
Seeking ‘telos’ in the ‘transfrontier’? Neoliberalism and the transcending of community conservation in Southern Africa

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Abstract. In Southern Africa the last ten years have seen a rather dramatic shift in donor and state interest and funding from ‘community conservation’ to ‘transfrontier conservation’. The new trend broadens the aim of conservation–development interventions to also include interstate cooperation. The article critically analyzes this development within a wider shift in neoliberal politics. It is argued that this broader shift helped create the right ‘enabling environment’ for the transfrontier conservation discourse to be presented as an all-embracing and unifying ideological ‘model of meaning’. Moreover, underlying neoliberalism’s contemporary political conduct is a strong reassertion and the actual neo-liberalisation of the state. It is this move that has truly enabled the ‘transfrontier’ to revive the telos of conservation in Southern Africa.

1 Introduction

“How can we explain the tremendous increase in the number of transboundary protected areas in the last few decades? And why has this phenomenon generated such tremendous enthusiasm in the conservation community? The answer is that the transboundary element can act as a multiplier, greatly amplifying the benefits protected areas already provide. Transboundary conservation area [TBCA] initiatives allow conservationists to operate at a larger scale, moving across political boundaries to protect a transboundary ecosystem in its entirety, rather than stopping at political borders that rarely correspond to natural systems. By the same token, a TBCA can create unique social opportunities; for example, by reuniting communities divided by borders or allowing mobile peoples to move across their traditional territories more easily. TBCAs also add an enticing political dimension to conservation, which is the capacity to reduce tensions or even to help resolve conflicts between countries, in particular those stemming from boundary disputes. This peace-making dimension enlarges the range of benefits parks provide in a significant way. It also provides powerful evidence for one of the central tenets of conservation—that protected areas are not only necessary to secure the planet’s ecological integrity but, more broadly, that they are an essential component of any healthy, peaceful, and productive society.”

Mittermeier et al (2005, page 41)

Transboundary or transfrontier conservation has indeed generated tremendous enthusiasm among conservationists. The world over, this trend has unleashed many new possibilities for the conservation community to link its political agenda with that of others and arouse public support and sentiment. As the quote indicates, transfrontier conservation enables conservationists to operate at a larger scale, create ‘unique social opportunities’, and ‘add an enticing political dimension to conservation’—namely, that of conflict resolution and peace building. As such, transfrontier conservation has given the conservation community a new set of ‘levers for engagement’ with which to reach out to other actors and so try to create wider political legitimacy for its mission. Moreover, the new trend has not only

reinvigorated, but perhaps even transcended, the conservation paradigm of community conservation which has been hegemonic—at least in policy—from the 1980s onwards.

The Southern African region has been central in this trend. In fact, where its regional ‘community-based natural resource management’ (CBNRM) programs have long influenced and inspired conservation interventions in other parts of the world, this role seems to have been taken over during the late 1990s and early 2000s by several major transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs). Not long ago, CBNRM programs such as CAMPFIRE⁽¹⁾ in Zimbabwe, LIFE⁽²⁾ in Namibia, ADMADE⁽³⁾ in Zambia, and the CBNRM program in Botswana stood firmly in the global conservation limelight. Nowadays, transfrontier conservation areas such as the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park between Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, The Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA between Lesotho and South Africa, and the Kavango-Zambezi TFCA between Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe occupy the position of international sources of inspiration for conservation.⁽⁴⁾ The shift in donor and state attention from community to transfrontier conservation is further evidenced by the literature, interviews conducted by the author, and trends in donor funding.

An early Southern African study on transboundary natural resource management (TBNRM) noted that “TBNRM is viewed by many proponents as an evolution of CBNRM in border areas” (Jones and Chonguica, 2001, page 49). According to an interviewee, an influential environmental officer from Lesotho, in the mid to late 1990s donors such as the World Bank were actively shifting their conservation-funding strategies towards projects with the word ‘transfrontier’ in it.⁽⁵⁾ Most significantly, in terms of donor funding, it is illustrative to look at the funding figures for the above major CBNRM programs and compare these with the funding for TFCAs. While comprehensive, comparative data on donor funding for CBNRM and transfrontier conservation in Southern Africa are lacking, research by the author indicates that donor funding for CBNRM has gone down substantially, while TFCA funding has seen a rapid increase over the last ten years. Tables 1 and 2 provide a crude overview of some of the donor funds spent on CBNRM and TFCAs in Southern Africa. Although the numbers in the tables by no means represent the totality of funding, either for CBNRM or for TFCAs, it is clear that funding for TFCAs has eclipsed the funding of CBNRM quite dramatically.

When comparing the two tables, several issues stand out. First, the four CBNRM programs had a distinctly national character and much of their funding came from one source—USAID. Hence, much CBNRM funding stopped when USAID discontinued their support for the major programs in the early 2000s. By contrast, TFCAs are multinational by nature, which leads to more fragmented donor funding. This is the reason why in table 2 major funding agencies are taken as the primary point of departure, rather than TFCAs. Important here, however, is that all sources point out that the variety of donors that supports TFCAs is much greater and more diverse across public and private sectors than was the case for CBNRM.⁽⁶⁾ Second, TFCAs

⁽¹⁾ Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources.

⁽²⁾ Living in a Finite Environment.

⁽³⁾ Administrative Management Design Programme for Game Management Areas.

⁽⁴⁾ Obviously, there are more in the Southern African region, but these are some of the TFCAs that have seen most investment, especially the Great Limpopo. Mittermeier et al (2005), for example, argue that the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park is one of ‘three exemplary cases’ globally.

⁽⁵⁾ Interview with Environmental/Consultant, Officer National Environmental Secretariat Lesotho, 28 April 2005, Maseru, Lesotho.

