



Rural development and the role of game farming in the Eastern Cape, South Africa



Thijs Pasmans^a, Paul Hebinck^{a,b,*}

^a Wageningen University, Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen, The Netherlands

^b University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of game farming is set in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Game farming reorders the use, meaning and value of land and animal species. However, what it means for rural development processes in the immediate region and beyond is not well accounted for. We perceive game farming as an assemblage that brings together new actors, new forms of land use and new discourses. We argue that although game farming has generated new opportunities and new forms of added value to the available resources (e.g. eco-tourism, trophy hunting, game-meat production), situated in the history and contemporary context of the Eastern Cape, it is a contested, and from a development point of view, problematic land-use practice. We argue that game farming constrains land and agrarian reforms: the distribution of land and income remains skewed; 'poaching' occurs and game farms do not, or only minimally, generate new and badly needed employment opportunities. The game farm has emerged as an exclusive, globally well-connected space. The nature of the relationships this space maintains with the surrounding communities is, however, such that the overall contribution to rural development in South Africa is questionable.

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1. Introduction

Game farming has developed into a major subsector of the agricultural economy in South Africa. With its diversification into state, communal and private land, it also represents a significant shift in the meaning, practice and purpose of nature conservation (Suich et al., 2009; Child et al., 2012). Conservation is no longer solely associated with nature reserves managed by government departments or non-governmental conservation agencies and community-managed conservancies, but also, and increasingly, with private landowners (Carruthers, 2008: 160). Game farming began to establish itself in South Africa from as early as the 1950s (Carruthers, 2008: 165). Although it was contested and debated at the time, it became more widespread during the 1970s (Beinart, 2003: 386; Brink et al., 2011). From the 1990s onwards, game farming gradually became more significant and the Game Theft Act 105 of 1991 (RSA, 1991) triggered further expansion as it meant that landowners could now manage wildlife as a private property resource (Child et al., 2012; Snijders, 2012). Most game farms are located on former agricultural land that previously required the active eradication of wild animals; this land is now

actively used to (re)introduce wild animal species to create a new wilderness that caters for the demands of an international market for trophy-hunting and eco-tourism. This constitutes, as we will argue, a complex and critical factor in land use and processes of rural development in South Africa—the more so given the game-farm lobby's claims that the farming of game in South Africa (and elsewhere) is positioned in a space where the opposing demands of an expanding global market for trophy and biltong hunting, and game-meat production, on the one hand, and those of the local population for rural development, rural employment, nature conservation and eco-tourism, on the other, can be, and are being, successfully merged.

In response to these claims and to the rapid rate of its expansion, game farming has received substantial attention in the economic and ecological sciences literature as well as in the policy and public domain. In these discussions and analyses, a game farm is often presented as an abstract and idealised configuration of people, nature, markets and institutions. The important questions of who, whether and through what processes game farming contributes to rural development remain unanswered. The nature of the development processes and the exclusivity of the space that game farming produces remain hidden. The emerging relationships between game farmers, farm workers and neighbouring villagers are not well accounted for. Instead, income and value added as an expression of rational behaviour and game species compositions are taken

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 317483638.

E-mail address: paul.hebinck@wur.nl (P. Hebinck).

as a one-dimensional measurement for success and impact. This article aims to address these issues by analysing how the game farm assemblage has come about and what kinds of spaces have emerged over time. In doing so, we reveal how such an assemblage shapes and reshapes rural development in the region surrounding the game farm.

The article proceeds as follows. After a brief explanation of the interpretive framework and methods of data collection, we elaborate on trends in game farming and how these are debated in the public and scientific domain. We then zoom in on game farming as we encountered it and observed it being practised in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. Finally, we examine the complexities and contestations that game farming generates and the extent to which it contributes to rural development.

2. Conceptual ideas and data collection

In this article, game farming and game farms are not perceived as fixed human–wildlife relationships or as isolated spaces enclosed by fences but rather, as an assemblage of ideas, human and non-human actors. Through its manifold interconnections, the game farm assemblage continuously generates new kinds of spaces with different and new attributes (Li, 2007, 2014; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; McFarlane and Anderson, 2011; Umans and Arce, 2014; Woods, 2015). Like Li (2007: 265), we understand assemblage as the ‘grafting of new elements and reworking old ones; employing existing discourses to new ends’. It reconfigures nature, game, landscapes and social actors and the relationships between them in such a way that previously existing elements and interlinkages are rearranged to form new connections and relationships that did not exist previously. The concept of space is used here in the political and relational sense, without geographical connotations (McGee, 2004; Massey, 2005; Escobar, 2008; Jones, 2009). Space interpreted in this way provides a useful lens to investigate assemblages and to analyse the everyday policies and practices of the actors involved, including the social and material relationships that connect them.

