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# Feed them to the lions: Conservation violence goes online

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 applications like Facebook and Twitter have enabled the development of online communities that have exposed and decried violence against animals including wildlife. One of the most active of these communities has organized around concern for the rhino in the face of escalating commercial poaching. On closer look, a deeply concerning relation between conservation and violence emerges through these platforms. Namely, community members routinely advocate extreme violence against poachers, ranging from shoot-on-sight policies to outright torture. Analyzing user comments on South African National Parks Facebook rhino poaching updates, I illustrate how Web 2.0 applications have become powerful tools of imagining and promoting conservation-related violence. These amount to an Agambian abandonment of poachers to a realm beyond human protection, which spins on a dehumanization of poachers and inverse invitation of rhinos into the national community. In short, the violence turns on a dialectic of abandonment and belonging, of abandoning the human and embracing the non-human. The case highlights both the expanding roster of actors behind conservation violence, as it includes facets of the public, and the growing spaces through which such violence unfolds, as it enters cyberspace. And while the contributions of these actors may seem relegated to online worlds, they come to matter. In particular, they authorize state militarized violence that results in the death of suspected poachers and in turn threatens long-term conservation efforts. More broadly, I illustrate how Web. 2.0 applications are productive of cyber-violence beyond hate and fascist groups as they expand to include conservation activism.



## 1. Introduction

The internet has become a productive space in which violence against animals including wildlife is exposed and passionately decried. Perhaps the most well-known case is the social media outcry directed against the Minnesota dentist who illegally killed Zimbabwe's beloved Cecil the lion, which dominated online space in mid-2015. Other campaigns to expose violence against wildlife have been similarly drenched in grief and rage but have proven more enduring. A prime example is the online community organized around concern over the white and black rhino (*ceratotherium simum* and *Diceros bicornis*), with both animals currently under threat by commercial poaching with its epicenter in South Africa. Online communities have emerged to ponder how such violence against these innocent and majestic creatures could transpire and to lament the loss of rhinos as part of South Africa's rich natural heritage. The killing of rhinos, however, does not exhaust the violence saturating these discussions. Web 2.0 platforms have enabled the development of an online community that demands the extreme punishment of rhino poachers, ranging from controversial shoot-on-sight policies to torture.

Turning to Facebook user comments to official South African state rhino poaching updates from 2010 to 2014, I show how Web 2.0 applications are being harnessed to promote extreme forms of conservation-related violence. In identifying the different types of violence called for and distilling the deeper logic rationalizing them, I illustrate how this violence spins on a joint dehumanization of poachers and parallel embracing of the rhino as part of the nation. Once dehumanized, Facebook users advocate the abandonment of poachers to a realm beyond human protection: to a landscape in which they are reduced to flesh and exposed to death. This is a space of Agambian abandonment that often unfolds within the famed African bush, a space of unforgiving, voracious nature. Just as poachers are ejected from the realm of the fully human, rhinos are invited to inhabit an expanded national community as they are celebrated and grieved as embodiments of South African national heritage. Such conservation-related violence, in short, turns on a dialectical relation of abandonment and belonging; that is, it hinges on the decision of who is rightfully included in the realm of the nation and afforded its protections and from whom human recognition and related protections are revoked. I

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suggest too that the violence at play is racialized although in more complex ways than expected.

More broadly, this analysis expands our understanding of the relationship between conservation and violence and the spaces in which it unfolds. I move in the opposite direction from mainstream public perceptions that tend to locate their intersection within the violence perpetuated against wildlife, which is certainly a point of legitimate concern. This case, in contrast, reinforces how concern for wildlife can itself incite calls for violence, here against perceived environmental perpetrators. While this fits into a long history of violence unleashed in the name of conservation, the case equally highlights novel features of the conservation-violence nexus. Namely, we are seeing an expanding roster of actors behind this violence, which has come to include facets of the public. Added to this is the proliferation of spaces through which such violence unfolds as it enters cyberspace. This violence, however, is not neatly contained within an online world. Rather, it comes to matter by authorizing a militarized approach to commercial poaching. This translates into the very real state-sanctioned killing of suspected poachers, which in turn compromises long-term conservation goals. More abstractly, the case shows how Web 2.0 applications are productive of cyber-violence in sites beyond the usual suspects of hate and fascist groups as they expand into conservation activism. I turn to develop these arguments after discussing methodology and the literatures on conservation-related violence and conservation and social media.

