



Selling green militarization: The discursive (re)production of militarized conservation in the Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the militarization of nature conservation has intensified, especially in protected areas located in conflict zones or plagued by 'poaching crises'. Such 'green militarization' is enabled by a range of discursive techniques that allow it to be seen as a 'normal' and 'legitimate' response. This article analyzes these techniques in relation to the Virunga National Park, located in the war-ridden east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where militarized approaches to conservation have a long lineage. It demonstrates that many of the discursive techniques that are currently at play show strong continuities with the past. These include moral boundary-drawing grounded in colonial tropes that accomplish the (racial) Othering of poachers and rebels, and the long-established practice of invoking states of emergency as part of wider mechanisms of securitization. However, the rise of neoliberal conservation, with its emphasis on marketing and marketization, has induced transformations in the employed discursive techniques. Notably, it has intensified the spectacularization of militarized conservation and anchored it in everyday consumer practices, by actively inviting individual supporters to directly fund militarized interventions, thus generating 'militarization by consumption'. This shows that 'green militarization' is not only driven by the growing commodification of nature conservation, but is increasingly subject to commodification itself.

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1. Introduction

The movie *Virunga* (2014), which portrays an endangered World Heritage Site located in the conflict-ridden eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, drew widespread media attention and acclaim, including an Oscar nomination. Juxtaposing spectacular imagery of African 'pristine wilderness' with warscape vistas featuring heavily armed park guards and rebel soldiers, the movie is engineered to shock-and-awe the spectator. Moreover, its simple but suspenseful storylines featuring clearly identifiable heroes, villains and victims generate a satisfying viewer experience, portraying an 'epic battle' for a 'good cause'. Consequently, the portrayed militarization of conservation elicits little explicit reflection, appearing like a 'taken for granted' and 'natural' feature of conservation in a war zone. In this article, we argue that the movie *Virunga* is emblematic of a set of discursive techniques that

normalize and legitimize the militarization of conservation. Our analysis therefore contributes to the emerging literature on 'green militarization' defined by Lunstrum (2014: 817) as "the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation".

Drawing on the existing literature on the discursive dimensions of green militarization, we analyze discursive techniques from the colonial encounter to the present, highlighting both continuities and discontinuities. Like in the colonial past, militarized responses to conservation in Virunga are normalized and justified by moral boundary-drawing through the deployment of colonial and racial tropes leading to the Othering of poachers and rebels (Neumann, 2004), while naturalizing control over military matters as white privilege. Furthermore, militarized interventions continue to be construed as 'necessary' by the invocation of states of emergency, which is a crucial element of mechanisms of securitization (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011; Ybarra, 2012). However, there have also been shifts in the discursive techniques that contribute to the (re)production of the militarization of the Virunga National Park. We ascribe these shifts to the rise of what has been called

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'neoliberal conservation' (Brockington et al., 2008; Igoe and Brockington, 2007), in particular its reliance on spectacle and marketization. Neoliberal conservation has intensified the spectacularization of militarized conservation, for instance through the intrusive multimedia diffusion of images of heavily armed park guards as 'real heroes'. Furthermore, it has fostered the marketization of militarization by actively inviting individual supporters to directly fund militarized conservation practices, or what we call 'militarization by consumption'. By generating self-referential narratives and imagery that are difficult to ground truth and penetrate by counter-voices, especially those of the inhabitants of the Virunga area, these techniques obscure the counterproductive effects of militarized conservation. This allows for encapsulating 'stabilization' as another 'win' in the seductive 'multiple win' rhetoric that is a hallmark of neoliberal conservation (Igoe and Brockington, 2007).

Our analysis does not intend to discuss the (in)adequacies of militarized responses to conservation and armed group activity in the Virunga park per se. This would require an elaborate discussion of the drivers of conflict, armed mobilization and illegal resources exploitation in the area, which we have already presented elsewhere (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016). Rather, we focus on the discursive techniques that render green militarization a taken for granted and justified approach. To identify these techniques and their effects, we studied discourses and imagery of the Virunga park between 2013 and 2016, analyzing news articles, websites, documentaries, movies and the social media, including the communications of the park and the movie *Virunga*. Additionally, we analyzed policy documents and other communications of organizations and aid donors involved in conservation and 'development' projects in the Virunga area. All documents, news articles and screenshots of websites were submitted to a database. Furthermore, as part of wider research projects, in total eight months of fieldwork were conducted in various parts of the Virunga area between 2010 and 2015, in the course of which interviews were held with park management and rangers, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), local authorities and different groups of inhabitants.

