addresses the colonial system that has been built to control and extract value from Indigenous lands. Moreover, by enabling communities to financially benefit from wildlife conservation, such a scheme incentivizes locals to ensure the sustainability of their own biodiversity. This transfer of wildlife ownership to local communities has proven successful in the Namibian conservancies, which have seen a significant reduction in rhino poaching since the shift (Fynn & Kolawole, 2020).

Another successful approach can be seen in Zimbabwe, which has implemented a communal areas management program for Indigenous resources (or a 'campfire project') across 60% of the country (Films Media Group, 2002b). The program granted rural communities with ownership of animals on their land and now allows them to harvest a sustainable yearly quota. Revenue earned from regulated tourist safari hunting is partially paid out to community members and partially used to improve community living conditions. By calling locals into conservation efforts rather than cutting them out, this model has led to the elimination of poaching, which is now seen by locals as stealing income from the community itself (Films Media Group, 2002b).

A final success story is the implementation of the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) project in Damaraland in northwest Namibia (Films Media Group, 2002b). Through this program, local communities have been educated on the value of protecting wildlife and have even appointed ex-poachers to protect their animals, which has

controlled poaching in the once highly poached area. The IRDNC's victory is yet another demonstration of the importance of local inclusion in conservation for the ultimate sustainability of communities and wildlife in southern Africa.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have aimed to situate the southern African conservation debate within the context of colonialism in order to re-examine the dominant Western framing of the controversy. In particular, I have demonstrated that wildlife conservation in southern Africa is rooted in colonialism and enabled by the conservation NGO, which takes Indigenous land, excludes Indigenous peoples, and exploits their resources for profit in a mass operation of neocolonialism. I point to Western influence in order to reposition local wildlife poaching as a symptom of (neo)colonialism and a mechanism of survival and resistance against (neo)colonial oppression. The above arguments support my conclusion that any solution to the wildlife conservation problem must reconcile the (neo)colonial inequalities produced by African conservation with a bias towards local-led and local-serving approaches to sustainability.

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