Introduction: The Politics of Engagement between Biodiversity Conservation and the Social Sciences

Bram Büscher and William Wolmer

Abstract: *In scientific endeavour related to biodiversity conservation, the perspectives of the natural sciences have long been dominant. During the last several decades, however, social science research has steadily gained momentum. The major achievement of the social sciences has been to investigate and emphasise the 'human side' of biodiversity conservation, ranging from local issues around social exclusion from protected areas and dependency of 'local people' on natural resources to more abstract issues of environmental governance and political ecology. But social science research is itself also a social process and its practices, assumptions and outcomes therefore deserve continuous critical reflection. The paper contends that when it comes to the engagement of the social sciences and biodiversity conservation the concept of 'politics' has tended to have negative connotations. However, we argue, like anything social, politics should not automatically be seen as negative. This acceptance could considerably improve relations between different actors and we therefore urge all those involved in the debate, especially social scientists, to take two crucial steps: first, the creation and acceptance of practical spaces for critical political engagement and second, the concomitant need for actors to scrutinise and reflect more consciously on their politics of engagement.*

Keywords: social science, biodiversity conservation, southern Africa, engagement, politics

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INTRODUCTION

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF *Conservation and Society* has as its central concern the politics of engagement between biodiversity conservation and the social sciences. This was the theme of an Indaba (meeting) held from 10 to 13 April 2005 in Skukuza, South Africa,[1] from which this special issue originates (IUCN and TPARI 2005). The Indaba stemmed from a desire to reflect upon and explore 'the nature and consequences of social research in communities who live in and around protected areas (PAs), and the dynamics between the different actors: local people, conservation officials, NGOs and donor agencies, and foreign and local social researchers', specifically in southern Africa (IUCN and TPARI 2005: 2). In particular, the Indaba sought to reflect firstly on social science findings and discourses related to nature conservation and PA management; secondly, on the actual social science research practices in local communities living in and around PAs and other actors dealing with conservation; and thirdly, on the links between social and natural science research on conservation and PA management. The ensuing collection of articles is the result of this critical reflection.

The links between biodiversity conservation, social dynamics in and around PAs and the roles of academic sciences have come a long way. In scientific endeavour related to biodiversity conservation, the perspectives of the natural sciences have long been dominant and still hold sway. During the last decades, however, social science research on issues of biodiversity conservation and PA management has steadily gained momentum, especially from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Much of this was spurred by increasingly apparent and acknowledged social injustices of conservation. The point of departure for social sciences has often been an emancipatory outlook;[2] they aimed to raise awareness and act on these multifarious social injustices: forced removal, limited or no access to natural resources and general loss of livelihood opportunities, among others (Brandon and Wells 1992).[3] Consequently, one of the main areas of interest in this upsurge of emancipatory research was around power struggles between actors involved in conservation; specifically, how historically unjust conditions were maintained through processes of elite capture and continued inequality. In short, the politics of conservation became and still is a central concern. Against this background, the article will argue that over time, the concept of 'politics' in social engagements around biodiversity conservation has increasingly been given a negative connotation. More precisely, the emphasis on processes of social disempowerment and inequality related to conservation have had the side effect that rather than being a process of negotiation with either negative or positive outcomes, the concept—and process—of politics itself has become synonymous with negativity and therefore preferably to be avoided.

Today, however, social researchers have become an intrinsic part of the conservation establishment (Brosius 2006; West and Brockington 2006) and therefore of the politics surrounding it. One important effect of this new situa-

tion, recognised by the Indaba, was that 'business as usual' for social scientists is not going to last. The new dispensation brings new responsibilities and pressures on social researchers, but also a need for the 'old' conservation establishment to deal with social scientists and try to understand the particularities inherent in conducting and communicating social science research. Unfortunately, some of these particularities, such as a critical approach, have led to misunderstandings between social researchers and conservationists and even their portrayal as 'enemies'. On the one hand, this is due to social scientists not recognising that they are part of the conflictual social terrains they study. On the other hand, it is sometimes unclear whether conservationists have accepted social science and scientists out of political pragmatism in an era of 'community-based conservation' (CBC) or whether they have actually tried to understand where social science comes from and what purposes it can or aims to fulfil besides the conservation of biodiversity (Brosius 2006). In short, we are currently faced with a problematic engagement between social researchers and conservationists.[4] The time has come to reinvigorate the engagement. This introduction and the authors of the articles in the special edition all aim to contribute to this goal by critically reflecting on some of the issues and achievements in the interaction between nature conservation and the social sciences in southern Africa.

