



Contested Conservation: Implications for Rights, Democratization, and Citizenship in Southern Africa

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Abstract

Two competing ideological approaches have emerged in African wildlife conservation: an exclusionary approach that is aligned with the, mostly Western, animal protection movement; and the inclusive human rights-based approach of many African governments, which reflects the opinions and rights of their citizens. The emergence of social media as a campaign tool used by animal protection organizations reduces the ability of rural African citizens to engage with policy processes affecting their rights and strengthens the ability of misinformed western citizens to assume this role.

Keywords Inclusive conservation · Policy · Citizenship · Governance · Social media · Campaigns · Animal protection · Militarization · Natural resources · Rights

Despite the idealized images of an unpopulated ‘wild Africa’ so often portrayed in traditional and social media, biodiversity conservation does not take place within such a ‘disneyfied’ space. It takes place in human-dominated landscapes which brings with it questions of citizenship, ownership, power, and authority which are increasingly overlooked in international public conservation discussions and policy processes. Conservationists should be deeply cognizant of the implications of their activities for people as well as the ecosystems and biodiversity they seek to conserve, and an inclusionary human rights-based approach can achieve that. However, rights-based approaches are increasingly undermined through social media campaigns by western animal protection organizations, which largely exclude participation by rural African citizens. Yet these campaigns are increasingly influential in international and national environmental

policy making. The outcome is threatening not only conservation objectives but also the rights of rural citizens throughout Africa to participate in policy processes that affect their rights and livelihoods.

Human Rights Context

International and national laws have for decades recognized that there are universal rights held by all people that are inalienable, unconditional, interdependent and non-discriminatory. This legal framework also provides for collective rights such as the rights of all peoples’ to determine their own future; to own, manage and use their traditional lands and natural resources; and to participate in political and policy processes that affect their rights. Most recently, the 2018 ‘UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Living in Rural Areas’—although it is not a binding instrument—explicitly states that ‘Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to access and to use in a sustainable manner the natural resources present in their communities that are required to enjoy adequate living conditions. They also have the right to participate in the management of these resources (UN Human Rights Council Resolution 39/12 2018)’. The declaration on the Rights of Peasants provides an extension to rights-based approaches to conservation. Wherein, local communities are recognized not merely as stakeholders whose rights need to be taken

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into account but as having a fundamental right to participate in decisions that affect them. A universal principle that exists in rights-based approaches is the right to participate in decision making as a key process through which right holders can make effective claims to duty bearers such as the state and other actors (Madzwamuse 2010).

Decision making is however inherently a political process, as such processes of consultation need to go beyond merely providing right holders with information to meaningful engagement where a plurality of voices (especially youth, women, indigenous peoples, and local communities) are represented. Other critical principles include equality and nondiscrimination, accountability, self-determination, self-representation through one's own institutions, and compensation for losses endured amongst others. All actors, whether government, private sector, civil society, or individual citizens, have an obligation to respect and uphold these rights. Social media has however presented a challenge to how procedural rights exercised by rural communities who live in conservation areas can effectively engage with policy processes. Their voices are drowned out by international activists and campaigners with better access to the internet and social media platforms, and a narrative that is more amenable to these means of communication.

Policy Frameworks for Conservation Dominant from 1980 to 2005

These universally recognized rights provide the legal context and framework within which biodiversity conservation takes place. Mainstream conservationists have long accepted that denial of the rights of rural citizens and their exclusion from the management and benefits of natural resources undermines conservation goals and this is reflected in several multilateral environmental agreements (Boyle and Anderson 1996; Campese 2009; Springer and Campese 2011). This realization led to a generation of progressive policies which—to varying degrees—involved rural citizens in the management of wildlife and other natural resources by providing them with rights to benefit from the sustainable use of natural resources, including wildlife, on land outside of state-protected areas.

