



The competitive (dis)advantages of ecotourism in Northern Thailand



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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism within protected areas is paradigmatically considered a neoliberal conservation strategy along with other market-based interventions that devolve authority to non-state actors, rely on market corrections to socio-environmental problems, and effectively try to “do more with less” (Dressler and Roth, 2011) or “sell nature to save it” (McAfee, 1999). However, the neoliberalisation of conservation is a path-based process that is shaped by local histories and on-the-ground engagements with different market forms, and a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated that there are significant gaps between “vision” and “execution” in neoliberal conservation. Through a case study of ecotourism in Ban Mae Klang Luang in Northern Thailand, this research approaches the question of why such programs often fail to reconcile environmental and economic concerns through an exploration of the internal contradictions in the governmentalizing processes embedded within market-led conservation projects. Specifically, I argue that the contradiction in encouraging both disciplinary environmentalism and neoliberal environmentalism ironically forces conservation and development interests into opposition. Furthermore, ecotourism’s deployment of neoliberal environmentalism contributes to the exaggeration of inequality and individualism in the village, creating tensions among community members. Despite the win-win expectations of neoliberal philosophy in conservation policies, the contradictory logics involved call the long-term viability of such strategies into question.

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1. Introduction

The growing body of scholarship critiquing the neoliberalisation of conservation governance suggests that there is a significant gap between “vision” and “execution” in neoliberal conservation, and that such programs do not easily reconcile environmental and economic concerns but rather produce messy and contradictory outcomes for local farmers (Dressler and Roth, 2011; Fletcher and Breitling, 2012; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011; McElwee, 2012). Despite the academic critiques, policy makers, NGOs and governments worldwide are increasingly promoting market-oriented conservation programs within inhabited protected areas (Brockington and Duffy, 2010; Fletcher, 2012). This approach is a response to the problems associated with the exclusionary and highly criticized ‘fortress model’ of conservation, which involved the territorialisation of protected areas and the strict policing of human activity within their boundaries (Vandergest and Peluso, 1995). Market-oriented conservation programs involve the intensification of agricultural production on smaller plots of land (Dressler and Roth, 2011), community-based or carbon forestry (Osborne, 2012), bio-prospecting (Crook and Clapp, 1998), or ecotourism (Duffy, 2008; Hitchner et al., 2009). These approaches to conservation assume

that increased income will dissuade local peoples from clearing the forest for agriculture or sustenance, painting local farmers as the ‘forest destroyers’ (Forsyth and Walker, 2008) and assuming that they would conserve intact forests if they could draw value from conservation-friendly behavior (Fletcher, 2012). Since market-driven solutions to park-people conflicts seemed to proliferate alongside neoliberal state policies, social scientists consider market-oriented conservation strategies like ecotourism to be complicit in – or at least complementary to – the neoliberalisation of conservation. The neoliberalisation of conservation involves both the increasing reliance on market mechanisms to protect environmental interests and the rescaling of conservation practice to involve non-state market-based actors, local communities, and NGOs (Brockington and Duffy, 2010; McCarthy, 2005; Roth and Dressler, 2012).

However, neoliberalism is a packed and complex term, and there is always a rupture between neoliberal ideals and the different forms of market engagement that actually take shape in different localities (Harvey, 2005; Polanyi, 1944). As an ideal within policy circles, neoliberal conservation aims to reconfigure local relations with nature according to the philosophies of the free market, private property, and individual freedoms (Harvey, 2005), which are assumed to be the optimal means to address all social and environmental issues. Underlying this logic is the assumption that people generally behave as rational self-interested actors who

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simply require the proper incentives to conserve (Dressler and Roth, 2011; Fletcher, 2010). In general, critical scholarship on the neoliberalisation of conservation will argue that it can: increase inequalities as wealth accumulates in the hands of those better positioned to capitalize; disenfranchise communities from local resources as these become commodities in larger networks; degrade the environment if profits are used to build or extract more for profit; and reorder the values attached to 'nature', consequently reordering socio-environmental relations (Castree, 2010; Fletcher, 2010; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004).

Neoliberalisation loses its effectiveness as a concept that can help us understand marketization policies when all forms of market engagement within conservation zones are lumped into a 'neoliberal' category (Castree, 2008; Hodge and Adams, 2012). It is important to note that market engagement in conservation zones does not necessarily make it neoliberal, as there are many different forms of possible market engagement. Polanyi's (1944) concept of the "double movement" is useful to consider here, as the push towards more neoliberalised self-regulating market forms is often tangled up with a push back from different actors demanding more protectionist markets. Different forms of ecotourism management can be either more protectionist or more neoliberalised as the case may be, and accordingly have very different effects on the lives of rural peoples.

