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A review of the social impacts of neoliberal conservation: Formations, inequalities, contestations

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, perhaps the two most prominent debates in geography on issues of biodiversity conservation have hinged upon, firstly, the positive and negative social impacts of conservation projects on human populations, and, secondly, the apparent neoliberalisation of conservation. Yet so far there have been few explicit linkages drawn between these debates. This paper moves both debates forward by presenting the first review of how the neoliberalisation of conservation has affected the kinds of impacts that conservation projects entail for local communities. It finds that, whilst there are important variegations within neoliberal conservation, processes of neoliberalisation nevertheless tend to produce certain recurring trends in their social impacts. Firstly, neoliberal conservation often involves novel forms of power, particularly those that seek to re-shape local subjectivities in accordance with both conservationist and neoliberal-economic values. Secondly, it relies on greater use of use of representation and spectacle to produce commodities and access related markets, which can both create greater negative social impacts and offer new opportunities for local people to contest and reshape conservation projects. Thirdly, neoliberal conservation projects frequently widen the distribution of social impacts by interacting with pre-existing social, economic, and political inequalities. Accordingly, the paper illuminates how neoliberal approaches to conservation generate novel opportunities and constraints for struggles toward more socially and environmentally just forms of biodiversity preservation.

1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed a rapid proliferation of interest among conservation agencies, civil society organisations, bilateral and multilateral donors, and academics about the social impacts of conservation measures, or the ways in which efforts to conserve biodiversity might positively and/or negatively affect the wellbeing of various human populations. Here, wellbeing encompasses a range of factors including livelihoods, culture and cultural survival, political empowerment, and physical and mental health. Whilst conservation projects can deliver benefits such as employment opportunities and revenue from ecotourism or payment for ecosystem service schemes, they can also entail direct or indirect negative consequences, including restrictions on livelihoods, resource access, and forced displacements (West and Brockington, 2006).

Disagreements over the nature and distribution of these impacts have given rise to a vociferous and occasionally quite polarised debate within the pages of academic journals, as well as in conservation organisations, donor agencies, and international conferences (e.g. Roe, 2008; Brockington and Wilkie, 2015). In recent years, these debates have been further complicated by an additional trend within academic publications – and largely without attaining a comparable degree of prominence within conservation organisations – about a perceived turn towards so-called 'neoliberal' forms of conservation (e.g. Igoe and Brockington, 2007; Dressler and Roth, 2011; Arsel and Büscher, 2012). Here, 'neoliberal conservation' refers to a complex and multifaceted trend characterized largely by the rise of practices and discourses of financialisation, marketization, privatization, commodification, and decentralisation within conservation governance (Igoe and Brockington, 2007; see also Castree, 2010; Fairhead et al., 2012). Although the rise of the academic literature on neoliberal conservation has been precipitous – including empirical case studies that explore how neoliberal forms of conservation have affected human wellbeing – there has been no comprehensive overview of these

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cases. Moreover, literatures on both neoliberalism and neoliberal conservation have grown so rapidly that they have arguably already engendered a certain 'neoliberalism fatigue' (e.g. Springer, 2016), and an accompanying search for novel modes of analysis. Yet, in order to truly appraise the enduring value of neoliberalization as an analytic for examining shifting geographies and political ecologies of conservation, there is a need to carefully examine its identifiable social impacts, with a particular focus on how its novel forms of governance and finance may have precipitated similarly novel patterns of social impact. Only then, we argue, can we properly take stock and identify points at which these inquiries can be productively complemented by other modes of inquiry.

This paper begins by briefly outlining key features of the literature on the social impacts of conservation and on neoliberal conservation. Second, we outline the methodology that guided our selection and analysis of relevant scholarship. Third, we present the key findings of a review of empirical case studies exploring neoliberal conservation projects and strategies, focusing on how these are: (i) highly empirically diverse, exhibiting different constellations of marketization, privatization, commodification, financialisation, and decentralisation, (ii) frequently involve novel forms of power, particularly those aiming to create new market and conservation-friendly livelihoods and subjectivities, (iii) rely upon greater use of representation and spectacle to both produce commodities and access related markets, and (iv) interact with and exacerbate pre-existing social, economic, and political inequalities. Throughout, we argue that these social impacts of neoliberal conservation present novel opportunities and constraints for achieving more socially and environmentally just forms of conservation in the context of both global ecological and political-economic change.

