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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures



Interactive elephants: Nature, tourism and neoliberalism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 September 2012

Revised 21 January 2013

Accepted 9 September 2013

Keywords:

Neoliberalism

Elephant riding

Safari tourism

Nature

ABSTRACT

This paper traces the relationships between neoliberalism, tourism and nature. It argues that the dynamics of global tourism reveal an underlying (neoliberal) world order that draws specific places and animals into the world economy. In order to explore these debates further, this paper uses the recent development of interactive tourist experiences with trained elephants in Botswana, Southern Africa. This paper focuses on how those experiences are produced. In so doing, it tackles how nature is entrained, reconfigured and recreated to produce tourist experiences; it highlights how nature, tourism and neoliberalism are linked and with what effects, especially for the elephants themselves. This is an important but under-researched area in tourism studies.

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Introduction

This paper traces the dynamics between tourism, nature and neoliberalism and it does so via an examination of elephant back tourism in Southern Africa. I argue that the dynamics of global tourism reveal an underlying (neoliberal) world order which draws animals and places into the world economy in particular ways. The recent developments in safari tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa reveal the interactions between neoliberalism, tourism and nature. Nature has been targeted, commodified and opened up, via global tourism, to the logics of neoliberalism. This has produced new dynamics and challenges, it is clear that the effects are complex and uneven, and they are not entirely negative for people who work with elephants, or for the elephants themselves. As Castree argues the neoliberalisation of nature is, by definition, a socioecological project and its effects are at once societal and biophysical. However the effects are judged, the outcomes are not trivial, at certain scales, specific social actors and/or the biophysical world enjoy or suffer the consequences, and the consequences are far from subtle (Castree 2008a, p. 166).

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While there is a lively and vibrant debate on how tourism might contribute to economic development in the South (for example see [Sharpley and Telfer \(eds.\), 2002](#)), there has been surprisingly little attention to the specific inter-relationships between tourism and neoliberalism. There have been some recent critical studies by [Fletcher \(2011\)](#), [West and Carrier \(2004\)](#), [Schilcher \(2007\)](#), [Lacher and Nepal \(2010\)](#) and [Neves \(2010\)](#) who do explore the entanglements between the industry and the wider global system, and by [Ayikoru, Tribe, and Airey \(2009\)](#) who analyse the neoliberal ideological underpinnings of tourism education in the UK (also see [Hall, 2010](#)). Similarly, the debate on neoliberalising nature is on-going in geography, but is not a central concern for tourism studies (see [Bakker, 2010](#); [Bakker, 2005](#); [Castree, 2009, 2008a, 2008b, 2003](#); [Heynen et al., 2007](#); [Mansfield, 2004](#); [McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, pp. 275–277](#); [Peck & Theodore, 2007](#)). The purpose of this paper is to draw these themes together to refine our understanding of the inter-linkages between tourism, neoliberalism and nature.

In order to develop these debates, this paper examines the recent rise in interactive experiences with trained elephants in Southern Africa, especially Botswana. Tourist interactions with trained elephants are marketed as 'back to nature' experiences and as a way of getting closer to wildlife. This new twist in the safari industry sheds light on the ways that nature is reconfigured, shaped and commodified by tourism as a driver of neoliberalism. Firstly, I outline the profile of tourism in Botswana; secondly, I explain the relationship between tourism and neoliberalism; thirdly I examine the development of interactive elephants in Southern Africa, especially in Botswana.

Interactive elephants: tourism in Botswana

In this paper, I argue that the growth of the global tourism industry in the last twenty years needs to be placed in the wider context of neoliberalism. Tourism is one of a number of global dynamics that allows neoliberalism to travel over time and space; in essence tourism seems to offer a pathway through the contradiction between the drive for continual growth and finite natural resources ([Fletcher, 2011](#); [O'Connor, 1988](#)).

However, the idea that everything is connected in ecosystems presents a problem for neoliberalism; in order to bring conservation into the orbit of capitalism, we need to expose and categorise the various ecosystemic threads and linkages so that they can be subjected to further separation, marketization, and alienation. This process of separation allows nature to be 'flattened and deadened' in to abstract objects, primed for commodity capture to create economic value ([Büscher, Sullivan, Neves, Igoe, & Brockington, 2012, pp. 8–23](#)). Furthermore, it allows neoliberalism to turn the environmental crises it has created into new commodities, as sources of accumulation ([Büscher et al., 2012](#); [Fletcher, 2011, p. 451](#); [West & Carrier, 2004, pp. 23–24](#)). Finally, neoliberalism has made global travel easier via increased wealth in some areas of the world, the development of international travel networks and the proliferation of tour operators opening up the South to tourism, as a core industry for (neoliberal) economic development.

It is important to offer a nuanced view of tourism as neoliberalism on the ground, drawing out its complexities and unevenness ([Brenner & Theodore, 2002](#); [Castree, 2008b](#)). [Brenner and Theodore \(2002\)](#) note that there is a tendency to assume that neoliberalism is hegemonic, and therefore it is ascribed with greater powers and coherence than it really has (also see [Peck & Tickell, 2002](#); [Walker & Cooper, 2011](#); [Mirowski and Plehwe \(eds\), 2009](#)). If we characterise neoliberalism as a hegemonic system, we can be tempted to (erroneously) assume that its effects are always negative. A more nuanced analysis of neoliberalism, in the form of tourism, also reminds us that the impacts and outcomes are not unremittingly negative ([Castree 2008b, p. 166](#)). This paper specifically tackles how neoliberalism is operationalized on the ground, in this case in the production of safari tourism experiences to draw out its effects for captive elephants and for the people who work with them.

Research methods

Interactive experiences with elephants in Botswana provide a very useful example of the inter-relationships between nature, tourism and neoliberalism. The development of luxury safari tourism, especially in the Okavango Delta reveals how nature is reconfigured to create new products for global

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