



Fencing elephants: The hidden politics of wildlife fencing in Laikipia, Kenya



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ABSTRACT

Conservation is a fundamentally spatial pursuit. Human–elephant conflict (HEC), in particular crop-raiding, is a significant and complex conservation problem wherever elephants and people occupy the same space. Conservationists and wildlife managers build electrified fences as a technical solution to this problem. Fences provide a spatial means of controlling human–elephant interactions by creating a place for elephants and a place for cultivation. They are often planned and designed based on the ecology of the target species. Yet as we show in this case study, behind their technical façade, fences are highly political. This article presents the process of planning and building the 121 km West Laikipia Fence: created to prevent elephants from moving out of large private and government-owned ranches and onto smallholder cultivated land to the west of Laikipia County. We seek to show how the construction of a fence to solve the problem of HEC led to the division, reinforcement and communication of territory on the ground and how this was captured and shaped by different, and sometimes conflicting, political interests.

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1. Introduction

Conservation is fundamentally a spatial practice (Adams et al., 2014), based, as it is, on the conceptual separation of human and non-human, and the protection of one against the other. The establishment of protected areas has been the leading strategy of conservation since the end of the nineteenth century (Adams, 2004; Sheail, 2010). In colonial Africa, conservation policy constituted a new order for nature and human society, as the colonial state sought to separate animals and people. Protected areas were the cornerstone of that strategy, firstly in the form of game reserves, and latterly (especially after World War Two), in the form of national parks. An Anglo–American nature aesthetic drove a vision of nature as wilderness, and the creation of protected areas as islands of the wild in a peopled landscape (Neumann, 2004). Thus the Selous Game Reserve was carved out of Liwale District in colonial Tanzania in the 1930s, abandoned to its elephants, while people were moved out (Neumann, 2001). The story of displacement and dispossession has become a standard of critical political ecology (Brockington, 2002; Brockington et al., 2008; Kelly, 2015), with

Africa as one of its prime exemplars (Neumann, 2002; Garland, 2008).

The conceptual and practical placing of nature within specific spatial bounds can be thought of in terms of the creation of conservation territories (Peters, 1994; Hughes, 2005). Elden (2010: 810) described territory as an object of governance: ‘a rendering of the emergent concept of ‘space’ as a political category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered and controlled’. The creation of territorialisation is a process reflecting the exercise of power, and the control of space, people and nature. Kelly (2015) identified protected areas as ‘internal territories’, areas set aside within national boundaries where nature and the use of nature by people, are controlled.

Sack (1986: 32) noted that territory is easy to demarcate since in principle it requires only one kind of a marker or sign: the boundary. Territorialisation can be defined as the process by which institutions attempt to control actions by drawing boundaries around a geographic space, excluding some categories of individuals from this space, and prescribing specific activities within these boundaries (Vandergest, 1996). The key element in conservation territorialisation is the demarcation and enforcement of boundaries, and these boundaries are the spatial focus of legal and coercive action in support of conservation outcomes (Peluso, 1993).

There is a rich scholarly literature on the politics of boundary making. Jones (1945) described four stages of boundary making: the allocation of territory; delimitation (choosing the alignment);

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demarcation (the physical marking on the ground); and administration (perpetuation of the physical boundary). Within political geography, boundaries have typically been analysed at the scale of the state, as the most explicit manifestation of the large-scale connections between politics and geography (Newman and Paasi, 1998). However, the creation of boundaries at finer scales also generates significant political processes. Newman (2006: 148) suggests that the alignment of borders is 'normally determined by political and social élites as part of the process of societal ordering and compartmentalisation'. Although a boundary may appear to be a clearly defined line, it is often an outcome of a complex, contested negotiation between different actors (Häkli, 2008). The process of physically demarcating a boundary is the 'crux of all boundary making' (Holdich, 1916: 208): 'it is in this process that disputes usually arise, and weak elements in the [plan] are apt to be discovered'.

Barriers are the physical realisation of boundaries and take many forms: most conspicuously fences and walls (Spierenburg and Wels, 2006). However they universally function as both physical markers and as symbolic icons that convey particular political meanings in the social landscapes in which they exist (Peters, 1994; Suzuki, 2001). They help to institutionalise the collective recognition of property rights and fix control over land use (Kotchemidova, 2008). They are a spatial projection of power that transforms not only the relations between nature and society but also social relations within a landscape (Van Sittert, 2002) in which 'people negotiate the meanings of land, resources and property' (Sheridan, 2008: 154). Boundaries and associated barriers reflect the nature of power relations between actors and the ability of one party to determine and impose categories of inclusion and exclusion of others (Ganster and Lorey, 2005; Newman, 2006). Geopolitically, walls have been signatures of territorial reconfigurations (Waterman, 1994; Thomas 1999; Daniel, 2000; Griggs, 2000; Brawer, 2002) and are increasingly being built along national boundaries to define migration policies (Lloyd et al., 2013). Furthermore, fence materials themselves have shaped sociopolitical landscapes. The invention of barbed wire in 1873, for example, transformed the American West, as settlers demarcated their patch of land in the frontier (Peffer, 1951). As Krell (2002: 160) notes, 'barbed wire has always functioned in that paradoxical zone, between protection and division'. Barbed wire represents symbolic as well as physical power: as Razac (2002) notes, barbed wire embodies heavy memories of the trenches of World War I; and the concentration camps of World War II.