From the late 1980s onwards, Southern African countries saw a rapid spread in national environmental policy frameworks that provided rights and expanded the democratic space for rural people to engage with policy processes affecting these rights. These policies rolled back the exclusionary approach to wildlife management that had been introduced during the colonial period. The global environmental policy processes mirrored the shift towards inclusive conservation policies with the creation of policy space and mechanisms within multilateral environment agreements, such as the

Convention on Biodiversity Diversity (CBD) and the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), and related forums such as the IUCN World Conservation Congress (IUCN WCC) to enable the role of citizens—in particular rural communities living with and owning wildlife—in shaping of conservation and related policy frameworks which served to ensure community management and benefits (Cooney et al. 2018). The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is a notable exception.

However, over the last decade a new and disturbing phenomenon has emerged within the global conservation movement. That is the resurgence of an exclusionary and militaristic approach to natural resource management and conservation (Duffy et al. 2015, 2019; Büscher and Ramut-sindela 2016; Kelly and Ybarra 2016; Büscher and Fletcher 2018) which draws upon strategies that were imposed during the colonial period in Africa, as a driving force behind international biodiversity policy. This exclusionary approach seeks to divest rural communities of their rights, reduces their ability to engage with and influence policy, removes the economic value of their resources and aims to recentralize authority over wildlife to a national and even international level. It is also resulting in a shift of scarce resources away from inclusive conservation strategies and activities that are essential to the integrity of protected areas (Duffy et al. 2019). Confirming this, a 2016 World Bank report indicated that of the \$1.3 billion dollars spent on combatting Illegal Wildlife Trade between 2010 and 2016 only 15% was spent on sustainable use and inclusive conservation programmes (Wright et al. 2016).

Competing Conservation Ideologies

Two competing ideological narratives and approaches have emerged in African wildlife conservation. An exclusionary approach that focuses on legal protection of individual animals from human consumptive use, and which is aligned with and informed by the, mostly Western, 'compassionate conservation' and animal rights movements on the one hand; and the inclusive, rights-based approach of many African governments which reflect the opinions and rights of their citizens on the other. Which approach will ultimately guide international policy depends on the power of networks, narratives and structured political interests. These are increasingly determined not by science but by the ability to influence public opinion, politics and ultimately policy making (Keeley and Scoones 2003).

Exclusionary approaches to conservation have their philosophical and historical roots in the West and are instrumental in shaping the Western worldview of African people as well as the wildlife found on the continent. Proponents of this approach note that 'compassionate conservationists strive to



embody four overarching tenets: first, do no harm; individuals matter; inclusivity; and peaceful coexistence' and that these tenets must be adhered to 'regardless of usefulness to humans' (Wallach et al. 2018). They also consider that 'conservation practices that categorically prioritize collectives without due consideration for the well-being of individuals are ethically untenable' and that conservation practice that does not accord to this ethic are 'estranging conservation practice from prevailing, and appropriate, social values'. In doing so they are positing that there is a universal ethical, moral, and social code relating to wildlife, allowing no room for alternative worldviews shaped by the hugely different lived experiences of African citizens with alternative cultural lenses through which they relate to wildlife.

This ideological stance puts organizations adhering to exclusionary approaches in direct conflict with the governments and citizens of Southern African countries where conservation policies are focused on the well being and the rights of the people depending on wildlife resources, as well as for species and ecosystems. For some Southern African countries, inclusive conservation policies are crucial to fulfilling promises of liberation from colonial rule where local communities were largely dispossessed of their land rights and access to natural resources (Madzwamuse 2010). These policies are underpinned by principles of restorative and social justice. They are based on pragmatic recognition that the fate of wildlife lies mainly in the hands of the rural citizens who live on the front-line with wild animals and that local communities must have appropriate incentives if they are to live with and conserve dangerous animals.¹ Provision of these incentives is ensured through recognition of the rights of citizens (particularly local communities) to own and earn a living from the use of their natural resources, including wildlife, within sustainable, legally mandated boundaries. This use includes regulated and sustainable hunting, which is particularly reviled by animal advocates and the subject of much campaigning and lobbying of policymakers in the west.

