Conservation Concessions as Neo-Colonization: The African Parks Network

Concessions for so-called conservation purposes (national parks, protected areas, nature reserves, etc.) have their roots in the ideas and beliefs that underpinned European colonisation. The concept of Protected Areas originated in the United States in the late 1800s, founded on the desire to preserve ‘intact’ areas of ‘wilderness’ without human presence, mainly for elite hunting and the enjoyment of scenic beauty. Both Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks were forcibly emptied of their inhabitants and provided the blueprint for ‘doing conservation’ that continues to the present day. During that same period, European colonisers declared large tracts of the occupied territories in Africa as ‘game reserves’ after forcibly displacing populations from said areas. These reserves were often created after colonialist hunters had already exterminated much of the wildlife population, in an effort to restore such populations so that they could continue ‘big game hunting.’

However, the withdrawal of European colonisers from Africa did not bring about a return to customary land tenure. Newly formed States often continued the land use and conservation policies of the colonisers, which demonstrates how deep colonial norms and knowledge systems had become institutionalised. Colonisation processes have always been accompanied by the idea that ‘nature’ is separate from humans, and that ‘civilisation’ is better than the unpredictable and unproductive ‘wilderness’. The idea of creating areas of ‘nature without humans’ is thus rooted in the racist and colonial thinking that only white ‘civilised’ men were able to protect and manage this 'nature'. They and only they could enter this otherwise ‘human-free’ 'nature'.

And we can observe that in many places, this idea persists even today. Safari tourism, for example, is simply a continuation of this tradition. Wealthy (predominantly white) tourists are paying large sums of money to stay in luxury hotels and receive permission to shoot animals (with guns or cameras) as trophies. Meanwhile, those populations that hunt for subsistence inside their territories-turned-park are labelled as poachers and criminalised. Such tourism relies on certain constructions of what ‘Africa’ means to those undertaking the safaris, which reveal the colonial mindset that created these reserves in the first place. That is why protected areas are mostly ‘people-free’ landscapes. People are rarely portrayed as an intrinsic part of nature, and if they are, they are depicted either as intruders or ‘poachers’, or as touristic landscapes for buying handcrafts or watching dances, or as guides or eco-guards working for a foreign company or NGO.

Most international conservation NGOs have facilitated this depiction of Indigenous Peoples as invaders in their own territories. This narrative has conveniently placed their focus on fighting against people using the forest for their own subsistence, instead of on the consumption patterns and economic interests of the supporters and funders of said NGOs.

The Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, for example, is arguably the best-known symbol of ‘Africa’s wild nature’. Yet, there is hardly any mention in the Park’s tourist propaganda on how the Serengeti was created: by evicting the Indigenous Maasai during colonial times from their ancestral territories. And this situation continues today. (1)

Mordecai Ogada, co-author of the book ‘The Big Conservation Lie’, explains in a 2021 interview that the geographical spaces of Protected Areas frequently work as colonies, with the difference that they are no longer under the management of an empire but of a network of elites with clear economic and political interests. (2) Those, he explains, are the colonisers with respect to conservation concessions. They enter such agreements with large sums of money and frequently influence any national policy that might impact their interests and managed areas. The power of these networks of colonisers is both physical –enforcing their rule and dominance on the ground- and political -having allies in the right places administering key governmental offices and funding positions, Ogada explained. On top of this, possible conflicts that may arise are easily brushed aside as not their responsibility; this is done by placing the burden on the ‘sovereign condition’ of national governments. These networks answer to donors, the tourist industry and tourists themselves, which are all mainly based in the global North. And they endure on the basis of images of peaceful landscapes, which in their imaginations are landscapes without people.

These networks also involve powerful business people with vested interests in financing conservation for offsetting their emissions or greenwashing their dirty and destructive activities. Recent examples include the internet retailer Amazon’s CEO Jeff Bezos and his ten-billion-dollar ‘Earth Fund’, with some of the biggest conservation NGOs receiving $100 million each in a first round of payments (3), and Swiss billionaire businessman Hansjörg Wyss’s donations to the so-called ‘30x30’ scheme (4), which aims for 30 per cent of the planet to be turned into Protected Areas by 2030.

Nowadays, the conservation industry is promoting the idea of ‘buying up’ conservation concessions (Protected Areas or Parks) and reconstituting them as business models with profit-seeking aims. A case in point is the ‘African Parks Network’ (APN), which manages 19 National Parks and Protected Areas in 11 countries in Africa.