## 2. Methodology

This research emerges from a long-term investigation into the transformation of conservation practice in the South African-Mozambican borderlands. When I began research in the early-to-mid-2000s, questions of violence were focused mostly on injustices tied to historical and contemporary conservation-induced displacement (RRP-UW, 2002; also see Wolmer, 2003). This began to change a decade later with the rise of commercial rhino poaching and the South African state's militarized response. This prompted my investigation into the justifications behind such 'green militarization,' its consequences, and its historical roots (Lunstrum, 2014, 2016). In following these threads, I became concerned with a relatively new actor in these processes: *the public*. More specifically, a facet of the public, enraged by rhino poaching, had begun to harness web-based platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to advocate violence that far exceeds that of green militarization. South African National Parks' (SANParks) rhino poaching updates on Facebook proved particularly intriguing in this respect. Given that Facebook users are invited to comment on the posts, together they provide a medium aimed at enabling engagement between the state and public and hence offer the public a state-sanctioned platform to express its concern and provide SANParks with feedback. Moreover, as with Web 2.0 platforms more broadly (Büscher, 2013; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), these sites enable commenters to co-produce knowledge of the issue, both how they understand rhino poaching and how the state should respond.

Between July 2010 and December 2014, SANParks issued 71 rhino poaching informational releases, which received 3434 comments.[1] Several research assistants and I archived the posts and comments, which I then analyzed using Nvivo 10. The comments were predominantly in English, with a smaller number in Afrikaans and a handful in Italian, Spanish, and Zulu, which we translated into English for purposes of analysis. In addition, we coded the users who advocated violence by gender and race. We found that women and men commented in relatively equal numbers and intensity. The vast majority of the posts, however, were made by white commenters, but the intensity of violence was seen across different groups. We pulled self-identified gender from users' home Facebook pages. Dealing with race was more complicated given Facebook's intentional decision not to include an option for users to racially self-identify, reflecting a liberal commitment to 'color-blindness'; despite this, users find other ways to self-identify (Ginger, 2008). Hence, we gauged race from users' photos (user profile and other photos), which is admittedly problematic given the complexity of race in general and especially in South Africa. But it does allow us to see that in broad brushstrokes the vast majority of commentators are white, confirming the estimates of SANParks' Facebook moderators (also see Büscher, 2015).

The 71 SANParks' updates explain the number and location of rhino carcasses and anti-poaching 'successes,' including the number of poachers arrested, wounded, or killed, along with numbers of those who escaped. Of the 3434 comments, 956 (28%) advocate violence, many of them advocating multiple forms within the same post. I chose not to include here the sizable number of comments where endorsements of violence are ambiguous, such as where it is unclear whether a commenter's thanking of the rangers is referring to their killing of a suspected poacher, his arrest, or both.

In interpreting the comments, I turned to discourse analysis, which helps illustrate how, when taken together, texts of various sorts not only describe a state of affairs but shape reality in concrete ways (Neumann, 2004; Rose, 2012; Sundberg and Kaserman, 2007). Discourse, in short, reworks the world. Or, as Said (1978) has shown, discourse brings to life the reality that it seemingly innocently claims to describe. In contrast to institutionally-based discourse generated by 'experts' (Foucault, 1970, 1973), Web 2.0 technologies enable the co-production of discourse and hence reality by a broader public (Barr, 2011). In fact, this interactive co-production by multiple users is precisely what defines Web 2.0 applications (Büscher, 2013; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). I build from here to show how Facebook commenters co-produce knowledge of rhino poaching and of how best to respond. I show how these proposed solutions, moreover, routinely amount to citational references to extreme violence. And while these demands might not entirely justify their own calls for violence, the discourse does authorize state-orchestrated militarized violence, a theme I return to in the conclusion.

This methodology, moreover, raises several ethical concerns. This begins with the fact that I 'lurked' within the online discussions without users' awareness (Murthy, 2008). Compared to an interview or survey, this allows for potential greater openness as 'subjects' are unaware their comments are being analyzed (Barr, 2011; Denzin, 1999). Nonetheless, they would not predict such scrutiny despite the somewhat public nature of the posts (Morrow et al., 2015). Given this, even though the posts are no longer locatable by a web search, I partially protect users' identity by giving only their first names. Additionally, in cleaning up a number of posts to make them easier to read, I have not used brackets to indicate where I have corrected spelling and grammatical mistakes, which risks belittling the users. Such protections may prove especially important in contexts such as this where we feel little affinity for our research subjects. There is additionally the thorny ethical issue of whether reproducing these texts sensationalizes and reproduces the violence at hand. While I generally err on the side of taking this risk, I chose not to include a photograph of a human corpse being eaten by vultures because the image was of a real human body (unlike the written posts) and the original image depicted a (non-violent) Tibetan sky burial. One final methodological note: I supplemented this analysis with 20 interviews with SANParks officials in 2015, along with several

[1] SANParks released the last of these when the Department of Environmental Affairs controversially changed policy to offer only intermittent updates.