The ensuing discussion is guided by one central question, the one that in essence also guided the Indaba: *What is the role of social researchers in the conflictual social terrain of biodiversity conservation and protected area management and how do they relate to other actors in the debate?* As stated above, the Indaba explored several subsidiary questions around social science discourses related to nature conservation and PA management, social science research practices in local communities living in and around PAs and other actors dealing with conservation and the links between social and natural science research. Obviously, these are big questions and this article will therefore merely scratch the surface. Our modest aim is to reflect on these questions by selectively reviewing some of the historical and contemporary outcomes and practices of social research on conservation and PA management and indicating how the articles in this special issue deal with these. Throughout, we argue that like anything social, politics as an unavoidable and necessary process and activity should be seen as having both negative and positive connotations. This, finally, leads us to outlining two steps necessary to come to a reinvigorated engagement between social researchers and conservationists, based on a more constructive conceptualisation of politics.

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND THE SCIENCES: SOME HISTORICAL NOTES

This section provides some historical background to social science and biodiversity conservation linkages with particular reference to the southern African

context. Our aim is not to provide an extensive and systematic historical over-view, but rather to outline some historical contexts that provide tasters of what the other articles deal with in greater depth and secondly, illustrate our contention that over time, the concept of politics in relation to biodiversity conservation has increasingly had negative connotations in the literature.

The history of scientific research on biodiversity conservation and PAs is tied to the history of nature conservation and PAs. Büscher and Whande's (this volume) overview suggests that modern ideas of nature conservation in Africa have their roots in seventeenth-century Europe and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. Both Europe and the United States went through phases of enclosure and intensification of agriculture, whereby the land was selectively partitioned and laid open for (agricultural) development (Igoe 2004).[5] This process triggered two main responses: first, collective appeals by romantics (Thoreau, etc.) to rescue wilderness in the United States (Nash 2001), and second, a concern for the loss of ecological services underpinning development, such as forests for watersheds, which was prominent in Germany and other parts of mainland Europe (Grove 1989). The first of these re-sponses is generally regarded as the predecessor for the 'fortress conservation' biodiversity conservation model, which places emphasis on strictly enforced PAs (see Büscher and Whande this volume; Peluso 1993; Schroeder 1999; Neumann 1998; Brockington 2002).

Science soon offered solutions to the perceived threats to wilderness in southern Africa. Foremost, this entailed amateur natural scientists collecting and describing species in an attempt to understand linkages between them. In doing so, many soon felt they had to let go of their romanticised inclinations towards nature. Rather, understanding nature and ecology required hard work 'in the bush' and was not regarded as an activity for the fainthearted. This, to-gether with the establishment of the PA model to conserve the wild led to a situation in many colonies in Africa where 'contact with the wild has come to be confined more and more to scientists' (Carruthers 1995: 117). Thus, ac-cording to Carruthers (1995: 116): 'the loss of an emotional dimension finally ended the era of romance, and the solitary game warden has been superseded by teams of scientists and administrators working together in advancing na-tional parks'. Although it goes too far to say that the era of romance ended (cf. Draper et al. 2004), it can be concluded that in southern Africa, and espe-cially South Africa, 'scientists and administrators' gained the dominant role in 'managing' biodiversity, particularly in PAs.

But the authority of science and administration in nature conservation and PA management was not limited to flora and fauna alone. Preservationist ten-dencies were further rooted in imperialist sentiment. Fiona D. Mackenzie (2000: 698–699) notes that: 'From the early 1920s, the doctrine of trusteeship, which informed colonial thinking, drew increasingly on the authoritative claims of the 'scientific method', both to generate 'crisis narratives' in the Reserve and to construct discourses of 'betterment' and 'environmentalism',

which legitimated a deepening of administrative control'. This last point is important to emphasise as it is clear from the literature that state control and nature conservation reinforced one another: under the banner of scientific progress, administrate state control was deepened; which in turn was necessary to promote colonial political ideology and entrench western values and languages (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Scott 1998). But state control did not restrict itself to ideology and values. The more practical issues of agriculture- and land-based economic activities also played a major role in the aspiration to extend colonial control, particularly in southern and East Africa. Again, the same mix of 'hard' science and conservation provided the necessary legitimation: '… in the late years of the nineteenth century, the much trumpeted universality of conservation was legitimated by reference to an international scientific community. It was this, in particular, that allowed the colonial state to use the righteous language of conservation and to confine and regulate the activities of peasant farmers in the marginal lands to which they were becoming increasingly restricted' (Grove 1989: 187).[6]

The boundaries colonists established in Africa held firm after decolonisation, and not just national boundaries. In Zimbabwe and Mozambique, for example, cadastral politics and mindsets introduced by colonial states not only superseded independence, but also intensified in conjunction with burgeoning pressures for the establishment of PAs and—later—the associated rise of nature-based tourism in Africa (Hughes 2006). Traditionally more so in former British colonies, Hughes contends that due to conservation and private sector interests even Mozambique has been making a 'sea change' from 'rule based on categories of people to rule based on the management of zones of land' (Hughes 2006: 145).