Unequal Access and Power: Silencing Voices of African Citizens

To ensure that their world view dominates, western organizations go to extreme lengths to influence public and political opinion and international policy. This includes engaging

¹ The extent of the threat wildlife poses to humans is rarely appreciated by those not directly affected. In Botswana over the past 2 years, 36 people have been killed by elephants; in India, elephants kill more than 100 people every year, and in Kenya more than 200 people have been killed in the last 7 years.

in propaganda² campaigns which undermine the rights of rural African citizens, including their right to participate in policy-making processes. Such campaigns³ are spearheaded by animal protection organizations such as the Humane Society of the US (HSUS), Born Free and the UK Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting—notably, mainstream international conservation organizations are not involved. There is concern that funds raised through these campaigns may be primarily reinvested in further campaigning and lobbying for increased legal restrictions, rather than supporting effective conservation activities in Africa. Further research is required to determine the extent to which funds raised are effectively deployed. The conservation strategies promoted by these campaigns are not new, they were dominant during the colonial period and have persisted in the form of 'fortress conservation' (Adams and McShane 1992; Western and Wright 1994; Büscher and Fletcher 2015), whilst attempts to undermine inclusive conservation approaches have been the focus of animal protection campaigns since the early 1990s.^{4,5} What is new is their ability to influence policy through social media.

These campaigns use different methods to distribute information—newspapers, TV, radio, political lobbying, international policy-making forums and, dominant over the last decade, social media. Somerville (2019) notes that such campaigns are characterized by typical propaganda techniques such as 'card stacking'—selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distraction to give the best or worst possible case for an idea—and 'cherry-picking'—use of only facts and details that support their arguments and conclusions and which can be extremely difficult to detect if in-depth knowledge is lacking.

A core thrust of these campaigns aims to undermine and discredit inclusive conservation strategies, which are most frequently embodied in Community Based Natural Resource Management Programmes (CBNRM). Relying on card-stacking and information cherry-picking, CBNRM programmes and their proponents are relentlessly attacked with false information and presentation of 'facts' drawn from other similar campaigns, creating what Somerville (2019) describes as an 'echo chamber where one campaign

² Propaganda is described by Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) as 'the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandists'.

³ <https://bantrophyhunting.org/vote-to-ban-trophy-hunting/>; <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/trophy-hunting>; <https://www.hsi.org/issues/trophy-hunting/>.

⁴ <https://www.utne.com/environment/elephant-war-zimbabwe-campfire-conserving-wildlife>.

⁵ <https://www.elephantsforever.co.za/docs/Pcaaa791.pdf>.



validates the advocacy of another'. The following campaign strap-lines are typical of such messaging:

Born Free is opposed to the killing of any animal for sport or pleasure, and strongly refutes claims by trophy hunting proponents that their activities support conservation or local communities.⁶

To say that trophy hunting is a vital source of income for people in Africa is misleading. Very few jobs have been created for locals. The main beneficiaries of 'trophy fees' are often officials, some of them corrupt, and overseas companies.⁷

Accompanied by gruesome images of dead animals, such constructs frame African citizens and governments as 'corrupt' with their primary motivation in relation to wildlife as 'trophy hunting'. No acknowledgement is provided that African citizens have agency of their own through which to realize resilient livelihoods based on the sustainable conservation and use of their resources and that their rights to exercise this agency and influence policy are being actively undermined by the activities and campaigns of these organizations.

These campaigns distort information to generate outrage and action from the western general public to pressure and petition policymakers to adjust policy to suit the ideologies of campaigners. For example, the 'fact' that 'only 3% of trophy hunting revenues end up in local communities' has now been taken up and is widely used in social media campaigns. This figure has tenuous relations with fact, stemming from a report commissioned by a group of animal rights organizations by 'Economists at Large pty' (2013) and was only relevant to one country (Tanzania) in 2007 when hunting was conducted in state protected areas and income from hunting went to the landholder—the State. In 2008, Tanzania introduced new policies to ensure that hunting also takes place on communal land and the primary beneficiaries from hunting became rural citizens. The figure of 3% has for over a decade grossly misrepresented the situation in Tanzania and has never been relevant to other countries but this does not hinder its constant repetition.