The article is structured as follows. We start with discussing the intersection of two ongoing theoretical debates within the field of political ecology: first, the debate on the legitimization and normalization of green militarization; and second, that on the rise of neoliberal conservation. Subsequently, we analyze the discursive techniques promoting militarized conservation practice in Virunga, starting with those having a long lineage, and then discussing what we identify as more recent trends. Next, we examine how the adverse effects of green militarization remain hidden, notably by excluding the voices of the population through differential access to power and technology, and how such concealment influences policymaking. We conclude by arguing that the increasing commodification of green militarization is not limited to the context of Virunga, but can also be detected in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, driving and being driven by the growing securitization of nature conservation and the recycling of often racialized colonial tropes.

2. The discursive (re)production of green militarization in the era of neoliberal conservation

The militarization of nature conservation is propelled by entwined discursive and material processes: military actors and instruments are only deployed to 'save nature' when this is seen as a 'normal', 'rational' and 'legitimate' response. Such normalization and legitimization is a result of particular 'discursive techniques', defined herein as recurring configurations of narratives,

imagery and discursive practices that frame social phenomena, thereby authorizing and privileging certain forms of knowledge, actors and modes of action while delegitimizing and obscuring others (cf. Snow et al., 1986). For instance, the discursive technique of 'securitization', or the framing of social phenomena as 'security issues', renders security experts and measures appropriate actors and modes of action to address the 'threat' at hand (Buzan et al., 1998). Another discursive technique is (the discursive dimension of processes of) 'marketization', understood herein as presenting market-based instruments and related forms of commodification as 'desirable' and 'adequate solutions' to regulating socio-economic life (cf. Peck, 2004). As they become part of publicity and marketing, and are anchored in everyday consumer practices, the narratives productive of marketization and commodification become 'normalized', thereby contributing to transforming social relationships, identities and worldviews. As argued by Massey (2013: 11), vocabularies of consumerism mould "both our conception of ourselves and our understanding of and relationship to the world". Such discursive practice, she contends, is "crucial to the formation of the ideological scaffolding of the hegemonic common sense" (Massey, 2013: 9). In the case of green militarization, as further showed below, marketization works for instance by inviting consumers to directly fund militarized conservation practices, and by presenting such contributions as an effective way to win 'the war for biodiversity' (cf. Duffy, 2016).

While driven by human agency, the discursive processes by which green militarization is normalized and legitimized are not necessarily the product of conscious and intentional strategies, as the language of 'techniques' might suggest. Although the Virunga park's marketing and communications strategies are carefully designed, and media reporting on the park often deliberately paints a positive image, this does not imply they are consciously engineered towards legitimizing and normalizing militarized interventions. Rather, those producing such discourses and imagery, often with the explicit intention to mobilize support and funds for the park, draw on existing tropes and narratives and representations of conservation as currently practiced. Through complex interaction effects and "frame resonance" (Snow et al., 1986: 477), or the ways certain narratives and images strike a chord among audiences, for instance as they correspond to engrained worldviews and everyday experiences (Snow and Benford, 1988), the employed discursive techniques affect the ways militarized conservation is seen and evaluated.

Just as green militarization in Sub-Saharan Africa is not a new phenomenon, dating back to the colonial era (Mackenzie, 1988; Neumann, 1998), the discursive techniques allowing it to appear as taken for granted and justified have a long lineage. As analyzed by Neumann (1998), the creation of protected areas (PAs) by the colonial powers was informed by a particular set of discourses, consisting of a blend of stereotypical views of African culture and nature-society relations. Combined with an unfaltering belief in white superiority (Wolmer, 2001), these ideas legitimized the violent imposition of radically different regimes of land ownership and use (Brooks, 2005; Igoe, 2004). One of the ways in which the concomitant racial hierarchization legitimized violent interventions was through moral distancing, in particular via the invocation of tropes of barbarianism. This allowed for portraying violence as part of a 'civilizing mission' bringing order and productivity to what were conceived of as places of lawlessness and 'primitivism' (Adams, 2003; Neumann, 1998; Van Schuylenbergh, 2009).

In the postcolonial era, conservation-related violence continues to be authorized by (moral) boundary-drawing as informed by colonial and often racial scripts, reflecting the power asymmetries that mark the relations of production and control underlying the appropriation of African wildlife value (Büscher, 2011; Garland, 2008; Singh and van Houtum, 2002). In his seminal article on the

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