The above aims to make the straightforward point that colonial dynamics around conservation and land in Africa had triggered deep social changes. These social changes remain only partially understood today, but literature devoted to this understanding has burgeoned over the last decades. Büscher and Whande (this volume) note that this started in a time of a 'changing international development climate that at least rhetorically became conducive to issues of popular participation, local ownership and a passionate plea by many international organisations for a more just international economic order'. These emancipatory forces did not leave the issue of nature conservation and PA management untouched; they sowed the seeds for 'CBC' and this new narrative soon became dominant. In its slipstream came more critical social science research on nature conservation and PA management. Naturally, social research on the environment existed already but this centred predominantly on the question of 'how non-Western societies live with nature' (Scoones 1999: 484), where 'traditional' life ways referred to 'stable coexistence' in line with ecological metaphors and the study of homeostasis, equilibrium and balance in nature (Neumann 2005). It was only during the late 1970s that concern with 'market integration, commercialisation, and the dislocation of customary

forms of resource management—rather than adaptation and homeostasis—became the lodestones of a critical alternative to older cultural human ecology' (Peet and Watts 1996: 5).

During the 1970s, the critical turn in social research on nature (conservation) became prominent under the heading of 'political ecology', whereby ecology had to be understood within wider political economic relations (Wolf 1972, 1982; Biersack 2006). According to Biersack (2006: 9), 'whereas earlier ecologies typically concentrated upon a local population, community, society, or culture, political economy targets the complex hierarchies and crosscutting linkages through which communities are embedded in larger political, economic and social structures. The implication for ecology is that the local is subordinated to a global system of power relations and must be understood entirely with respect to that subjection, in terms of what is commonly referred to as capitalist penetration and its effects'. If the local has to be seen as 'subordinated to a global system of power relations', the implication is that a hierarchy of importance and influence in terms of power exists: global constellations are more powerful than, and overarch, local constellations. This is the argument that Büscher and Whande (this volume) use to identify current trends in the governance of biodiversity conservation and PAs management. Whether this turn is justified or not is not our concern here. We are interested in its effects with respect to the connotation attached to the concept of politics. To understand this, we must delve deeper into the purpose of much social science, or, its *political agenda*.

In essence, because of the magnitude of historical social injustices related to conservation in Africa, much critical social science research displayed a very open emancipatory political agenda that was confrontational rather than constructive.[7] In itself, this is an ancient political strategy: confrontation leads to recognition through shock. By reporting quite unidimensionally on the local (historical) grievances of 'communities', these authors put the spotlight on conservation and their social responsibilities. Social scientists have, for instance, catalogued the adverse impacts on livelihoods, food security and land rights engendered by the denial of access to natural resources, the criminalisation of 'poaching' and 'squatting' and the displacement of communities (Carruthers 1995; Ghimire and Pimbert 1997; Fabricius et al. 2001; Adams et al. 2005; West and Brockington 2006). Few nowadays, including natural scientists, deny that perhaps this 'shock therapy' was necessary in order to come to terms with these historical injustices; a philosophy of practice that for instance also provided the basis with which the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee wanted the country to come to terms with brutalities of its apartheid past.[8]

This emancipatory political agenda is still very much prominent in current-day research (Chapin 2004; Draper et al. 2004; Dowie 2006a,b) and indeed is probably still necessary. After all, if we take one of the main historical injustices associated with modern biodiversity conservation, the expulsion of peo-

ple living in current PAs, it is clear that there are very few cases in which park land was given back to the local people that used to inhabit or make use of it. In southern Africa the only well-known success story is that of the Makuleke community in South Africa that saw their claim on the northern part of the Kruger National Park rewarded (Steenkamp and Uhr 2000). And even this is not to say that all is suddenly well: according to Friedman (2005) the Makuleke 'victory' has been characterised by internal community strife and the continued shattered cultural bond with the area.