⁽⁶⁾ Conservation International, for example, did a partial inventory of organizations active in the proposed Kaza TFCA between Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, which included 40 donors and NGOs; the Peace Parks Foundation is financially backed by its ‘Club 21’, consisting of 21 wealthy companies and individuals.

Table 1. Funding status of major Southern African community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) programs (sources: App et al, 2008; <http://www.usaid.gov/zw/html/NaturalResources.html>; Balint and Mashinya, 2006; Frost and Bond, 2008; Jones, 1999; Taylor, 2006; personal communications Nico Rozemeijer, former SNV advisor to the Botswana CBNRM support programme.

Program	Funding	Major sources	Status
LIFE, Namibia	US \$16 845 827 (LIFE I: 1993–99) US \$15 118 535 (LIFE II: 1999–2004) US \$11 100 000 (LIFE PLUS: 2004–08)	USAID, WWF USAID USAID	Major donor funding ended June 2008
CAMPFIRE Zimbabwe ^a	US \$28.1 million (1989–2003) US \$12 190 293 (1994–2002)	USAID Norad/WWF	Almost all donor funding ended early 2000s
ADMADE, Zambia	US \$4.8 million (1989–99)	USAID	Program ongoing, but major donor funding ended in 2000
CBNRM Botswana	US \$19.9 million (1989–97) approx. €490 000 (US \$650 000) (1999–2005)	USAID SNV/IUCN/ HIVOS	Program ongoing, but major donor funding ended in 2005

^a According to Frost and Bond (2008, page 778): “Information on the amount of funding from sources other than USAID is not readily available. Moreover, these funds were allocated to support community-based natural resource management generally, not just CAMPFIRE”.

in Southern Africa are facilitated by an extremely successful (from a financial point of view) funding organization founded solely for the purpose of stimulating TFCAs; namely, the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF). CBNRM programs did not have this ‘luxury’.

Third, neither table includes funding from the national states, but state funding obviously plays an important role. While the Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe governments have continuously provided—and continue to provide—funding for CBNRM, this has also been eclipsed by state funding for transfrontier conservation. Most noticeably, this is because the best-resourced state—South Africa—started contributing substantially after apartheid. Observations in and interviews with staff members of South Africa’s Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) over a three-year period (2005–08) clearly indicate that transfrontier conservation has been better institutionalized and better state funded than CBNRM ever was. CBNRM is one of many priorities in the Biodiversity and Conservation Branch, while transfrontier conservation has been a separate, well-staffed, and well-funded directorate since the early 2000s.⁽⁷⁾ The current importance of TFCAs within DEAT can be further emphasized by the recent establishment of another directorate, the TFCA 2010 Development Unit, which focuses on linking TFCAs to the 2010 soccer World Cup.

Although I would not state that CBNRM has ‘disappeared’ in favor of TFCAs, the shift in funding resources is striking, with the early 2000s showing CBNRM funding on the decline and funding for TFCAs strongly on the rise. Interestingly, the reasons why this shift took place have been little investigated. So far, much of the nascent, but burgeoning, literature on TFCAs has focused on whether TFCAs can keep their multiple promises (Duffy, 2006; Ramutsindela, 2007; Van Amerom, 2005; Wolmer, 2003), particularly with respect to local communities (Draper et al, 2004; Whande, 2007).

⁽⁷⁾ See <http://www.deat.gov.za/>

Table 2. Funding status of transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs) in Southern Africa (source: Peace Party Foundation financial reports 2006; 2007 – calculations include Pear Parks Foundation group and company); personal communication, Dr Leo Braack Director, Southern Africa Wilderness and Transfrontier Conservation Programmes, Conservation International; www.worldbank.org; <http://www.awf.org/section/heartlands>; <http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/cp2000/afr/isa.html>; http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACD874.pdf; http://www.rural21.com/uplocads/media/ELR_engl_50-53.pdf).

Major sources	TFCAs	Funding	Status
World Bank and Global Environmental Facility	Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park	US \$5 million	Pilot project (1996–2003)
	Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park Lubombo TFCA Chimanmani TFCA	US \$26.7 million	Ongoing, until at least 2013
	Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA (2003–08)	US \$15.3 million	Project ongoing, major funding ended 2008
Peace Parks Foundation (PPF)	Involved in all major Southern African TFCAs, but most heavily in the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park	Approx. SA Rand 200–250 million (+/– US \$22–27 million) total assets annually	PPF founded in 1997 and will be ongoing for the foreseeable future
USAID	Great Limpopo, Kavango Zambezi + ZiMoZo TFCAs (1998–2004)	US \$3 million	Funding for TFCAs stopped in 2004 as priority shifted to transboundary water management
Conservation International	Ai–Ais Richtersveld TFCA	US \$150 000 annually (as from 2004)	Ongoing (funding for Kgalagadi TFCA to be renegotiated in 2011)
	Kavango Zambezi TFCA	US \$300 000 annually (as from 2004)	
	Kgalagadi TFCA	US \$500 000 annually (as from 2007)	
KFW (German Government)	Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park	€12 million (US \$16 million)	Ongoing
AFD (French government)	Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park	€11 million (US \$14.5 million)	Ongoing

A theoretically solid explanation for the rather dramatic shift in donor and ‘conservation community’ attention from CBNRM to TFCAs is still lacking. This lack is especially surprising given that CBNRM was long heralded as the *telos*—the ultimate purpose or form—of conservation, but lost much of its glow due to disappointing results and increasingly fundamental criticism from the mid-1990s onwards (Hutton et al, 2005). Since then, conservationists have sought to construct a new *telos* for conservation; something that would generate the ‘tremendous enthusiasm’ that the conservation community was longing for and which would enable it to source new revenues and renew its ties to important constituencies.