As this article will demonstrate, game farming creates spaces where game farmers actively reorder and reclassify land and wild animals into new products and services. New animal species are introduced, but also relatively new categories of social actors (e.g. trophy and biltong hunters, and eco-tourists) with considerable impact on relationships with surrounding communities. Game farming also gives rise to new institutions (e.g. game farm lobbies, game auctions, specialised feed and fodder companies) and likewise produces new discourses to underpin and legitimise game farming as a land-use model that simultaneously conserves nature and enhances rural livelihoods. Game farming assembles these diverse elements by forging connections between them to create a configuration that works. The reordering of nature and culture, and the development of game farms as exclusive spaces, are essential outcomes of the game farm assemblage.

The game farm assemblage extends beyond the local and connects farms, the various game species and game farmers with global markets for eco-tourism and trophy hunting, and simultaneously also neighbouring farmers and villages, farmworkers and ‘poachers’. Game farms unfold as a locally specific configuration of an ‘interconnected, but not homogenous, set of projects’ (Tsing, 2000: 353) connecting people and spaces across the globe in many different ways (Woods, 2007, 2015). It offers ‘wilderness’ (Wolmer, 2005) and tourist gazes (Urry, 2002; Van der Duim, 2007), but at the same time produces fenced-off spaces excluding people and creating poaching opportunities. Unpacking these global–local connections requires, as Heley and Jones (2012: 212) reason, ‘paying attention to the agency of local actors, whilst also examining the

broader economic and social relations – both historical and contemporary – which locate places within wider networks’.

The expansion and further development of game farming takes place in the present; history and historical processes, however, cannot be ignored and become actualised in game farming assemblages. Historical processes – unequal access to resources, racial divisions of landownership, racial segregation policies (Beinart and Delius, 2014) – are reproduced in and through assemblages, shaping in turn their current dynamics and outcomes. Situating game farming in the complexities of history helps us to show that the ‘new’ that emerges in game farm assemblages, generates in turn new complexities, intensities, inequalities and contestations. ‘Poaching’ occurs next to trophy and biltong hunting, next to experiencing the wilderness and game-meat production. Game farms at the same time do not, or only minimally, generate new employment opportunities—an indication that viewing game farming as a driver of rural development is, at the least, problematic. The fences that are erected, as well as the anti-poaching and securitisation campaigns and laws are expressions of the new intensities generated by game farming and its further expansion. We need to realise, however, that game farming is not a homogeneously practised assemblage; rather, it generates heterogeneous, highly fragmented and diverse spaces (Umans and Arce, 2014).

The data for this article is derived from published as well as unpublished sources, such as reports from the South African Ministries of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs and Tourism, academic seminars and conference presentations such as those during the Wildlife Farming Conference held in Pretoria in 2015. Data released by Statistics South Africa on commercial agriculture for the years 2002, 2007 and 2012 are unfortunately incomplete and do not cover the full breadth of game farming. The most recent available (2015) General Household Survey (GHS) also offers only sketchy data about labour and employment on game farms. The data for 2015 in the category ‘Game hunting, trapping and game propagation, including related services’ is based on observations of only three to six jobs in this category per three-monthly survey (Stats SA, 2015). This could be taken to mean that in fact there are very few such jobs, but more likely it means that the GHS has not recorded this well (personal communication with Michael Aliber).

We also draw on a detailed case study of a game farm in the Eastern Cape in order to discuss processes in the reordering of nature and changing social relationships. Interviews exploring landscape transformations, animal (re)introductions and ‘poaching’ were held with the game farmer and neighbouring farmers during a two-month period of fieldwork in 2012.¹ The data allows us to present an account of the specific practices and relations on the game farm as well as the discourses and organising practices of most of the actors involved in the global game farm context. Not all actors were interviewed and/or observed, however, as ‘poachers’ tend to be reticent about their activities. The study focuses specifically on the Eastern Cape as part of a longitudinal engagement with rural development processes in the former homelands, notably the former Ciskei (Hebinck and Lent, 2007; De Wet, 2011; Hebinck et al., 2011; Hebinck and Van Averbeke, 2013). An analysis of the trends and dynamics of game farming as a relatively recent land-use activity adds to and broadens the existing knowledge about rural development dynamics in the province. These dynamics are shaped, not just by what happens over time in the former homelands, but also by the interaction with the former South African part of the Eastern Cape where land, despite land and agrarian reforms, is still largely

¹ ‘Poaching’ is neither an adequate nor a correct term for the harvesting of wild game as it criminalises the act of poaching. Nonetheless, given the lack of an appropriate term, we refer to ‘poaching’ but also refer to bushmeat hunting, a more neutral term for this activity.

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