Based on the foregoing we cannot be conclusive about the progress made in the redressing of historical injustices related to conservation and the role of social science herein. Rather, we argue that the social science 'shock therapy' has had the side effect of the 'politics' around biodiversity conservation being ascribed negative connotations. In fact, we suggest that this might even be political economy's main perverse and unintended consequence: as the critical turn in social research on conservation started regarding the global political economy as overarching to local issues—thereby implicitly stating that if anything was to blame for local misfortunes in terms of underdevelopment or environmental degradation it was the global political economy 'up there'—it created an antipathy for the same politics it argued were so vital for understanding human–ecological interactions![9] This is, we argue, also the reason why so many current policy documents on biodiversity conservation speak of turning 'negative' politics around to an 'enabling environment', that is then often best done by pretending that it is possible to do away with politics altogether.[10] Next we elaborate this point with respect to contemporary issues in the engagement between social sciences and conservation.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE ENGAGEMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES WITH CONSERVATION

According to Brosius (2006), there are four enduring 'sources of difficulty' in the relationship between anthropologists/social scientists and conservationists. Firstly, conservationists often work with a great sense of urgency and therefore feel they do not have the time to listen to critical social scientists. Secondly, social researchers often align themselves with local people which they feel provide rich and textured accounts of human–nature interactions but are often seen by conservationists as a nuisance and not useful for generalised policy (cf. Campbell 2005). Thirdly, there is an incommensurability of research agendas: whereas conservationists are ultimately interested in data that supports biodiversity conservation, social scientists are often interested in a myriad of different data, not all directly useful for biodiversity conservation. Finally, social scientists and conservationists often regard each other as privileged and themselves as marginalised, which again creates uncomfortable footings on which to base engagement.

Although Büscher and Whande (this volume) try to defuse the latter source of difficulty by pointing out that both policy issues of conservation and development are in fact marginal to the broader policy arena, Brosius does make it clear that relations between social scientists and conservationists are still tense and will probably remain so. In fact, Büscher and Dressler (forthcoming) warn that if both conservationists and social researchers continue to play the 'crisis card' and have a 'now-or-never' approach (cf. Oates 1999; Terborgh 1999) the polarisation between natural and social scientists will only further increase. But the fact remains, that both sides need each other in order to understand 'complex socio-ecological systems' (King et al. this volume) and are thus jointly responsible for defusing this potential polarisation. This means that, as stated in the introduction, 'business as usual' for social scientists—critiquing without providing solutions—cannot persist, while conservationists cannot go back to isolationism (Brosius 2006; West and Brockington 2006). In fact, it is widely accepted nowadays that conservation and PAs cannot survive without political and social legitimation from a variety of constituencies. Johns (2003), for instance, is acutely aware of this by pointing out the necessity of 'new alliances' for nature conservation, while King et al. (this volume) also point to the need for social acceptance for nature conservation.

Social and political legitimation, however, has led to an overt dependence in conservation policy on supposed win–win ideals (which is the basis for the CBC narrative) and 'mobilising metaphors' (Mosse 2005) such as 'sustainable development', 'participation', 'empowerment', etc. In turn these have stimulated the depoliticisation of conservation policies by asserting that choices between conservation and development do not have to be made anymore and that they could effectively be combined to their mutual benefit (Oates 1999). Although many emancipatory social scientists were initially content with these developments, they were also quick to point out that the linking of conservation and development was not as easy as often portrayed. This complexity in the human–nature relationship is one of the central concerns of what Biersack (2006: 13) calls the 'second generation' of political ecology.

One of the main complexities addressed in recent anthropological research deals with (the limits of) human understanding of nature. Croll and Parkin (1992: 3), for example, note the paradoxical nature of the relationship between humans and their natural surroundings in which 'humans create and exercise understanding and agency on the world around them, yet operate within a web of perceptions, beliefs and myths which may portray people and their environments as constituted in each other, with neither permanently privileged over the other'. Ethnographic studies show how, for example, people commonly attribute human dispositions and behaviour to plants and animals or expand the realm of non-human living organisms to include spirits and artefacts. These studies draw attention to the way in which the Cartesian separation of culture and nature is often replaced by holistic understandings of the human place in the landscape (Brosius 1999; Descola and Palsson 1996; West

and Brockington 2006). However, holistic understandings of the human place in nature also means the acceptance of the variety of these understandings, further underlining the complexities in taking various human constituencies in biodiversity conservation into account and by consequence, also further complicating politics around conservation.

Many anthropological case studies have demonstrated that these different ways of seeing or conceptualising society and nature and their relationship can lead to misunderstanding, conflict and resistance in attempts to set up and manage PAs in much the same way as the more immediately obvious displacement of populations or denial of access to resources does (Neumann 1998). A wide literature demonstrates how the popular representations of threatened nature (and particularly charismatic mega fauna), which have underpinned international conservation organisations' campaigns for rolling out PAs, are embedded in European values and discourses of nature, which deny the existence of alternative understandings of nature and often negate the human histories of landscapes—including ostensible 'wilderness' areas. Such research undermines the myth of *terra nullius*—the elision of human histories (see MacKenzie 1988; Adams and McShane 1992; Brockington 2002; Adams 2004; Hutton et al. 2005). In turn, this further spurred emancipatory research that often aimed to untie 'indigenous knowledges',[11] which many argue should be accepted as being equal to 'expert knowledge'[12] (Dowie 2006a).