In this paper I aim to address the gap in the literature, arguing that the main way in which conservationists have taken up this challenge is by reconstituting conservation in neoliberal terms. It was hoped that, by further cementing CBNRM into the larger framework of capitalism, the market would productively connect conservation and development where the state had failed. Yet neoliberal ideology has itself been subtly but swiftly changing, with due consequences for the CBNRM paradigm.

Understanding these important shifts in today's globally dominant political ideology of neoliberalism, I argue, is critical in explaining why CBNRM could no longer revive the 'tremendous enthusiasm' so sought after by conservationists, whereas transfrontier conservation did. First, and leaning on work by Baudrillard (1994), I contend that the level of the symbolic has taken on increased significance in contemporary neoliberalism as a way of 'solving' or concealing the (increasingly intense) contradictions of late capitalism. Similarly, and as stated above, TFCAs have (quite literally) broadened the conservation mandate to create new symbolic 'levers for engagement' with novel and preexisting constituencies. Second, following Peck and Tickell (2002, page 384, emphasis in original):

"there seems to have been a shift from the pattern of deregulation and dismantlement so dominant during the 1980s, which might be characterized as 'roll-back neoliberalism,' to an emergent phase of active state-building and regulatory reform—an ascendant moment of 'roll-out neoliberalism.' In the course of this shift, the agenda has gradually moved from one preoccupied with the active *destruction and discreditation* of Keynesian-welfarist and social collectivist institutions (broadly defined) to one focused on the purposeful *construction and consolidation* of neoliberalised state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations."

As I show in more depth below, CBNRM has been neatly aligned with 'roll-back neoliberalism', whereas transfrontier conservation is more attuned to 'roll-out neoliberalism'. It is this quality that has truly enabled the 'transfrontier' to revive the telos of conservation.

After some further remarks on the move from community to transfrontier conservation in the context of neoliberalism in the next section, my argument will unfold in two steps. First, I will outline what I regard as fundamental changes in neoliberal political practice from '1980s neoliberalism' to its more contemporary 1990s and 2000s character. Second, I will show how these changes created new possibilities to reinvigorate the telos of conservation: namely, by making use of the spaces provided by the 'transfrontier trend' to reconstruct conservation as a 'model of meaning' and, crucially, by 'bringing the state back in.' Throughout, I illustrate the argument with research done on Southern African TFCAs between 2003 and 2008, in particular the Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Project between Lesotho and South Africa. I conclude with some final reflections.

2 From community to transfrontier conservation in the context of neoliberalism

The history of conservation paradigms in (Southern) Africa is well covered in the literature (see Adams and Hulme, 2001; Adams and Hutton, 2007). Important to mention here is that CBNRM policies arose out of a desire to redress the colonial 'fortress conservation' model which emphasized protected areas, limited to no use of natural resources, and a separation between humans and nature. It tried to do so by allowing sustainable use of natural resources and empowering 'communities' to take charge of conservation (Brockington, 2002). In line with models of participatory sustainable development, one of CBNRM's most appealing (theoretical) strengths lay in its ability to construct win–win solutions both for biodiversity and for 'local communities'. As a consequence,

"CBNRM has enjoyed a long and successful career at the center of international projects and programs, in spite of a stream of critiques and evidence of failure. A sceptical view of CBNRM would treat it as a fashion, in a catwalk of fashions—community development, micro-credit, farming systems, livelihood approaches and so on have filed past ..., but even the sceptic would concur that this model has had exceptional longevity" (Blaikie, 2006, page 1952).

Thus, the main reason why CBNRM has become hegemonic is not just because it aimed to rectify fortress conservation; in practice, it often did not (Adams and Hutton, 2007). The point is that CBNRM provided theoretical benefits on such a wide scale that it firstly enabled many actors with divergent agendas to crowd under a common umbrella and secondly enabled the discourse to produce and reproduce its own success. According to Blaikie (2006, page 1954):

“‘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).”

Indeed, criticisms of CBNRM having fulfilled neither its conservation nor its development objectives are plenty (Wainwright and Wehrmeyer, 1998; Wunder, 2001); yet have little impeded its popularity.

Beside the above explanations for CBNRM’s continued (theoretical) ‘success’, there is, according to McCarthy (2005), another reason why CBNRM has remained popular: its ability to hybridize with today’s dominant political ideology of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, though difficult to define (Castree, 2008a), relates here to the political ideology that aims to subject political and social affairs to market dynamics. According to McCarthy (2005, page 998), neoliberal and CBNRM discourses have similar invocations of the concepts of ‘civil society’ and ‘community’, respectively. He discerns three ways in which the concepts are ‘functionally analogous’. First, both neoliberal and community conservation discourses construct civil society and community as “unified, cohesive entities, obscuring differentiation within groups while hardening the boundaries between them.” Second, McCarthy argues that both discourses “tend to construct civil society and communities as inherently democratic and flexible, and states as inherently less democratic, leaning towards centralization if not totalitarianism” (page 999). Third, this aversion to state interference almost ‘naturally’ leads the two discourses to stress the ‘inevitable’ bond between communities/civil society and markets as the spaces that are “cast as the aggregate results of free individuals voluntarily entering into contracts and associational life, free of coercion from the sovereign” (page 999). As such, CBNRM has appeared remarkably congruent with (roll-back) neoliberalism, leading to hybridized models of governance which aim to reconstruct conservation–development realms as markets.

