



Rhetoric and reality in protected area governance: Institutional change under different conservation discourses in Mount Elgon National Park, Uganda



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ABSTRACT

The approach to governance of protected areas has been in transition over last decades, partly driven by evolving policy discourses that shape the ways in which conservation is thought to be delivered. The most influential discourses are the “fortress” approach, “community conservation” and “back-to-the-barriers” How different discourses translate and are instituted on-ground are, however, complex and disputed. Inclusive policy strategies in relation to local involvement in developing countries are of particular concern. The study analyses how conservation policy discourses have become manifested, taking the case of Mount Elgon National Park (MENP), Uganda. It outlines main conservation policy discourses, analyses actor’s interests and power relations and further examines how institutions for park governance have evolved and changed according to the different discourses. The results indicate that conservation discourses—and donor support—come and go, while MENP seems to outlast all. The worrying reality is that MENP administration, strongly influenced by the interplay of path-dependent institutional forces rooted in the “fortress” discourse, simply “sticks to its guns”—maintaining the application of law enforcement as key management instruments in its approach to governance, especially to local people interactions. There is an apparent gap between rhetoric and reality in protected area governance.

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1. Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) constitute key strategies for national conservation of biodiversity and landscape resources. A PA strategy entails spatial demarcation of land and crafting of particular institutional structures and processes to govern the natural resources defined within its boundary. This can be interpreted as the establishment of an environmental resource governance system for a given PA (Vatn, 2005; Ostrom, 2011).

In Africa, the PA strategy was introduced by colonial powers, but was inherited and further expanded by the independent states (Naughton-Treves et al., 2005). Many actors at different governance levels have been involved in the evolution of the PA policy field and, especially over the last few decades, governance discourses have evolved in Africa on how conservation is to be delivered (Hutton et al., 2005; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010; Pochet, 2014). This has also manifested itself in the crafting and re-crafting of different PA institutions. It is, however, disputed how different conservation policy discourses translate into practice, especially strategies concerning local people and their inclusion (Barrow et al., 2000; Hutton et al., 2005; Blaikie, 2006;

Roe et al., 2009; Dressler et al., 2010; Schusser et al., 2015). It has been argued by many that most of the devolved natural resources management strategies are found to reflect participation rhetoric rather than real substance (Shackelton et al., 2002).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, most rural people depend heavily on natural resources for their survival and livelihoods. Over the last decades, there has been a general shift from centralized forms of governance of natural resources to various devolved natural resources governance systems in Africa, falling under the broad heading of Community-based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) (see Roe et al., 2009). A specific dimension of this approach concerns the governance of natural resources—and on how to involve communities in access and benefit sharing—that are embedded in some forms of PAs, like national parks, game reserves, and forest reserves. These areas often encompass significant parts of the respective countries’ land and related natural resources (Barrow et al., 2000).

PA governance in Africa followed this shift, shifting from the older exclusionary governance strategies or “fortress” approaches towards multiple strategies inclusive to local people (Adams and Hutton, 2007). This has frequently come in the form of park institutional changes and new power structures (Roe et al., 2009). Much critique has, however, been raised on both the implementation and outcomes of the community conservation strategies (Barrow et al., 2001). This has led

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to a renewed interest among conservation actors in a return to exclusionary strategies in PA governance, and now coming higher on the agenda as an influential conservation discourse phrased as “back to the barriers” (Wilshusen et al., 2002; Hutton et al., 2005; Büscher and Dietz, 2005; Adams and Hutton, 2007; Aubertin et al., 2011). This study adds to the debate on directions for PA governance by providing novel analysis on how conservation strategies and projects—shaped by different discourses—manifest, influence and evolve in a given area.

Policy processes are complex undertakings, and they are strongly context dependent, where the actors involved have different and often contradicting views and preferences on both processes and outcomes (Vatn and Vedeld, 2012). Analysis of what drives, motivates and empowers actors to change PA organizational and institutional structures, described through discourses and narratives, is an emerging scientific field, where power relations, economic and political structures and interests and agencies are central analytical themes (e.g. Gibson, 1999; Peters, 2005; Adams and Hutton, 2007; Dressler et al., 2010).

PA strategic policy making is and has for a long time been under the strong influence of hegemonic international conservation actors and funding agencies (Büscher and Dietz, 2005). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the central government capacity and competence have been weak and financial resources scarce, global conservation actors have been very influential in driving PA policy making and related crafting and re-crafting of institutions for conservation delivery (Hutton et al., 2005; Roe et al., 2009).

Essentially, it is a major challenge for any PA policy maker to seek effective, efficient and legitimate policies and implementation practices to meet the objectives (Barrow et al., 2000; Paavola, 2007). This study seeks to contribute to improved understanding of the contested relations between policy intentions and results, hence between setting and implementing the policy agenda for PA governance. Our overall aim is to examine how different conservation discourses—put forward in the form of narratives, rhetoric and projects, manifest themselves in protected area governance practices. We put a focus on the impact of altered discourses and accompanying policies on local people and their access to environmental resources.