Thus, one noteworthy effect of social research is that the politics of conservation has been extended from human–nature relationships to the more abstract politics of knowledge of nature and human understanding of human–nature relationships. As Brosius observes in relation to the work of anthropologists, social scientists often endeavour to understand 'how knowledge is produced and who is empowered to produce it, how it circulates, and how some forms of expertise are considered authoritative whereas others are marginalized' (Brosius 2006: 683). There has been a growing recognition that knowledge is multiple and positional and that landscapes such as PAs are 'read' differently by different actors. They are locales of meaning, which are perceived and interpreted from many different and contested viewpoints, which reflect different actors' particular experiences, culture and values at particular moments in time. Yet the institutional context and power relations within which these actors are embedded means some are empowered to 'speak for nature' while others are voiceless.

These themes are also taken up in different ways by contributors to this special issue. Mavhunga and Dressler for instance warn of 'knowledge prospecting' as local communities' knowledge is extracted and encoded into 'devspeak' by external professionals, reducing local control and power over intellectual property. Similarly Tapela et al. describe communities' fears of extractive research and a desire for more control over knowledge generated through research. However, as many of the papers in this collection demonstrate, simply introducing 'community participation' into the equation has not necessar-

ily been found by social science researchers to lead to 'legitimate conservation' (see Mavhunga and Dressler this volume; Tapela et al. this volume). A main theme here is: who is empowered to speak for communities? As Tapela et al. (this volume) describe, communities are fractured entities rather than homogeneous units and processes of community conservation are susceptible to power struggles and processes of elite capture. Mavhunga and Dressler point out "the phenomenon of 'community' is best interpreted in the light of political tensions, cultural (re)creation, and unequal power relations"—they argue that it is a romantic and essentialised category that serves to simplify complexities and make people a legible and segregated 'Other'. The very idea of local community in much social science research, they contend, imposes a 'pass system' on the fluidities of lived experience.

If anything is clear from these diverse social science interests, it is that social scientists have invariably 'complicated' the conservation debate and therefore the politics and governance around it. As stated above, this in itself has been a favourite topic of much social science research. Increasingly, for example, there has been interest in the mechanisms by which biodiversity conservation involves ceding considerable authority and decision-making power to a range of relatively unaccountable supra-national entities—such as bilateral and multilateral donors, international conservation NGOs (themselves competing for funding and the establishment of exclusive territories) and multinational companies—and sub-national entities which often by-pass 'legitimate' state authority structures (Duffy 2002; Chapin 2004; Wolmer 2003; Brosius 2006). Here it seems we are coming full circle: the need for inclusion of a wide range of actors, 'knowledges' and ideas about nature for the legitimation of conservation, together with the dispersal of authority over conservation amongst a wide range of actors, seems to have complicated legitimacy with respect to conservation to such an extent that two conclusions seem inevitable. Firstly, ambitions and expectations with respect to all-inclusive legitimate conservation have to be toned down; and secondly, the mindset of actors needed to come to (place specific) legitimate conservation will have to be based on a more constructive conceptualisation of the process of politics than has so far been the case.[13] In other words, a reinvigorated engagement between actors dealing with conservation is needed. The next section will outline some issues that the contributors to this special issue feel need to be taken into account in such an endeavour.

ISSUES IN A REINVIGORATED ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN SOCIAL SCIENCE AND CONSERVATION

As stated in the introduction, the Indaba reflected on social science discourses related to biodiversity conservation; on the actual social science research practices in local communities living in and around PAs and other actors dealing with conservation; and on the links between social and natural science re-

search on conservation and PA management. The ensuing pages will follow these points when introducing the issues the contributors feel need to be taken into account in a reinvigorated engagement between social science and conservation, while also highlighting some potential pitfalls in doing so.

According to the contributors, the starting point for a reinvigorated engagement is defining common interests and common problems (King et al. this volume). King et al. rightly point towards the 'interconnectedness of the biophysical and the social' as the common ground upon which we should identify joint interests. They also rightly note that because of this interconnectedness, social and natural scientists need each other in order to come to real-world solutions. Natural scientists, according to King et al., must recognise what they call 'soft knowledge', which is often the hardest and most difficult to grasp part of nature conservation. The other contributions to the special issue all join in this statement. Calls are made for social scientists to improve their discourse and so try to make social science more digestible for conservationists: a more straightforward tone of language, and more direct communication and accessibility of social science research findings. Büscher and Whande would suggest that besides common goals, the joint marginality of conservation and development priorities in the wider political economy might also provide a basis for engagement and 'manoeuvrability'.