Although McCarthy perceptively clarified the analogous ways in which neoliberal and community conservation discourses construct and inform hybridized models of *governance* he left implicit the *political* strategies (consciously or unconsciously) intended or propagated by proponents and followers of neoliberal conservation discourses. For the current argument, it is important to recognize that the politics of neoliberalism has also seen subtle, yet far-reaching, changes since the 1980s. Igoe and Brockington (2007, page 435), hint at these when they state:

“neoliberal conservation moves beyond a world of win–win solutions to a world of win-win-win-win-win-win-win (or win⁷ if you like) solutions that benefit: corporate investors, national economies, biodiversity, local people, western consumers, development agencies, and the conservation organizations that receive funding from those agencies to undertake large conservation interventions.”

They too, however, do not explicate the changes in neoliberal political conduct that have made ‘win’ constructions not only necessary for political legitimation, but also believed to be viable by neoliberals.

It is here that our analysis of the move from community to transfrontier conservation in Southern Africa truly begins. After all, transfrontier conservation—according to its proponents—adds important ‘wins’ to community conservation. The most important is that of cooperation and peace across international boundaries. But as the quote at the beginning of the introduction indicates, one should also think about increased geographical and political scale and increased ‘social possibilities’. However, merely stating that transfrontier conservation increases the amount of ‘wins’ of conservation constructions does not aid the theorizing around (transfrontier) conservation, the move from community to transfrontier conservation and the connections with neoliberal ideology. In the next sections I therefore embed these discussions in an explicit theory on the substance and meaning of contemporary neoliberal politics, and show how this frames and legitimates transfrontier conservation.

3 Contemporary modes of neoliberal political conduct

In earlier work (Büscher, 2009) I attempted to develop a theoretical framework around contemporary modes of neoliberal political conduct which research has shown are pertinent in understanding the constitution of neoliberalism in (Southern African) conservation/development interventions. These political strategies will be summarized here and should be seen in an overall framework in which they are reinforced by, and themselves reinforce, particular ‘technologies’ of neoliberal devolved governance, such as competition, commercialisation, and ‘promoted self-regulation’ (McCarthy, 2005). Three political modes are distinguished: consensus, antipolitics, and marketing. I argue that, in conjunction with forms of neoliberal devolved governance, these three modes are vital in understanding the depth and breadth of neoliberalism’s reproduction through conservation–development in Southern Africa, while also providing a strong explanation for the shift from community to transfrontier conservation.

Underlying the discussion are two assumptions about neoliberalism; namely, that it has progressed from its 1980s variant to a late 1990s–2000s version and that its proponents are ‘blatantly’ universal in their ambitions. In line with Peck and Tickell (2002), these assumptions refer to what Overbeek (1999, pages 248–249) suggests are several important ‘moments’ in “the process of global restructuring and the neoliberal ascendancy”: namely, from 1980s neoliberalism as a ‘*constructive*’ project, imposing structural adjustment, privatisation, etc, to the hegemonic *consolidation* of neoliberalism as “the global rule of capital” in the 1990s. I return to the first assumption below. For now, the second assumption is important for understanding the political mode of consensus in that neoliberalism’s universalism collides with a strong pressure for ‘actor and thematic all-inclusiveness’ in conservation. ‘Neoliberalism’s universalism’ relates to the well-established supposition that neoliberals believe that their ideals and modes of governance are universally valid *and* applicable. From this arises a tendency to bring ever more people and aspects of life into the neoliberal framework.

Similarly, contemporary conservation must not only take ‘communities’ into account, but must also cater for the private sector, NGOs, the state, influential individuals, tourists, and others (Igoe and Brockington, 2007). Moreover, besides conserving biological diversity, conservation agencies are nowadays also pressurized to take social, gender, international cooperation, security, and other ‘issue areas’ into account. Hence, the constituencies and interests of conservation are persistently broadening and conservation interventions have increasingly been forced to speak in consensus rhetoric to capture these actors and interests (Petersen et al, 2005).

Illustrative of many contemporary conservation policies, an unpublished memo written for the Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA stated that the overall planning framework for the Maloti–Drakensberg bioregion for 2008–28 is supposed to guide “all action, whether country-specific or joint, *collectively* contributing to the achievement of the project purpose (impact) and vision/overall goal.”

Importantly, the consensus strategy should be seen within a tendency to construct conservation–development arenas increasingly as ‘self-regulating markets’, whereby ‘consumer constituencies’ have to provide legitimacy and reconstruct their social relations into economic ones. The language of consensus, coupled with neoliberal governance schemes such as ‘payments for environmental services’ (Wunder, 2007), then becomes subsumed under a neoliberal political strategy to make all ‘stakeholders’ feel as though they gain their ‘rightful’ place in a conservation–development market. A consultancy report produced for the Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA illustrates the point:

“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 et al, 2004, page 5).

Here, the link between consensus and neoliberal conservation is obvious. Yet, to retain this image of all-inclusiveness and consensus in the face of actors capable of critically scrutinizing and resisting one’s political agenda requires a second neoliberal mode of political conduct: that of antipolitics. Political modes of antipolitics entail a strategy of positing or constructing a reality such that it seems not to be debatable but ‘taken for granted’, or ‘the logical/rational choice’. The familiar way to do so in conservation–development interventions is through ‘rendering technical’, what in fact is political (Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007). Yet, following Schedler (1997, page 12), the concept of antipolitics should be conceptualized much more broadly: as ‘reshaping politics’ in such a way that a particular image or ‘partial rationality’ is imposed onto it. Besides technical or instrumental antipolitics, Schedler distinguishes several other types of antipolitical strategies, including *moral* antipolitics. Simply put, this strategy comes down to replacing democratic debate with a particular ‘moral high ground’. In the case of the Maloti–Drakensberg TFCA, research revealed that one of the reasons why the South Africa and Lesotho project teams implementing the TFCA often came into conflict was because both teams had established a certain ‘high ground’ that was not to be ‘compromised’ (key informant interview, 23 September 2005). For South Africa this was the technical planning process, whereas Lesotho chose the moral high ground of CBNRM. In the end the TFCA became a mix of both strategies which further worked to depoliticize the power differences between them and between the project and the supposed beneficiaries. Like consensus, the political strategy of antipolitics fits contemporary neoliberalism: it fits a market environment that works to ‘discipline’ subjects into—often literally—‘buying into’ one’s political agenda and so stimulating and further entrenching neoliberal modes of devolved governance.⁽⁸⁾