In conservation, fenced boundaries define conservation territories, strengthening the fortress approach by physically actualising the nature–society divide (Brockington, 2002). Fences for conservation purposes tend to be planned and built to separate nature from threatening human activity (Hayward and Kerley, 2009), invasive species (e.g. Brook et al., 2004), disease (e.g. Suttmoller, 2002) or persecution resulting from conflict or the illegal killing of wildlife (e.g. Packer et al., 2013). Protected area boundaries are often fenced to exclude local people (redefining human movement onto protected land as trespassing, the collection of fuel wood, cattle fodder or food as theft; hunting for meat as poaching; and making a home as encroachment, Homewood and Rodgers, 1991; Spierenburg and Wels, 2006; Brockington et al., 2006; Duffy, 2000; Büscher, 2010). At the same time, such fences typically permit entry for certain categories of people (e.g. tourists).

Conservation fences may be planned for technical reasons, but their construction is highly political. Wels (2000) describes how the white shareholders of Save Valley Conservancy in Zimbabwe wished to generate revenue to invest into its neighbouring communities through a hunting tourism operation. To do so, it was a legal requirement to build a veterinary fence to keep buffalo off neighboring farmland. To white conservancy shareholders the fence represented a necessary means to generate benefits that

could flow over their boundary. However for surrounding smallholder farmers the fence represented an 'insurmountable physical and symbolic obstacle, because it puts the disputed signature of the white owner and its social identity on the land' (Wels, 2000: xxi). In the Karoo region of South Africa, the enclosure of the open semi-arid landscape with fences from the late 19th Century – to define private ranches and later, conservation areas, and exclude trespassers – constrained the mobility and resilience of people and wildlife (Sheridan, 2008; Roche, 1908; Rohde and Hoffman, 2008; Benjaminsen et al., 2008). Today, these hardened fenced boundaries persist, supported by the narratives of powerful conservationist actors about land degradation, and contribute to the insecurity of rights and livelihoods of the poor (Benjaminsen et al., 2008).

In the context of fenced conservation boundaries, patterns of exclusion and inclusion also extend to animals, both domestic and wild. The expansion of human settlement and cultivation onto elephant range could be understood as an act of forced colonisation. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) describe such human encroachment as an act of appropriation and an assault on the sovereignty of wild animals. Elephants can certainly be understood as political actors, exercising agency in the political ecology of human–elephant conflict (Evans and Adams, in preparation). Thus when the boundaries of Etosha National Park, Namibia, were drawn and enforced, dogs that had been used for herding by Herero pastoralists for centuries were no longer allowed: dogs that crossed into the Park were shot as a threat to wildlife (Hoole and Berkes, 2010). Likewise, conservation boundaries determine what wild animals can do. Wild animals may roam at will within protected areas, designated as 'wildlife', to be protected, photographed or researched. Yet once those same animals cross a protected area boundary and intrude on landscapes designated for people, they are re-classified as marauding, dangerous pests (Wels, 2000).

Where people and wildlife coexist, a common result is described as 'human–wildlife conflict'. This widely used term refers to negative interactions between people and wild animals, conflating the impacts of wildlife on people and their activities, and associated conflicts between conservationists and other people about these impacts (Redpath et al., 2015). Human–wildlife conflict is a problem throughout Africa, not only around protected areas from which animals issue forth and raid farmer's crops, but also where wild animals and people share unprotected land. Many animals raid crops (primates, bush-pigs and rodents, for example), but the most intractable crop-raiding problems in Africa are associated with the African elephant, *Loxodonta africana*. Human–elephant conflict (HEC) is recognised to be a serious problem across African elephant range, particularly along the hard boundaries that separate cultivation from wildlife areas (Graham et al., 2009; Hoare, 2012). HEC encompasses the range of negative interactions that occur between people and elephants sharing a landscape and includes significant damage to crops, property, livestock risk to human life and the retaliatory killings of elephants (Barua, 2010; Graham et al., 2012). Elephants have a vast requirement for space and resources (Blake et al., 2003; Leggett, 2006), and although elephant numbers have declined since the latest poaching crisis began in 2011 (Nellemann et al., 2013; White, 2014), human settlement and the expansion of smallholder cultivation on rangeland used by elephants have created conditions for conflict in many countries.

HEC is among the most emotive and political form of human–wildlife conflict (Lee and Graham, 2006). Elephants embody diverse cultural contradictions: they are a serious and sometimes dangerous crop pest and are locally feared. HEC can elicit violent responses from people. Mariki et al. (2015), for example, described the killing of six elephants in northern Tanzania as a result not only of a desire for retribution for crop or property damage but also of a wider, underlying resistance to the appropriation of land for conservation that had marginalised and disempowered local people. At the same

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