



Producing hybrid forests in the Congo Basin: A political ecology of the landscape approach to conservation



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ABSTRACT

Environmental conservation is increasingly operated through partnerships among state, private, and civil society actors, yet little is known empirically about how such collectives function and with what livelihood and governance outcomes. The landscape approach to conservation (known also as the ecosystem approach) is one such hybrid governance platform. Implemented worldwide over the past decade by international NGOs, the landscape approach employs the ‘ecosystem principles’ of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In spite of its prominence as a conservation and development strategy, little political ecology scholarship has considered the landscape approach. This article offers a case study of a conservation landscape in the Congo Basin, the Tri-National de la Sangha (TNS), which connects tropical forests in Cameroon, Republic of Congo, and Central African Republic. Led by NGOs, the TNS has since 2001 relied on partnerships among logging companies, safari hunters, the state, and local communities. Although the landscape approach purports to facilitate re-negotiations of user rights, resource access patterns in the TNS appear to have molded to pre-existing power relations. Rather than incorporating local concerns and capabilities into management, local knowledge is discredited and livelihoods are marginalized. As a result, management occurs through spatially-demarcated zones, contrasting the fluidity of interactions among diverse groups: both human (loggers, hunter-gatherers, safari guides, NGOs) and non-human (trees, elephants). These findings are situated within a burgeoning literature on neoliberal environmental governance, and suggest that ensuring ecologically and socially positive outcomes will require careful and iterative attention to linkages between ecological processes and evolving power dynamics.

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1. Introduction

Tropical forests have become increasingly entangled within global political economies and transnational governance processes (Peluso, 2012). The heightened opportunities for extracting forest products (including timber and wildlife) and intensifying agriculture (Laurance et al., 2014) have been met by expanding initiatives of forest management and conservation (Naughton-Treves et al., 2005), the majority of which center on human-dominated landscapes (Zimmerer et al., 2004). Decentralized approaches (e.g. community forestry), market mechanisms (e.g. sustainability certification and carbon trading schemes), and territories managed by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) serve to extend forest governance beyond more traditional state-operated protected areas (Agrawal et al., 2008). In many tropical forest regions, these diverse management tactics have recently been mobilized in unison under the umbrella of a “landscape approach”

or ecosystem-based conservation (Sayer et al., 2007; Sayer, 2009; Reed et al., 2015).

Variants of ecosystem-based conservation—also referred to as “ecosystem approaches,” “integrated landscape approaches” or “landscape-scale conservation”—are being implemented worldwide by major international conservation NGOs including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The approaches are premised on enlarging conservation territories by uniting private extractive industries, local resource users, international NGOs, and national governments in day to day management operations (Sunderland et al., 2012). The approaches thereby hinge on cooperation where there has often been discord. In Congo Basin forests, for example, wildlife conservation NGOs and logging companies are now partnering with the state and local communities. An archetype of “hybrid governance,” that is, collaboration among state, private, and civil interests (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006), the hope is to facilitate inclusivity of

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multiple resource users' concerns alongside enhanced management efficiency (Sayer et al., 2005).

Yet, ecosystem approaches could be similarly prone to issues that have long plagued other conservation and development projects (Forsyth, 2005). Indeed, the current emphasis on transfrontier and large scale conservation areas arguably derives from conservation's increasingly neoliberal ethos (Buscher, 2010; Adams, 2014). A core question is therefore whether ecosystem approaches can adequately address longstanding social justice issues, at the root of which are often pre-existing, uneven power relations between diverse social, ethnic, and economic groups (Hirsch et al., 2011). Alternatively, ecosystem approaches could risk producing new trade-offs between conservation and development, as other neoliberal conservation programs have been demonstrated to do (Fletcher, 2012).

Investigating how such trade-offs are embedded in processes of control and marginalization has become a hallmark of political ecology analyses of conservation (Robbins, 2012) which have scrutinized a wide variety of conservation and development schemes. Community-based conservation (CBC), co-management, biosphere reserves, Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs), and transboundary conservation areas (Peace Parks), as a few examples, have been critiqued for adherence to rigid spatial and social hierarchies which can impinge on local resource access (Neumann, 1998), eschew intra-community and intra-household power structures (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999), and overlook non-equilibrium ecological dynamics (Scoones, 1999; Zimmerer, 2000). Landscape-level schemes increasingly common to carbon forestry and Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) have been critiqued on similar lines (McCall, 2016). Few studies, however, have taken a political ecology perspective to investigate hybrid governance arrangements such as those underlying ecosystem approaches to conservation (but see Forsyth, 2005; Adams, 2014).