Both these neoliberal modes of political conduct aim to frame conservation/development interventions and realities as all-inclusive, rational, and free from contradictions. Yet, time and again, critical research has shown that they are rife with contradictions (Ferguson, 2006; Kovel, 2002; Li, 2007). Accordingly, I argue, after

⁽⁸⁾ For an in-depth discussion, see Büscher (2010).

Baudrillard (1994), that a preference for discourse, images, and signs over ‘reality’ is cultivated. After all, the symbolic realm of discourse seems better fitted to try and control or mediate contradictions—through discursive grooming and promoting ‘sign values’—than ‘reality’, even if ‘reality’ is always inherently socially constructed. This is where the third and final neoliberal political strategy comes in: marketing. Marketing here entails the manipulation of abstraction in order to gain competitive advantage. Increasingly, conservation–development interventions depend on branding themselves and their objectives as valuable and legitimate parts of the public space in order to stand out against competing claims on the public space. Moreover, and despite a master narrative of CBNRM, conceptual competition within the conservation/development sector is rife. As a result, marketing and branding, as methods to exploit the tension between ‘reality’ and its construction, become a political necessity to gain competitive advantage and so bring one’s agenda to the fore. In turn, this marks a further neoliberalization of conservation–development through the creation of a political valorization system which is deeply capitalist in nature.

Arvidsson (2005, page 236) explains that “brands are mechanisms that enable a direct valorization ... of people’s ability to create trust, affect and shared meanings: their ability to create something in common.” Yet, these objectives are not valued in themselves; they have to lead to something that can be validated commercially:

“the systematic push towards sign value was a response to the limits of the commodity form. Constructed to support expanded and regularized consumption of commodity consumer goods, the sphere of commodity signs was itself an effort to overcome earlier limits to the growth of capital” (Goldman and Papson, 2006, page 336).

Nonetheless, and as I show in more depth below, marketing as a vehicle to create meaning and ‘something in common’ is convincingly illustrated by the ways in which TFCAs are marketed. The following remark by Nelson Mandela, one the founding patrons of the PPF, is used particularly often in marketing material:

“I know of no political movement, no philosophy, no ideology, which does not agree with the peace parks concept as we see it going into fruition today. It is a concept that can be embraced by all. In a world beset by conflict and division, peace is one of the cornerstones of the future. Peace parks are a building block in this process, not only in our region, but potentially in the entire world.”

Taken together, the three modes of consensus, antipolitics, and marketing present a particularly strong and resilient set of political practices which is not only able to maintain legitimation for conservation–development interventions, but also works to mask the ‘uneasy contradictions’ in neoliberal conservation. But this analytical framework must be taken further still, as conservation–development arenas are not the only ‘public’ sphere to have internalized these shifts in neoliberal political conduct. On the contrary; this needs to be viewed within the context of the neoliberalization of the wider public sector—especially the state. Following Peck and Tickell (2002), contemporary neoliberalism has progressed from its 1980s ‘roll-back’ to 1990s and 2000s ‘roll-out’ neoliberalism which implicates not only the (public transfers to the) private sector but also the actual neoliberalization of the state. Similarly, Moore (1999, page 64) argue:

“If the era of ‘structural adjustment’ economic policies of the 1980s and earlier 1990s meant attempts to ‘get the prices right’ and to hack away indiscriminately at the state, then we are now in the age of ‘getting the state right’ to implement the same goals as before.”

Hence, not only does the state support neoliberal governance strategies such as competition and commercialization, it also actively partakes in them—even disciplining

itself accordingly: for instance, by substituting traditionally public sector operating principles (like cross-subsidization or supply-driven service) to private sector operating principles (like managerial and financial ring fencing or demand-driven service) (McDonald and Ruiters, 2005). Getting the state to support neoliberal policies, and in fact to internalize neoliberal political conduct, in turn fuels a continuous deepening of neoliberalization across society. And although this is not to say that neoliberalization is a linear process and that neoliberalism's various constitutions always remain context, place, and time specific, its global hegemony does imply that similar types of processes can be seen across the globe (Castree, 2008b, page 157). I argue that the political strategies of consensus, antipolitics, and marketing are an integral part of these processes, and that they can provide clues to a myriad of contemporary trends and questions: for instance, that of how 'the transfrontier' revived the telos of conservation in Southern Africa.

4 Seeking telos in the transfrontier

Based on the above, I argue that transfrontier conservation, at least in Southern Africa, reconstituted and reinvigorated the telos of conservation in two main ways: first, by being better suited to frame and subject conservation to the three 'modes of neoliberal political conduct' described above; and second, by strategically incorporating the neoliberal state.