King et al. also give several pointers to social scientists in their engagement with conservationists. Firstly, they provide a passionate plea for a joint and 'realistic' appreciation of the natural laws that still underpin and influence social interaction and possibilities, despite even this being (partly) 'socially constructed'. Secondly, King et al. argue that social scientists should recognise complexity of social–ecological systems, take a holistic view, insist on inclusive processes, enable natural feedbacks, work on multiple scales, acknowledge uncertainty and enhance adaptive capacity of managers and ecosystems.

Another important element in fruitful practical engagement between natural and social scientists is by building discourses and practices together. The way to do this is to make sure that interaction starts when policy and implementing action are yet to commence. West and Brockington (2006: 614), for instance, 'advocate collaborations before PAs are made or before new projects are designed'. Likewise, Brosius argues that 'modest points of consensus should be sought—in small ways, in particular places' (Brosius 2006: 685). Despite continuous reiteration of this latter message by social scientists, however, conservation and development interventions instead keep getting bigger and more encompassing, the latest trend being massive transfrontier conservation areas that besides conservation and development also aim to bring 'peace' and 'international understanding' (Wolmer 2003; Van Amerom and Büscher 2005).

In spite of calls for multiscale approaches by King et al., this disjunction between the preferred scales of ecological and social intervention is also one of the pitfalls in building joint discourses between social scientists and conservationists. Contributors to the Indaba, for example talked of a mismatch of

scales as social scientists working on nature conservation often look at the local level where research results often are not generalisable and hence not always useful for conservationists (IUCN and TPARI 2005). A related potential pitfall that was mentioned related to conservationists trying to engage local communities solely through natural science techniques. The inverse, however, could also be true. As stated above, few of the social science contributions try to work with, within or according to 'natural laws' as defined by natural scientists. Moreover, conservationists often defend themselves against the above critique by placing more policy emphasis on 'CBC'. However, Mavhunga and Dressler (this volume) add a potentially important caveat to this argument. In their view, the idea of 'engagement' is simply 're-territorialised spaces of expert jurisdiction—a clash of anthropology and biological science in which 'the local' had no voice'. Indeed, one often finds that local knowledge does not seem to play an important role in conservation writings, but rather depend on a rational, problem-solving approach based on the importance of expertise. Again, this can be a serious pitfall as many social scientists see a technical problem-based approach as favouring clear-cut solutions offered by outside 'experts', leaving no room for local analyses that are often less decisive or open to multiple technical, moral, historical and social interpretations whereby definite answers are hard to find.

Another important element in a reinvigorated engagement between social scientists and conservationists stressed by contributors deals with the issue of reflexivity, especially on the part of social scientists. Hence, we must also examine the *practice* of social research itself. How is this 'normally' conducted and what do the research 'subjects' think about it? Bruno Latour's honest account of the practice of collecting data and putting it on paper merits quoting at some length:

> *'What we are doing in the field—conducting interviews, passing out questionnaires, taking notes and pictures, shooting films, leafing through the documentation, clumsily loafing around—is unclear to the people with whom we have shared no more than a fleeting moment. What the clients (research centres, state agencies, company boards, NGOs) who have sent us there expect from us remains cloaked in mystery, so circuitous was the road that led to the choice of this investigator, this topic, this method, this site. Even when we are in the midst of things, with our eyes and ears on the lookout, we miss most of what has happened. We are told the day after that crucial events have taken place, just next door, just a minute before, just when we had left exhausted with our tape recorder mute because of some battery failure. Even if we work diligently, things don't get better because, after a few months, we are sunk in a flood of data, reports, transcripts, tables, statistics, and articles. … And when you begin to write in earnest, finally pleased with yourself, you have to sacrifice vast amounts of data that*

cannot fit in the small number of pages allotted to you. How frustrating this whole business of studying is' (Latour 2005: 122–123).

Obviously, all researchers know how frustrating the 'business of studying' is, but it is clear from the contribution by Tapela et al. in this volume that a great deal more frustration may lie on the other side: with the research subjects, and in this case in particular, the (local) people involved in nature conservation or living in and around PAs. While perhaps contradictory with respect to the emancipatory outlook of much social research, lack of feedback, misrepresentation of findings, a perceived lack of accountability of researchers and a lack of evident benefits being derived from research are causes of genuine and justified grievances among subject communities. As Mavhunga and Dressler comment 'while conceptual heuristics are useful, framing and packaging social analysis oversimplifies and 'white-washes' complex local and extra-local processes'—while, at the same time, making for circumstances where local community members feel 'we can hear but not speak back'. Ironically, they conclude that the participatory research discourse—rather than allowing local people to speak on matters that concern them—ensures that researchers speak on 'behalf of the community'.