2. The social impacts of conservation

Although some publications, conference outputs, and organisations have raised the issue in previous decades (see Roe, 2008 for an overview), concerns over the social impacts of conservation rose to unprecedented prominence in the early 2000s through three trends. Firstly, key academic publications on the issue by Stevens (1997), Chatty and Colchester (2002), Brockington (2002), Adams et al. (2004), West and Brockington (2006), West et al. (2006), Wilkie et al. (2006) and Brockington and Igoe (2006), among others, explored current and recent impacts from conservation, whilst Neumann (1998), Spence (2000) and Jacoby (2014) explored the negative impacts brought about by the earliest national parks in North America and Africa. Secondly, articles in popular press such as Chapin (2004) and Dowie (2005) brought the issue of negative impacts from conservation projects to a much broader audience, provoking a variety of responses by conservation organisations including denial, disavowal, and irritation. Thirdly, conservation's negative social impacts on indigenous people – both historical and contemporary – were a key theme of discussion at the 2004 World Parks Congress (WPC), to the extent that some prominent conservation biologists complained that such concerns 'dominated and drowned out the discussion of themes more directly related to conserving nonhuman life on this planet' (Terborgh, 2004: 619). Related debates have also been sustained to a greater or lesser extent at subsequent WPCs and similar high-level conferences.

Some conservation organisations and scientists have responded by disputing the reliability of some case studies of negative social impacts (e.g. Curran et al., 2009; Burgess et al., 2013), by arguing that the literature disproportionately focuses on negative impacts of conservation (e.g. Dudley and Stolton, 2010), and by seeking to mitigate such consequences through establishing ostensibly more equitable policies and institutions (see Roe, 2008; Dressler et al., 2010). Nevertheless, these debates remain unresolved, with researchers, activists, journalists, and civil society organisations continuing to critique a range of active conservation projects with regard to their social consequences for affected populations.

A number of trends can be identified from this literature (for an overview, see reviews including Brockington and Igoe, 2006; West et al., 2006; Adams and Hutton, 2007). Negative impacts include eviction and exclusion from customary land and natural resources such as grazing land, firewood, bushmeat, medicinal plants, timber, and culturally important resources and places, with implications for both monetary income and non-monetary livelihoods (e.g. Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau, 2006; West et al., 2006; Vedeld et al., 2007; Holmes and Brockington, 2012; Oldekop et al., 2015), health and physio-psychological wellbeing (Zahran et al., 2015), as well as culture and cultural survival (West and Brockington, 2006; Hitchcock et al., 2015). Conservation regulations are sometimes imposed or enforced in a harsh, violent, or corrupt manner, precipitating allegations of human rights abuses (e.g. Beymer-Farris and Bassett, 2012; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2014, 2015). Other negative impacts are less direct, such as the social upheaval caused by the sudden growth of a tourism industry (e.g. Benjaminsen and Bryceson, 2012; Ojeda, 2012). Many of these negative impacts are imbricated within Eurocentric notions of 'wilderness', and the corresponding desire to territorialise conservation spaces that are insulated from human impacts, habitation, and influence (West et al., 2006; Adams and Hutton, 2007). Such spaces can be imposed because – although conservation organisations may occasionally represent themselves as valiantly struggling to save biodiversity from the callous and incessant expansion of human economies – conservationists tend to have substantially more resources and political influence than the rural communities whose lives they affect (Brockington, 2004; Holmes, 2013). This is especially the case when the state forcibly imposes conservation regulations, and when conservation objectives become aligned with (inter)national 'security' objectives (Lunstrum, 2013; Cavanagh et al., 2015; Massé and Lunstrum, 2016).

Reported positive impacts mirror their negative counterparts, and include more secure land tenure (particularly in the case of indigenous and community conserved areas [ICCAs] – Stevens, 1997; Berkes, 2009), increased income from ecotourism and payment for ecosystem service (PES) schemes, secure or reliable access to natural resources and ecosystem services, employment opportunities, insulation from natural hazards, and compensation schemes for either direct or opportunity costs of conservation (Dudley and Stolton, 2010). The question over whether positive impacts tend to be more or less frequent than negative ones is complex and fraught with methodological complications, such as difficulties in systematically gathering data, or comparing very different kinds of impact (Oldekop et al., 2015; Wilkie et al., 2006; Brockington and Wilkie, 2015). In some instances, it is complicated by the vested interests of those involved in debating such research, and the reliance on self-reported data within some analyses (Holmes and Brockington, 2012). This is despite the number of different frameworks and approaches used to study the impacts of conservation, including cost-benefit analyses, institutional approaches, livelihoods frameworks, and political ecology studies rooted in political economy and environmental history. Additionally, the literature to date exhibits a strong focus on protected area issues, particularly stricter terrestrial protected areas (Oldekop et al., 2015), although many other forms of conservation intervention have also been studied.

Moreover, calculations of conservation's costs and benefits often fail to consider the unequal *distribution* of impacts, and the