4.1 Transfrontier conservation as a model of meaning

Let us return to the quote at the start of this paper, this time more critically. What is striking firstly is that the *political* dimension of TFCAs is squarely equated with *peace making*. That few (social) scientists would directly equate politics with peace making is an understatement. This idea, however, has gained such firm ground that TFCAs are also commonly referred to as 'peace parks'. Secondly, the paragraph praises the multiple positive effects of TFCAs: in the environmental, social, economic, and the political realms, TFCAs supposedly bring great and positive contributions, 'greatly amplifying the benefits protected areas already provide'. Naturally, this is 'marketing speak', as in the real world the social, political, economic, or even environmental benefits of (transboundary) protected areas are not as clear cut (Brockington et al, 2008; Igoe, 2004; Reyers, 2003; Van Amerom and Büscher, 2005; Wunder, 2001). Thirdly, the paragraph as a whole explicitly tries to mold protected areas into a new all-embracing teleology of 'health, peace and productivity', with the adjective 'transboundary' being the latest and, perhaps, most definitive stage in the molding process.

When studying transfrontier conservation areas in Southern Africa, evidence for this last point is overwhelming. Special attention should be reserved for the PPF, a nongovernmental organization, founded in 1997 by the late South African billionaire entrepreneur Anton Rupert, the late Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, and former South African president Nelson Mandela with the sole purpose of stimulating the establishment of TFCAs. It is exceptionally well resourced and well connected politically and economically and has therefore been able to influence Southern African TFCA development tremendously (Spierenburg and Wels, 2008). As such, in the following I take the PPF as the empirical point of departure. The argument I advance is that proponents of TFCAs, especially the PPF, try to construct transfrontier conservation as a *model of meaning* to which people can attach their identity and emotions as well as the telos—the end state or 'natural' order—of conservation and development more generally. In this way, they are able to adhere to the three modes of neoliberal political conduct of consensus, antipolitics, and marketing.

The background to this argument is Marx's assertion that "liberal capitalism alienated people from the environment in ways that ecological connections were no longer evident to them" (Brockington et al, 2008, page 197). Marx's overall assertion, of course, was much broader than the environment. In a capitalist world, he argued, where in principle everything can be commodified, alienation in general continuously deepens. This, in turn, is associated with loss of meaning as meaningful attachment gives way to commercial rationality (Arvidsson, 2005). Baudrillard (1994, page 80), in turn, has taken this point further and argued that in our 'hyperreal' information society, information "exhausts itself in the act of staging communication" and that "rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning." Yet, in true capitalist fashion, and as Brockington et al (2008) show, this does not deter entrepreneurs from exploiting this new space: namely, by reattaching meaning to and engagement with commercial products (as nature is fast becoming) through consumption. Nowhere is this better understood than in contemporary private sector marketing which tries to tie products in with personality attributes, passions, personal emotions, and so forth, in order to 'hook' clients on a deeper level (Arvidsson, 2005). In turn, there seems to be no actor in transfrontier conservation that understands this better than the PPF, an organization originating from and rooted in 'big business', as shown by Ramutsindela (2007). In their public relations for 'peace parks', I argue, PPF, but also other actors, employ all the familiar marketing moves of contemporary advertising and public relations to make TFCAs meaningful to 'stakeholders'.

The first point to make is that, if politics is about competing interests and making choices, then the 'peace parks discourse' promoted by the PPF tries to avoid this by literally trying to take everything related to conservation and development into account. Looking at the lists of criteria and principles that donors *and* 'stakeholders' alike want conservation–development schemes to attend to, peace parks surely seem to be the epitome of what can be asked of these interventions: besides conserving nature and reducing poverty, they are supposed to facilitate participation, enhance ownership, empower communities, enhance international cooperation and understanding, reunite and reinvigorate cultures, stimulate spirituality, encourage economic growth and tourism, educate, form partnerships, bring peace, enhance security, adhere to good governance, and so forth. Hence, the conservation–development telos seems complete and ready to compete. Where states used to be the archetypical focal points to lead these objectives, with the shift from government to governance and the changing nature of the state itself, many other actors try to fill the void left by a less all-encompassing conceptualization of the state.

As a result, nongovernmental and private actors strategically started competing for popular support to legitimize their existence and interventions in the public arena. The way to do this is similar to more 'classical' political mobilization: to gather as many people as possible under unifying, all-embracing, and seemingly noncontestable concepts, premises and promises. The PPF tries to do exactly this, and does so rather bluntly. For example, the official slogan of the PPF reads 'the global solution', indicating that

the peace parks concept as they see it provides the perfect conservation–development construction that can appropriately be implemented throughout the globe. Another example is the extremely strategic use the PPF makes of its patrons and founding patrons, especially former South African President Nelson Mandela. Obviously, Mandela is one of the most recognizable and most respected people in the world today and to have him as founding patron, regularly endorsing PPF activities and initiatives—for example through the quote above—probably guarantees the highest buy-in one could get from any endorsement.



Interestingly, not all staff members of the PPF themselves always agree with the way the PPF conceptualizes peace parks, but most are still admirers of its founder, Anton Rupert, and believe that he ‘gave them’ the tools to make their common ‘dream’ a reality (personal communication, PPF staff member, 2005). In fact, the person of Rupert himself is used as a tool by the PPF to present peace parks as models of meaning, as Rupert’s life is portrayed as arguably the most meaningful life that could be lived. Nowhere is this clearer than in a brochure dedicated entirely to Anton Rupert’s life, entitled “An idea that binds. How Anton Rupert’s philosophy of co-existence and partnership culminated in peace parks” (PPF, no date). In it, Rupert is portrayed as a role model to follow: a hard worker, successful business entrepreneur, and patron of nature who, despite his enormous successes in life, remained a humble man. The brochure even highlights Rupert’s resistance against apartheid based on his “philosophy of co-existence between man and man and man and nature”:

“The policy of apartheid stymied the development of the entire Southern Africa. When Rupert’s philosophy of co-existence was discussed in the South African parliament in 1966, he was accused of trying to establish Hong Kongs and Singapores in South Africa! If only South Africa had done so way back in 1966 ...!” (PPF, no date, page 3).