Quantifying the exact extent of even economic benefits—including cash income, employment, protein, reduction of human wildlife conflict, improved social infrastructure (roads, schools, clinics) for communities throughout Africa is not feasible, as there are significant variations from country to country and there is no consolidated data or analysis. For example, in Namibia 100% of income from trophy

hunting on communal land goes to the local community; whilst in Zimbabwe, 100% of income from hunting goes to the Local Council of which 52% is redistributed to local communities (Taylor 2009). Just as significantly, attempts to quantify economic benefits and portray these as representative of the merits of inclusive and citizen driven conservation efforts of Africans obscures the far reaching socio-political implications of these initiatives for African citizens.

The ability of CBNRM to empower citizens, ensure accountable and inclusive governance and provide resilient livelihoods is evident in many countries, with Zimbabwe providing a notable example. Throughout the 1990s, Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE programme had been the globally acclaimed flagship for CBNRM and provided the model on which similar programmes were adopted throughout the region. Between 1989 and 2006 CAMPFIRE generated almost \$30 million dollars for rural citizens throughout the country, most of which came from high-value sustainable hunting (Taylor 2009). This resulted in the creation of a large, politically salient constituency which had institutional links from local to national levels revolving around District Councils. From 1999 the national political dynamic within Zimbabwe shifted dramatically and the country descended into 'crisis', with its once stable political conditions becoming characterized by civil unrest and repression, a well functioning bureaucracy left in tatters, recentralization of power over land and resources, and total collapse of a once-thriving economy. (Hammar and Raftopoulos 2003; Harold-Barry 2004).

Despite this extremely challenging context and concerted efforts by political elites to capture the value of wildlife, remarkably CAMPFIRE continued as political elites could not afford to alienate the rural constituency which formed much of their support base or local governments which were fully invested in CAMPFIRE, by recentralising ownership of wildlife (Rihoy and Maguranyanga 2007; Rihoy et al. 2007). The result is that in many rural areas of Zimbabwe, it remains one of the few reliable sources of income for an increasingly impoverished citizenry, albeit not to the same degree as in former years, particularly during the 1990s.

With the emergence of social media as a primary communications tool, campaigns can now reach and actively engage millions of western citizens. The spark for the current anti-hunting campaigns was the shooting of 'Cecil' the Lion by an American tourist in July 2015 which led to an unprecedented and continuing public reaction in the West. This amounted to 87,533 mentions per day on social media at its peak and 11,788 in editorial media (Macdonald et al. 2016)—more media attention than for any conservation story in history. 'Cecil' sparked a movement that has led to growing political pressure from Western citizens on the US, UK and other governments and on multilateral environmental processes to ban hunting and trade in wildlife

⁶ <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/trophy-hunting>. Accessed 20 November 2019.

⁷ <https://bantrophyhunting.org/vote-to-ban-trophy-hunting/>. Accessed 20 November 2019.



and remove the value of these resources from their owners and undermine the legitimacy and rights of rural citizens to engage with and influence policy decisions.

Social media provides mechanisms and platforms enabling western citizens, misinformed through campaigns, to exert increasing influence on national and international conservation policy-making. It enables these citizens to comfortably retreat into a space where Africa and Africans can be observed and judged from afar and creates the gratifying illusion that by pressing a button to sign a petition condemning the Government of Botswana or donating to the campaign, the supporter is actively engaged in conservation and the ‘saving’ of endangered species. Social media has then enabled the citizens of countries far removed from the realities of living with wildlife to become involved in conservation politics and policy making, replacing the role of African citizens who live with and depend on wildlife for their livelihoods. Campaign supporters go unaware that they are actively engaged in undermining inclusive democratic governance, the basic human rights of ‘others’, or imperiling some of the few outstanding conservation successes that the world is able to boast.