Empirical work on market-led conservation interventions is growing, but separate cases are path-dependent and not necessarily easily comparable, so the implications of different kinds of market engagement in protected areas remain relatively unclear (Castree, 2008; Roth and Dressler, 2012). Geographers have approached research on market-based conservation in different ways. Dressler and Roth (2011) have demonstrated that local peoples significantly shape the operation of markets in relation to their local livelihoods, histories, and contemporary realities, and that neoliberal conservation can rearticulate earlier forms of coercive conservation. Others have shown that neoliberal conservation programs still require strong state intervention (Fletcher, 2012; McElwee, 2012), that neoliberal conservation can put pressure on local communities to commodify 'nature' according to growing capitalist markets (Büscher and Dressler, 2012), and that market-oriented conservation programs do not necessarily meet conservation and development goals simultaneously (Fletcher and Breitling, 2012; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2011). Little work, however, has approached the question of why we continually see contradictory and unsatisfactory outcomes in market-oriented conservation through an exploration of the internal contradictions in the governmentalizing processes involved in market-oriented conservation projects, and how these contradictions play out and affect rural peoples' lived realities.

This paper therefore adds to these debates by taking a post-structural political ecology approach (Fletcher, 2010) to explain the contradictions and tensions involved in adopting ecotourism as a market-oriented conservation strategy. Fletcher (2010) argues that within any given neoliberal conservation strategy, multiple and discrete environmentalities can operate simultaneously and in contradiction with one another. He explains that neoliberal conservation programs employ neoliberal environmentalism, which is an approach to conducting conducts that draws on Foucault's (2008) concept of neoliberal governmentality. Neoliberal governmentality works by setting up incentive structures within which rational economic actors will be motivated to act appropriately to receive monetary rewards. This approach differs slightly from disciplinary governmentality, which seeks to 'conduct the conducts' (Foucault, 1991) of subjects through the internalization of ethical norms – although neoliberal governmentality operates in conjunction with disciplinary techniques that encourage subjects to become *homo-economicus* (Fletcher, 2010), "the ideal, entrepre-

neurial, self-made individual" (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004: 276). When this approach is taken in conservation zones with the goal of producing particular neoliberal environmental subjects, the approach is termed neoliberal environmentalism. Put differently, neoliberal environmentalism describes the increasing belief in policy circles that the most efficient way to reach conservation goals is to marketize 'nature' and set up monetary incentive structures within which rational actors will be motivated to conserve. On the other hand, disciplinary environmentalism takes an approach to conducting conducts in line with disciplinary governmentality, and encourages subjects to care about a particular understanding of nature and thus to behave in conservation-friendly ways.

Ecotourism as a market-oriented conservation strategy combines disciplinary and neoliberal environmentalities, "involving not only the promotion of economic incentives but also the use of various disciplinary techniques intended to condition local participants to an 'ecotourism discourse'" (Fletcher, 2010: 177). Local farmers are encouraged to live modest, conservation-friendly lives through discourses of ecotourism, while they are simultaneously encouraged to seize the monetary benefits associated with the production of natural, picturesque landscapes by running ecotourism businesses.

This research thus also builds on and departs from the literature on ecotourism, the majority of which looks at ecotourism as a largely material practice. Much of the scholarship on ecotourism has analyzed factors contributing to the relative 'success' or 'failure' of ecotourism initiatives in relation to conservation goals (Buckley, 2009; Hvenegaard and Dearden, 1998) and the politics of ecotourism as a tool for poverty reduction in the Global South (Duffy, 2006; Horton, 2009; Laudati, 2010; Scheyvens, 1999; Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008). Other work has demonstrated the problems of commodifying and marketing a particular aesthetic (but not necessarily biodiverse) image of nature through ecotourism – or "selling nature to save it" (McAfee, 1999)—while ignoring inequality in access to resources (Braun, 2002). This paper, however, works to explain the relationship between discourse, governmentality, and practice by considering ecotourism an ideological force – one that works to produce and promote an 'ecotourism discourse' (Fletcher, 2009) which employs contradictory governmentalizing processes that can create messy and unsatisfactory outcomes for resident peoples.

Through a case study of Ban Mae Klang Luang, located within the Doi Inthanon National Park in Thailand, this research argues that the tendency for certain community members to pursue individual entrepreneurial business goals instead of community-based goals stems from the deployment of neoliberal environmentalism in the ecotourism project, where community members are encouraged to act as self-interested rational actors and pursue personal income maximization. This is contradictory to the disciplinary environmentalism operating within ecotourism discourse, and so the contradiction in encouraging both self-maximizing entrepreneurial ethics and modest, conservation-friendly living ironically forces conservation and development interests into opposition. Furthermore, reordering social relations with nature in accordance with the neoliberal philosophies of individual freedoms, private property and competition are aggravating issues of inequality and individualism in the village, resulting in many community members pushing back against entrepreneurial ambitions and demanding a more communally-managed and controlled form of market engagement through ecotourism. Many villagers in Ban Mae Klang Luang have been mobilizing ideas of traditional culture and traditional environmental knowledge in resistance to the profit-seeking and individuality associated with entrepreneurial ecotourism in the village. This discourse can arguably be considered a third kind of environmentalism based on Foucault's 'art of

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