The brochure goes on to praise Rupert’s achievements in nature conservation by founding WWF South Africa and describing how this ‘culminated’ in the ‘global solution’ of peace parks. Different aspects of peace parks are explained, after which the brochure ends by quoting some of Rupert’s practical philosophies and wisdoms in life.⁽⁹⁾ These portrayals of Rupert not only come from the PPF, however. Many others, especially after his passing in January 2006, described him in similar terms.⁽¹⁰⁾ More critical literature, however, has problematized these ‘successes’ and shown them to be both factually and contextually incorrect. First, it has repeatedly been pointed out that there are large contradictions in a ‘benevolent conservation tycoon’ who made most of his fortune from cigarettes, liquor, and luxury goods, many of which depend on mining and natural resource extraction (Spienburg and Wels, 2008). Second and more serious are the social dislocations as the result of TFCA establishment. The best-known example here is the recent eviction of some 28 000 people from Mozambique’s Limpopo National Park, which is a direct result of the establishment of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (Spienburg et al, 2008). Third, many of the community benefits promised by Rupert’s PPF have not been forthcoming, as acknowledged by the Foundation’s CEO, who stated in a meeting attended by the author that the five million people living next to the South African side of the Great Limpopo are not benefiting from the peace park yet and that “this is a problem”.⁽¹¹⁾

These critical remarks in the literature, however, have had little impact on what is the crux of the argument here: namely, that Rupert is portrayed as a role model whose life was meaningful in multiple ways. In an interview, Van Riet, former CEO of PPF stated that Dr Rupert “is the catalyst, by example. His whole life has been taking an idea and putting it into a real venture, and he’s applying those things to his conservation activities. I am his arm, his weapon” (Weaver, 2001, page 9). In brief, the direct link between Rupert’s exemplary life and peace parks again serves to construct the latter

⁽⁹⁾ Such as: “Confidence begets confidence. It certainly is a risk to trust, but mistrust is an even greater risk that can lead to disaster. If you don’t trust others, you probably can’t trust yourself!” (PPF, no date, page 33).

⁽¹⁰⁾ To quote but one example, the *South African Sunday Times* of 22 January 2006 titled its piece “The benevolent tycoon” and added that ‘the good doctor’ “Anton Rupert channelled his desire to be a doctor into using his wealth to benefit others.”

⁽¹¹⁾ Professor Van Riet in a presentation at the Dutch embassy in Pretoria on 9 March 2005.

as ‘models of meaning’ through which people can obtain new hope in conservation, development, peace, and Africa.

Other examples, such as the quote at the beginning of the paper, are plenty, but the point remains. Peace parks are presented as all-embracing ideological models of meaning, and are often linked to more widely accepted, fundamental ‘models of meaning’ such as religion. In PPF brochures TFCAs combine the ‘Garden of Eden’ with business sense, both of which are seen as natural to humans. In this vein it is apt to heed Marden’s (2003, page 185) words in that “indeed, the spiritual centre of contemporary life in modern capitalist society is deemed by the protagonists to be corporate in origin, and is itself, one manifestation of the deification of the market and the triumph of antipolitics.” Yet the inverse of the above argument might also illustrate why the construction of peace parks as a model of meaning is a consensus-oriented, antipolitical strategy. One could argue that, instead of TFCAs forming ‘the global solution’ to social, environmental, political, and economic problems, they are in fact the solution to many of the social, political, economic, and environmental pressures on conservation and development interventions today.

Let me state this more bluntly: influenced by neoliberal logics (Castree, 2008a) and further reinforced by the exponential increase in organizational development (Igoe, 2004), many aspects of our world, and especially such politically sensitive issues as conservation–development, have reached such heights of sensitivity that consensus-oriented antipolitical strategies have become an absolute necessity to get new initiatives off the ground or to maintain existing ones. This does not imply that TFCAs are mere discursive constructions assembled to deal with the pressures of our time: TFCAs do have validity in reality, as indeed it makes (biological, managerial) sense that ecosystem across borders are looked at and managed holistically; that often previously disadvantaged communities living in or near these areas have a say in the management of TFCAs; and that more regular cooperation between countries could enhance understanding. Yet, when implemented and legitimated the neoliberal way, these issues are increasingly torn between the enormous expectations of peace parks as discursive ‘models of meaning’ and the contradictions in reality described in a growing body of literature (Büscher, 2009; Duffy, 2006; Wolmer, 2003).

4.2 Soothing the state

In the PPF’s attempt at playing the neoliberal consensus, antipolitics, and marketing game by positing TFCAs as models of meaning, another crucial element is added to the mix: the return of the state to conservation. As narrated above, community conservation shared with earlier neoliberalism an inherent mistrust of the state. In line with more recent developments in neoliberal practice, transfrontier conservation ‘brings the state back in’. Obviously, this is not to suggest that neoliberalism’s ambivalence towards the state—on the one hand, that the state is all that is ‘bad’ while, on the other hand, that the state is necessary as an ‘enabling environment’ (Moore, 1999)—is gone. Rather, the necessity for the state and its importance as a (public–private) partner in the further neoliberal constitution of conservation/development has now been recognized by neoliberals, such as the PPF. As such, facilitated by its enormous financial resources and fund-raising capabilities, the PPF has been able to create direct access to and, I argue, even direct the relevant actors and policies of practically all Southern African ministries of environment and tourism towards its objective of facilitating ‘peace parks’.