Internet penetration in Africa is less than 40% and this is largely confined to urban citizens, whilst in the US and Europe it is 95%.⁸ Relatively few rural Africans have access to social media and this unequal access to internet connection will grow because subscriptions to fixed broadband are growing 15 times faster in countries with high human development index (UN Human Development Report 2019).

But not only do rural communities in Africa have limited access to social media, theirs is also a more complex story to tell, difficult to reduce to slogans and capture pictorially through social media which lends itself to what Kahneman (2011) characterizes as ‘thinking fast’—intuitive and emotional reaction. Theirs is a story of the intersections between conservation, citizenship, and democracy in Southern Africa, requiring deliberative and logical thought not always conducive to social media.

Whilst further research is required, it appears that the use of social media, relatively inaccessible to rural African citizens, is stifling the voices of those who live with wildlife whilst amplifying the voices of those far removed from this reality, in discussions informing conservation politics and policy. Missing from the ensuing discussions is acknowledgement that wildlife is owned by African countries and that this ownership has led to remarkable conservation successes and contributes to the livelihoods of rural Africans. Instead, wildlife is portrayed as a global resource whose fate lies in the hands of people in the West. African citizens, in

so far as they are presented at all, are cast as impoverished, corrupt, ‘trophy hunters’—‘others’ who are recipients of the wisdom and largesse of the campaigning organizations and their supporters in the west. And yet it is not by accident that 80% of trips to Africa are linked to wildlife tourism and that the majority of wildlife is in fact found outside of protected areas. African communities have demonstrated their capacity for sustainable stewardship.

Botswana: Inclusive Democratic Governance or ‘Driving Elephants to Extinction’?

The situation in Botswana over the last year represents just one illustrative case study typical of the many ongoing campaigns against consumptive use of wildlife referred to in preceding sections. Events have clearly exposed the deep polarization in perspectives as to how and by whom wildlife should be managed and the manner in which social media can be unequally manipulated to influence policy outcomes, regardless of the lack of appropriate information on which to base actions.

For decades Botswana maintained an enviable international reputation as an ‘African miracle’ due to its robust democracy, sound governance systems and representative and accountable government. A culture of civil and political rights prevailed and citizens were consulted on policy decisions, including those which affected the right of citizens to earn a livelihood from sustainable use of their natural resources within the bounds of national and international law. On coming to power in 2008, former President Khama introduced policies which removed rural peoples rights to use their natural resources and introduced a militarized approach to wildlife management which alienated wildlife from rural citizens. Department of Wildlife and National Parks game rangers were provided with semi-automatic weapons, the Botswana Defence Force was called to assist with anti-poaching (resulting in the execution without trial of at least 52 people⁹) and sustainable, regulated hunting banned. The outcome was impoverishment, abuse of human rights, increased poaching and wildlife destruction. This militarized approach was applauded by animal protection organizations in their social media campaigns as ‘progressive’¹⁰ and a ‘a shining example of a nation at the forefront of the battle to save Africa’s declining wildlife’.¹¹

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269329/penetration-rate-of-the-internet-by-region/>.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/world/africa/elephants-botswana-poaching.html>.

¹⁰ <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/news/botswana-hunting-ban>.

¹¹ <https://blog.humanesociety.org/2019/05/breaking-news-botswana-lifts-trophy-hunting-ban-on-elephants.html>.



Following comprehensive, inclusive consultations and nationwide dialogue, the government of President Masisi reversed the former President's flagship conservation approach, introducing a legal framework to restore ownership to local communities of wildlife occurring on their land to ensure equitable benefit sharing and secure better outcomes for wildlife. That this move represented the will of the majority of Botswana is in no doubt. Largely on the basis of this shift in policy and its signaling of a return to inclusive conservation and democratic governance, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) won the majority of wildlife rich constituencies in the general election of September 2019 resulting in the re-election of the BDP. CBNRM is now being promoted as a key strategy for wildlife management once again and President Masisi has actively championed an inclusive conservation agenda. This represents the first time that the necessity for inclusive environmental management has explicitly played a defining role in national political outcomes in Africa and sets a precedent throughout the region.