The African Parks Network: Outsourcing Protected Areas to Private Companies

The ‘African Parks Network’ (APN) was founded by billionaire Dutch tycoon Paul Fentener van Vlissingen in the year 2000. Its founding name was the African Parks Foundation. Fentener comes from one of the Netherlands’ richest industrial dynasties and was CEO of the energy conglomerate SHV Holdings, which undertook business with the apartheid regime in South Africa. He allegedly had the idea for creating ‘African Parks’ after a dinner hosted by Nelson Mandela in the presence of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, at which the future of national parks in South Africa was discussed. For the billionaire, it was the perfect opportunity to restore his image, tainted by his activities during the apartheid regime. Initially created as a commercial company, ‘African Parks’ swapped this status for that of an NGO in 2005, in order to more easily attract donors and conservation funding. (5)

APN’s business model is based on a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) strategy for the management of Protected Areas, whereby APN maintains the full responsibility and execution of all management functions and is accountable to the government. APN employs a market approach to wildlife conservation, arguing that wildlife can pay for its conservation if ‘well managed’. It presents itself as an “African solution for Africa’s conservation challenges”. (6) However, behind the façade of APN is a large group of northern and southern governments, multilateral institutions, international conservation organisations, millionaire family foundations and individuals that fund its conservation business.

Since 2017, the president of the company is Prince Henry of Wales, otherwise known as Prince Harry, a member of the British royal family, who has helped in the acquisition of funding and partners.

APN controls a total area of 14.7 million hectares in Africa, about half the size of Italy, and it intends to expand even more in order to manage “30 parks by 2030 across 11 biomes, ensuring that 30 million hectares are well managed, thus contributing to the broader vision of having 30% of Africa’s unique landscapes protected in perpetuity”. Moreover, their roadmap to 2030 states that “10 more protected areas spanning a further five million hectares will be managed by select partners through our newly created ‘Incubator Programme’. These objectives are ambitious and will contribute significantly to the global target of protecting 30% of the Earth to keep the planet flourishing”. (7)

The Network also indicates its interest in selling carbon credits as an additional source of income. Although such credits basically facilitate more pollution and fossil fuel burning, the website of APN claims that its conservation model “represents an integrated nature-based solution to climate change (…). We secure the carbon captured in the plants and soil in places of high biodiversity value”. (8)

However, experiences on the ground reveal how this so-called Public-Private ‘partnership’ is in fact reinforcing and recreating oppressive power relations.

A 2016 academic study on **the Majete Wildlife Reserve in Malawi** is a case in point. (9) The reserve has been managed by APN since 2003, with a 25 year management concession. It was the first park to fall under APN’s administration. According to the concession they were granted, APN is supposed to involve community members in the management of the reserve. This includes consulting them in issues requiring critical decisions such as bringing new animals into the area, and allowing said members to access and use some of the resources in the reserve such as grass, fish and reeds.

While there is a formal and legal partnership between the Malawian government and APN on the sharing of proceeds, there is no formal or clear agreement between local communities and APN on how benefits are going to be shared out. The benefits for the communities are only indirect, by engaging in activities such as selling food and performing dances for a tourist public. APN argues that apart from physically accessing the resources from the game reserve, communities will benefit from wildlife conservation through employment, income-generating activities they are engaged in and via APN’s corporate responsibility initiatives. However, according to the research, communities are rarely allowed to fish, or to harvest honey or reeds in the game reserve. Instead, they are allowed to harvest only grass at specific times of the year, with the Park management putting forth the argument that communities are supposed to protect and conserve these areas, and that such harvesting disturbs the animals.

One woman interviewed for the research was reported as saying “we have lost control over our means of livelihood, but cannot also get employed by APN; we are prevented from accessing resources that we need for our daily subsistence life such as fish, mushrooms and honey.”

The same research also underlines how APN deceptively used local people to achieve its own goals, but in such a way as to be of no benefit to the community as a whole. For example, APN used a vague agreement with local chiefs (who were taken to other national parks for a tour) as justification to enforce an extension of the wildlife reserve to ancestral land that was being farmed by the communities. This left community members not only voiceless but also divided. This situation has been worsened even more by APN’s tactic to coerce families, and women in particular, by offering to cover their children’s school fees.

Interviews with local chiefs and leaders of community organisations also revealed that though they are informed about the new developments inside the reserve, they do not have any powers to object to APN’s management decisions. Consequently, they are forced to align themselves with the APN

management for fear of jeopardising their relationship with the organisation.

The Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo is another case that merits being highlighted. The Park, created in 1935 when the country was a French colony, appropriated the biggest forest area in the region with 1.35 million hectares. Since 2010, the management of this "nirvana for nature lovers", as APN describes it, has been placed entirely in APN's hands for a period of 25 years. The partners of the Park include groups such as WWF and the European Union.

APN partnered with the Congo Conservation Company (CCC), an enterprise created and funded by a German philanthropist, in order to undertake tourist business activities in the Odzala-Kokoua National Park. This includes three high-end lodges, which tourists can access by flying in on charter flights from the Congolese capital Brazzaville. However, very few inhabitants of Brazzaville have the possibility to enjoy such luxury tourism. A 4-day Odzala Gorilla Discovery Camp visit, for example, costs US$ 9,690 dollars per person.

While the Park was founded in 1935, APN states that "humans have occupied the area for 50,000 years". The company notes that 12,000 people still live around the Park, "yet it is still one of the most biologically diverse and species-rich areas on the planet" (emphasis added). With this formulation, rather than recognising the inhabitants' contribution towards keeping the forest standing after all these thousands of years, the company makes it clear that in its view, the presence of people is not compatible with the aim of conserving forests; it is despite the communities' presence that there is still some remaining biodiversity. (10)

APN claims to protect the Park "with an enhanced eco-guard team and other law enforcement techniques", besides investing in "changing human behaviour". These claims and views on conservation make clear that for this Network and its funders and allies, people living in and around forests are considered a threat and that their conservation business can be run better without them.

In fact, according to a study about the historical relationship between communities and the Park's management, an estimated 10,000 people were evicted following the Park's creation in 1935, and have never been compensated for their loss. The study also points out that in spite of the more recent policy of APN that suggests 'participation' and 'representation' of communities in decision-making processes, the general feeling among the communities interviewed is that the Park has been set up not only by foreigners but also for foreigners. Some community members said: "We don't want this park that gives us nothing and diminishes our livelihoods; it deprives us from our rights over the forest. Our rights to access resources and lands are very weakly respected". Another person said: "Our game is seized by eco-guards. There is more misery and poverty, because not only are we unable to feed ourselves well, we also cannot sell a bit of game to buy basic products such as soap and petrol". (11)

It should be no surprise that for more than 10 years, APN has shown an interest in exploring if the Odzala-Kokoua Park could be turned into a REDD+ project, because through the lens of such projects, communities are also considered a threat and blamed for deforestation. (12) Furthermore, there are no provisions for communities to receive a share of the profits from the sale of carbon credits.

For the WWF, people and not mining companies are threatening the forests

The Odzala-Kokoua National Park is not the only park in the region. It is part of what WWF calls the 'Tridom Landscape', an area covering 10 per cent of the whole Congo Basin rainforest, which

includes another two Parks: the Dja Faunal Reserve in Cameroon and the Minkébé National Park in Gabon. But several large-scale projects are planned inside the 'Tridom Landscape', in particular an area of 150,000 hectares for iron ore mining concessions in the Cameroon-Congo border region. Due to the inaccessibility of said region, huge infrastructure investments must also be planned, such as roads, a railway to transport the minerals, and a hydro-dam for supplying the necessary electricity. The latter is called the Chollet Dam, named after a stretch of waterfalls on the Dja river, described by WWF itself as "a pristine site". (13)

WWF has been practicing and conniving with persecution and eviction of Indigenous Peoples and other communities in the region in the name of 'protecting' nature. Yet, no similar measures have been announced by the NGO against the companies promoting mining, large-scale infrastructures and hydroelectric dams in this same area. The explanation can be found in a recent (rejected) project proposal that WWF presented to the EU to create yet another Protected Area, the Messok Dja Park.

In this proposal, WWF argues that it expects the mining companies to fund WWF in its 'protection measures' in the Triodom area. In other words, the new Park could be seen as an offset for the damage done by mining and its related infrastructure. On top of this, eco-guards supported by WWF have been involved in severe human rights violations, including beatings, torture, sexual abuse and even the killing of members of indigenous communities who live in Messok Dja, the new Park that is being proposed. (14)

The tremendous contradiction of persecuting those who have lived with and conserved forests while remaining silent about the mining companies' plans, reveals the real interests of current 'conservation' policies, namely, the continuation of an overall destructive model based on the ideas and beliefs of colonisation processes and the colonisers, old and new. Solidarity with the communities that resist and face the impacts of 'fortress conservation' is imperative. Enterprises such as APN represent and reinforce these 'fortress conservation' beliefs and policies.

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(7) Idem (6)
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