According to Professor Van Riet in a presentation at the Dutch embassy in Pretoria on 9 March 2005 which I attended, the management of the PPF is concerned mostly with access to and space for ‘peace parks’ and facilitation and training regarding

the development of TFCAs. Facilitation, according to Van Riet, means to “oil the government machinery and so fix what is broke”. Practically, the PPF has ‘oiled the government machinery’ by funding the appointment of a staff member working solely on TFCAs in nearly each ministry of environment and/or tourism in Southern Africa. According to a PPF memo:

“Based on the tremendous success PPF had with the secondment of a TFCA Technical Advisor to South Africa’s Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, it is now planned to create a network of similar positions throughout the SADC [Southern African Development Community] region within each of the conservation agencies. One of the biggest requirements to promote the TFCA concept is continuity. Through appointing a person dedicated to focus on TFCA issues with the support of PPF assisting technically, logistically and financially a great impact can be made on various fields but most importantly at a political level to influence and empower decision-makers” (PPF, 2002, page 5).

As well as staff, PPF also supplies national departments with technical and financial resources, such as maps and overview documents and it brings governments and other actors together by setting up, financing, and organizing conferences and workshops. According to Büscher and Dietz (2005, page 5):

“in this way, not only has the PPF direct political access by contributing a wide variety of resources, they also have an edge in directing policy because they can influence part of the content, as the resources they offer are directly being used by ‘their’ officers in the various departments to make decisions in the policy process.”

In the literature the close bonds between the white, Afrikaner-dominated PPF and the South African state have been given cultural explanations in that transfrontier conservation aroused the creation of “‘Super-African’ identities, based on identifying with nature and the landscape rather than the nation-state” (Draper et al, 2004, page 341). On the basis of the above, I would like to put forth a different argument—one that places emphasis on the importance of the state in a global and a regional Southern African context. Both black and white elites in South Africa actively subjected themselves to the global neoliberal project during the 1990s (Bond, 2000), and the ‘soothing’ of the state by the PPF and the state approval of this should be seen as an acceptance of the increasingly important role attributed to the state as a tool for the further entrenchment of neoliberal practices. The common argument for the state emphasis in TFCA development is that nation-states are the only actors with international negotiation powers. Yet, in a swiftly neoliberalizing economy with tremendous emphasis on the importance of tourism, the state plays a vital role in providing ‘services’ such as security, international investor confidence, and a legal framework. Hence, the positing of TFCAs as the central strategy for growth in tourism by the PPF cannot but acknowledge and incorporate the state as crucial.

This line of thinking also fits better with the ‘state fetishism’ so prevalent in South Africa, as explained by Neocosmos (2003, page 343):

“In South Africa ..., state fetishism is so pervasive within the hegemonic political discourse that debate is structured by the apparently evident ‘common sense’ notion that the post-apartheid state can ‘deliver’ everything from jobs to empowerment, from development to human rights, from peace in Africa to a cure for HIV-AIDS. As a result not only is the state deified, but social debate is foreclosed from the start; the idea simply becomes one of assessing policy or capacity. In other words the focus is on management not on politics.”

In turn, this ‘state fetishism’ acknowledges the importance of consensus and anti-politics which, in effect, completes the ‘neoliberal circle’. The true telos of conservation

brought by the ‘transfrontier trend’, therefore, is that the state is back in, and actively partakes in the new neoliberal modes of political conduct.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to provide a theoretically robust argument for the sudden shift in donor and ‘conservation community’ attention in Southern Africa away from community to transfrontier conservation. I have argued that the transfrontier movement has, more so than community conservation, enabled proponents to package conservation as an all-embracing and unifying ideological model of meaning which links with contemporary ‘modes’ of neoliberal political conduct—specifically, those of consensus, antipolitics, and marketing. Underlying neoliberalism’s contemporary political conduct, however, is a strong reassertion and the actual neoliberalisation of the state. It is this move that has truly enabled the ‘transfrontier’ to revive the telos of conservation in Southern Africa.

It is important to repeat that transfrontier conservation has not replaced community conservation. The point is that transfrontier conservation has added more ingredients to the basic community conservation model in order to link it up better with contemporary modes of neoliberal political conduct, and so increase conservation’s avenues for acquiring political legitimation. Moreover, positing transfrontier conservation as a model of meaning is also not to say that TFCAs are indeed expected to compete with, or even replace, more fundamental ‘models of meaning’ such as religion. My point here is about the influence of neoliberalism and its effects on conservation–development, about which two issues should be raised as concluding reflections.

The first links in with Morris’s (2005, page 698) statement:

“while it is highly unlikely that postmodern commodification and consumption have simply replaced ideology and religion as the principal binding forms that give ‘real’ meaning to people’s lives, these processes nevertheless pose significant challenges to the maintenance of coherent and enduring interpretative communities.”

Similarly, the rather abrupt change in the overall telos of conservation through the ‘transfrontier trend’ has obviously not replaced the many meanings embedded in the human articulation with nature. In line with other scholarly work (Igoe and Brockington, 2007; McCarthy, 2005), it does corroborate, however, that the field of conservation is increasingly becoming subjected to neoliberal logics, which can indeed ‘pose significant challenges’ to the endurance of the conservation community and its articulation with ‘nature’.

The second has to do with the actual effects on biodiversity and the social relations around biodiversity. In this paper I have indicated that the supposed multiple positive effects of TFCAs on conservation–development have not yet materialized. The new neoliberal energy brought in by the transfrontier trend might, then, do more harm than good to challenge the conservation community’s articulation with nature. Rather, it will further reify the current status quo about which most conservationists agree that it can and should be improved significantly.

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