What then are potential answers to these practical problems? Mavhunga and Dressler make a plea for more sophisticated engagement with language in the recognition that—as the mode of transportation of knowledge—language carries subjectivities about and rationalises 'local communities' according to old models of western domination. On a more practical level, Tapela et al. show that local groups living next to PAs themselves argue for more control over the direction and content of 'incoming' research. Naturally, this touches on the tricky debate about academic freedom, but it is clear from direct engagement with local communities that they themselves are aware of this issue and willing to think along (TPARI 2006). Other, simpler suggestions are basically gestures of courteousness, such as informing local groups what came out of the research by sending the results; informing them upfront about the topic and questions that are going to be asked; fair remuneration for research cooperation and the possibility of gaining benefits from such cooperation. These could, according to Tapela et al. be seen as 'rules for engagement'. Considering the experiences of communities they describe, these rules do not only seem necessary from a practical point of view, but also to raise awareness within universities of their own 'system goals' so that they get 'shocked' into recognising these side effects of social research.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF ENGAGEMENT AND ENGAGING POLITICS

The previous sections have clearly shown that in their joint engagement, social researchers and conservationists have both contributed to creating the

complexities conservation is facing today, especially with respect to its social and political legitimacy. In order to deal with this, a reinvigorated engagement is necessary, one that, we argue, should more constructively accept and pragmatically deal with politics. We argue that two crucial steps are necessary if we want to move forward in the politics of conservation: first, the creation and acceptance of practical spaces for critical political engagement by social scientists and second, the concomitant need for social scientists to more consciously scrutinise and reflect on their own political agenda.

The first step, the creation and acceptance of practical spaces for critical political engagement by social scientists, is directed predominantly towards conservation practitioners albeit also involving an active role for social scientists. The essence of this step lies in the principal distinction between hope, politics/administration and critical understanding as different dimensions of development, as identified by Quarles van Ufford et al. (2003), which we argue also holds for the field of conservation.[14] These three concepts, so they argue, are three general phases in the post-war history of development, as well as different domains of action and knowledge. Hope refers to the hope experienced in starting up a conservation activity whereby a better future is foreseen in terms of biodiversity conservation and strategies are developed in order to get there. The next step of materialising this hope is inextricably bound with politics and administration as the organisational forms around hope enter themselves into relationships with contrasting, cooperating and competing organisational forms. As has repeatedly been shown, there is always a contrast between hope and politics/administration. Van Ufford et al. contend that this has led to a divide within social research, between those taking the optimistic road of maintaining belief that politics and/or administration might one day fulfil hope and those being sceptical, believing that this is in vain. According to Mosse (2005: 241), this debate has 'reproduced the same institutionalised distinction between constructive engagement and disengaged critical analysis that results in the divergence of the careers of anthropologists as either development professionals (consultants, advisers and policy researchers) or as scholarly academics'. From the foregoing, it is clear that this can also be seen in the field of conservation, whereby some social researchers posit themselves as sceptical and disengaged academics and others as optimistic engaged professionals. The main problem hereby, as we have argued, is that the former have often seemed to regard the politics of conservation as something negative while the latter regard it as something to be avoided or dismissed altogether by constantly hammering on the need for depoliticised win–win 'mobilising metaphors'. The danger obviously is that conservationists might be more inclined to discard the former as it will be easier to work with the latter. In order to overcome this dichotomy, a reinvigorated engagement is necessary, based on the condition that both conservationists and social researchers acknowledge this fundamental problem and are willing to do something about it.

From the contributions it is clear that a fundamental premise of the reinvigorated engagement must be the creation and acceptance of practical spaces for critical political engagement. The basis of this is that actors must not shy away from politics but embrace an open and democratic politics, which 'essentially […] is to recognize and promote discursive contests, to uphold or contest political decisions, to contest dominant hegemonic metaphoric language that disguises alternatives or constrains choice, and finally, to recognise that decisions are made within larger discursive frames that define the parameters of the problems and the possible solutions' (Marden 2003: 234). Hence, we call for all actors not to automatically perceive politics to be something 'negative' but to be open for critical, democratic debate. In order to clarify this briefly, we can use the emphasis on CBC in contemporary conservation policy and research as an example. One could easily say that having 'local communities' participate in conservation practice constitutes democratic conservation and hence we need not look any further for other paradigms for purposes of checks and balances. But democracy lies not in the individual or one specific actor group. Democracy is a way for the collective of dealing with itself[15] and the 'conservation collective', though rightly having become much more inclusive over the past decades, does not just consist of communities as a check and balance against conservationists. In much more practical research terms, CBC should thus be scrutinised both starting from the stance that it might work in practice, as well as starting from the stance that it might not at all work in practice.[16] From this point of view the recent 'back-to-the-barriers' neoprotectionist literature (see Oates 1999; Terborgh et al. 2002; Hutton et al. 2005) should be welcomed as a check and balance against the 'powerful explanation' of CBC. Although we do contend that CBC is an improvement on the old fortress conservation model, this does not mean it is without flaws, as many scholars have shown (Oates 1999; Murphree 2000; Barrow and Murphree 2001; Mavhunga and Dressler this volume). The point is that CBC proponents should not regard themselves as the 'moral high ground' against which no arguments can be brought to bear. To the contrary, this should be encouraged.