Yet, despite the deep ramifications of this for inclusive and accountable governance, representative democracy, and upholding the rights of rural citizens, western campaigns have reduced this on social media to an issue of 'putting critically endangered elephants at risk of extinction'¹² and condemn President Masisi and Botswana, directing their millions of followers to 'Tell the Botswana government to bring back the ban on trophy hunting'¹³ and unleashing multiple petitions and calls for tourism boycott if Botswana does not adhere to their demands and reverse its policies.^{14,15,16}

Botswana civil society organizations and citizens, who are overwhelmingly in favour of the Government's decision, are unable to keep up with the international social media campaign that has been unleashed as a result of this policy reversal. Likewise the largely favourable local print media coverage is unable to keep up with the vast international coverage, much of which roundly condemns Botswana for its

decision^{17,18,19,20,21,22,23} but fails to explore the complexities and implications for inclusive citizenship, human rights and inclusive conservation.

Conclusion

Whilst further research is required to determine the extent, it appears that through the use of social media, well funded but misleading campaigns and effective lobbying, the voices of Western animal protection organizations and their supporters are drowning out those of African citizens in the international environmental policy arena. One outcome is increased emphasis and financing by the international community of exclusionary militarized approaches to conservation. This leads to disenfranchisement, alienation, and even criminalization of rural African citizens in relation to wildlife and inhibits their ability to exercise their agency within the policy space. Furthermore, this threatens to undermine the vital role that CBNRM plays not just in conserving wildlife and generating livelihoods but also in empowering rural citizens to demand accountable and inclusive governance. Campaigns are directed at undermining the economic rationale which underpins CBNRM: the generation of income from the sustainable use of wildlife. This arises as the international environmental framework influences national policy frameworks and determines the value of natural resources. As the mechanisms and tools for influencing these policy frameworks are not conducive to active participation at the international level by rural citizens, their voice and perspective becomes increasingly marginalized from international policy debates, whilst the ability of those who live far from wildlife, misled by campaigns, increases. Despite the clear legal frameworks and normative stance of global citizens and governments in recognising the importance of human rights, moves to undermine these rights are supported—often unknowingly—by these same governments and citizens throughout the world. In their vehement, ideologically driven opposition to any consumptive use of wildlife, animal

¹² <https://www.change.org/p/president-mokgweetsi-masisi-reinstate-botswana-ban-on-trophy-hunting>.

¹³ https://action.hsi.org/page/39048/action/1?&ea.tracking.id=website&_ga=2.225831257.2140093755.1574111586-913434704.1531325786.

¹⁴ https://secure.avaaz.org/en/community_petitions/His_Excellency_Oppose_Botswanas_suggested_Blood_Laws_of_elephant_culls_and_trophy_hunts_1/.

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/world/africa/botswana-elephant-hunting.html>.

¹⁶ <https://www.change.org/p/president-mokgweetsi-masisi-reinstate-botswana-ban-on-trophy-hunting>.

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48374880>.

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/23/botswana-lifts-ban-on-hunting-elephants>.

¹⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/05/23/botswana-overturns-ban-elephant-hunting/>.

²⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/23/africa/botswana-elephant-intl/index.html>.

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-botswana-hunting/botswana-lifts-ban-on-big-game-hunting-idUKKCN1SS2PJ>.

²² <https://www.independent.ie/world-news/africa/expect-mass-culling-next-botswana-lifting-ban-on-elephant-hunting-condemned-38143834.html>.

²³ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/botswanas-elephants-zimbabwes-buffaloes-fair-game-lawmakers-relax/story?id=63225461>.



protection organizations are utilizing social media and the access this affords to national and international policy processes, to place the rights of individual animals before the rights of African citizens and countries who live with and own wildlife. The voice of rural African communities is now being eroded and drowned out by the growing dominance of international activists and pressure groups pushing for a reversal in inclusive conservation policies and a return to exclusionary approaches.

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