Truly, there is no blue-print prescription for the ideal governance system of well performing and legitimate PAs, but we do observe an evolving debate and scholarship on understanding how to enhance governance capacities for the protected area systems (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013). This study analyzes PA policy processes, evolving actor roles, institutional changes and outcomes in the same park in different periods. It has the purpose of adding to increased understanding of the role of governance approaches for the performance of PAs (Naughton-Treves et al., 2005; Ostrom, 2009; Watson et al., 2014).

Our main objective is to explore how main conservation discourses in PA governance in Africa over the last few decades has been instituted in practice—from rhetoric to reality—by conducting an analysis of actor roles and institutional change induced under the different discourses. We follow three dominant PA conservation discourses, the “fortress”, “community” and “back to barriers” discourses, and conduct analysis in the same national park that over time has experienced all these through different conservation initiatives.

We apply insights from institutional theory and use the case of Mount Elgon National Park (MENP) Uganda. It has undergone several institutional changes and provides a good case for such analysis. We focus on the period from 1986 when relative stability was restored in Uganda after the turbulent Amin and post-Amin crisis.

2. Concepts, theoretical perspectives and analytical framework

2.1. Conservation discourses influencing protected area governance in Africa

Influential conservation discourses have shaped the ways in which conservation and the related governance of protected areas are

delivered on-ground (Büscher and Dietz, 2005; Hutton et al., 2005; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010). Our understanding of discourses follows Foucault's school of thought, taking discourses as a system of representation, of shared meaning of phenomena that goes beyond texts or discussions and that embraces actions (Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 1997; Hall, 2001). Importantly, discourses are created and maintained by social actors and can generate frameworks for interpretation of specific issues such as governance of protected areas (Vedeld, 2002; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010).

According to this understanding, three main discourses have been identified and that can be seen as partly hegemonic for protected area conservation in Africa in different time periods, but also overlapping in time and space (Hutton et al., 2005; Pochet, 2014). They have dominated thinking and practice and been manifested in different institutional arrangements at multiple governance levels (Adger et al., 2001) (Table 1).

The first and oldest of the PA conservation discourses is labelled the “**fortress approach**”, building on the thought that conservation of nature necessitates separation from humans and that local people are key persons to blame for environmental degradation (Neumann, 1998; Brockington, 2002). This can be traced back to the first national park establishment in 1872 in the US and later introduced in Africa during the colonial period in the late 19th century (Neumann, 1998). It became an established policy norm and practice during the colonial period and was consciously inherited and developed further by the national governments during and after independence in the 1960s (Child, 2004). The “fortress” metaphor therefore refers to parks being “fortresses” of nature managed and maintained separately from local people.

The second discourse, “**community conservation**”¹, gained momentum in the wake of the concept of sustainable development in the 1980s, partly based on the logic that there could be established win-win relations between conservation and local community needs (Pochet, 2014). Further, multiple critics to the unjust and socially exclusive “fortress” approach became a part of the “community conservation” discourse (Adams and Hulme, 2001). Since the 1980s a range of “community conservation” initiatives have been implemented with substantial donor support in most African countries (Barrow et al., 2001). By the 1990s, the “fortress” discourse no longer enjoyed hegemony in Africa due to the introduction and emphasis on “community conservation” (Hutton et al., 2005). There is a broad spectrum of approaches to “community conservation” delivery and furthermore, there are regional variations in approaches identified in Sub-Saharan African countries (Barrow et al., 2001; Roe et al., 2009). In Uganda, the case for this study, the most prominent “community conservation” approach has been a PA outreach with a focus on institutions for access and sharing their benefits, sanctioned in the Uganda Wildlife Act of 1996 (Barrow et al., 2000).

The third and most recent conservation discourse has been termed “**back to the barriers**”, which started gaining momentum in the mid-1990s. As the metaphorical name implies, it brings back less attention to community issues and involvement and suggests a return to more authoritarian conservation approaches. This partly means taking on the notion of critical global environmental change, increasing global scientific knowledge, and rising interest in the commodification of nature as well as the partly apparent criticisms of the many lax outcomes of “community conservation” (Pochet, 2014). The proponents of this discourse are not, however, directly referring to the mechanisms of the “fortress” approach, but are rather putting forward a new array of measures in order to strengthen conservation as a key priority (Hutton et al., 2005). Increased global ambitions for biodiversity conservation or mitigating climate change may easily displace concern for poor rural people

¹ The community strategies come under many terms, e.g. protected area outreach, co-management and CBNRM, but for convenience we use here the term “community conservation” for this discourse (Barrow and Murphree, 2001; Pochet, 2014).

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