This article presents a case study of hybrid governance in a conservation landscape, the *Tri-National de la Sangha* (TNS) in the Congo Basin. The TNS conservation landscape has since 2000 united logging companies, professional hunting outfits, the state, local communities, and international NGOs in pursuit of an ecosystem approach to conservation. Spanning Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and the Republic of Congo, the TNS conservation landscape is envisioned as a way to promote regional development while maintaining stable populations of high-value timber species such as sapele (*Entandrophragma cylindricum*) and large mammals such as forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) and chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*). The research informing this article was conducted in the Lobéké region of southeast Cameroon from June to August 2010. Qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participatory activities) facilitated understanding of how various groups (including hunter-gatherers, smallholder farmers, loggers, safari hunting guides, and conservation employees) interact to produce the hybrid architecture of the TNS conservation landscape. This article thus adds to the limited empirical material regarding how hybrid conservation arrangements emerge and change over time (Hardin, 2011).

A set of robust concepts to investigate the hybrid governance apparatus of the TNS and other conservation landscapes is found in burgeoning political ecology scholarship on the co-production of conservation outcomes (Goldman et al., 2011; Ogden, 2011; Sundberg, 2011). This scholarship has demonstrated the value of considering how resource management operations are shaped through particular social and ecological histories, including encounters between humans and nonhumans. This article demonstrates the value of considering the partial and contested process of hybridization underlying ecosystem-level conservation, wherein the nature and extent of society-environment interactions are

continuously negotiated (Swyngedouw, 1999; Bakker, 2005). In so doing, it follows Zimmerer (2000) in depicting conservation activities in non-equilibrium human-dominated landscapes as the “production of nature-society hybrids” (p. 356).

This article begins by discussing landscape approaches to conservation, suggesting that political ecology work on neoliberalization and co-production can enrich understanding of these complex, hybrid conservation endeavors. The article continues by discussing histories of forest use and management in the Congo Basin to frame how the vision of landscape-level hybrid governance has been implemented in a dynamic social-ecological landscape in Southeast Cameroon. I then detail how socio-spatial processes of forest management intersect with complex webs of interaction among an array of human (loggers, safari guides, indigenous peoples, migrant agriculturalists) and nonhuman actors (roads, old-growth trees, large-bodied mammals). Demonstrating that the richness and complexity of these human-environment entanglements is overlooked by management plans that emphasize spatial calculability of narrowly defined ecosystem functions, I argue that efforts to script particular viable interfaces among diverse actors has obfuscated other (divergent or unpredictable) society-environment interactions. While hybrid governance activities continuously influence such interactions, they account for neither pre-existing nor produced intimacies. I demonstrate that a political ecology perspective on ecosystem-level conservation can bring to light how distributive justice concerns therefore arise in unexpected places for certain groups. These results suggest that the impacts of the landscape approach to conservation can be better understood by attention to the dynamic social-ecological interactions that it helps to produce.

2. Political ecology and landscape approaches to conservation

Political ecologists situate conservation within historically specific political economic and ecological contexts, emphasizing how social and environmental change are linked and often co-constituted (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003; Robbins, 2012). As a form of “governance through nature” (Bridge and Perreault, 2009, p. 492), conservation typically employs scaling and boundary-making in order to criminalize activities and police spaces, shifting local livelihoods into the purview of external management (Zimmerer, 2000) and its accompanying techno-scientific protocols (Goldman, 2009). Political ecologists' critiques of conservation thus often center on power imbalances between marginalized local people (peasants and indigenous groups) and authoritative external actors (the state, NGOs, private industry) (Peluso, 1993; Neumann, 1997; Adams and Hutton, 2007). Such “conservation and control” (Robbins, 2012) research demonstrates how technocratic governance uncouples dynamic society-environment interactions, thereby destabilizing social and ecological processes (Scoones, 1999; Goldman, 2003; Zimmerer, 2006), impinging on livelihoods and resource access (Leach et al., 1999), or expropriating land and evicting communities (Schmidt-Soltan, 2009; Cavanagh et al., 2015).

Given vast expansions of conservation territories (4.5 million km²) throughout human-inhabited areas between 1950 and 2000 (Zimmerer et al., 2004), political ecologists look more and more to conservation “where people live and work” (Miller and Hobbs, 2002). Buffer zones, biosphere reserves, and community based natural resource management (CBNRM) are a few prominent models employed throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (King, 2009) in search of elusive win-win solutions for biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation (Wells and McShane, 2004). These conservation platforms are increasingly coordinated through NGOs and private enterprises in addition to the state (Agrawal

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