How, then, does one 'develop' spaces where critical or democratic political engagement can be stimulated? The first obvious spaces are certain geographic locations where people come together. The Indaba tried to be such a space and whether this has succeeded is the question of the contribution by Mavhunga and Dressler (this volume). But not all spaces for coming together these days have to have a geographic location. 'Virtual' locations, such as the internet, video conferences and teleseminars, are the new spaces of our time. When Tapela et al. (this volume) presented their paper at a TPARI teleseminar, not only (social) scientists and policy makers tuned in, but also local people living next to Kruger National Park through seven community fora. In direct interaction, these various actors were able to comment on each other and while not everybody agreed with one another, many were pleased with the

space provided (TPARI 2006). Other spaces have more to do with mindsets; creating 'discursive spaces' for mutual learning and understanding, while at the same recognising their limits. It could for instance well be that such a space can be found by the wider acceptance that both social development in Africa and nature conservation are hardly priority issues in contemporary world politics (Brosius 2006; Büscher and Whande this volume; King et al. this volume).

Another way of creating space is by not only being critical of others, but also of oneself. Participants at the Indaba remarked that many social scientists' tendency to focus on the local inhibits their smooth interaction with conservation and development policy makers who prefer something 'generalisable' (IUCN and TPARI 2005). Moreover, being critical just for the sake of being critical does not encourage engagement. Rather, social scientists should 'rethink the convergence zone between their critiques and the forms of practice promoted by conservation scientists' and show 'in concrete form how their analyses can inform the practices of conservation practitioners and by providing alternatives' (Brosius 2006: 684).

It is this last point that leads us to the second step towards a reinvigorated engagement between social scientists and other actors in conservation: the need for social scientists to more consciously try not to let their science be driven by the urgency of their political agenda.[17] This is something that so often occurs in the social sciences that many do not even recognise this or regard it as problematic (Latour 2005). But it certainly can be and often is. Consider Latour (2005: 259–260):

> *'The words 'social' and 'nature' used to hide two entirely different projects that cut across both of those ill-assembled assemblies: one to trace connections among unexpected entities and another to make those connections hold in a somewhat liveable whole. The mistake is not in trying to do two things at once – every science is also a political project – the mistake is to interrupt the former because of the urgency of the latter'.*

Latour points here at a fundamental *problematique* of the social sciences: namely that social science is inherently always political—meaning the process of and leading to the organisation of the public sphere—yet maintains it is objective or at least 'as objective as possible'.

We have seen in the section on 'Biodiversity conservation and the sciences: some historical notes' that a lot of social research on conservation has a very open political agenda of emancipation, combined with a critical attitude. In fact, it was stated that CBC constitutes, besides an academic discourse, a policy reaction to the explicitly emancipatory critique on protectionist and exclusionary forms of nature conservation and PA management. In itself this is not problematic. In fact, we contend that the political academic project leading to

forms of inclusive and development-sensitive conservation was very necessary to break through the mould of 'fortress conservation'. However, there is a need for the politics within social sciences to be more consciously accepted, scrutinised and laid open for reflection and criticism. Many researchers, for example, fall into the 'powerful explanation' trap, often encouraged by commerce and the need to distinguish oneself in a competitive environment. However, as Latour states, "you might feel the pleasure of providing a 'powerful explanation', but that's just the problem: you partake in the expansion of power, but not in the re-composition of its content (Latour 2005: 260)". Hence, Latour (2005: 261) argues that 'there should be no powerful explanation without checks and balances'. And these checks and balances should not only come from other social scientists—for instance the article by Mavhunga and Dressler (this volume) in the case of Indaba—but also from the research subjects in question (see Tapela et al. this volume).[18]

Even though the social sciences are never objective, this does not mean one should not try to pursue at least the scientific effort, which holds the risk that the research might fail and should always be contested (see Latour 2005). Perhaps in this vein it is a relief that many of the natural sciences are also not as objective as is often perceived (Latour 2004). If anything, this type of thinking at least provides (democratic) space to compose, decompose, construct and deconstruct, question and affirm scientific enterprise and keep the debate open, something that all the articles in this special issue adhere to, despite their great difference in approach and (disciplinary) background.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Organised by IUCN - The World Conservation Union (South Africa) and the Transboundary Protected Areas Research Initiative (TPARI).
2. With emancipatory we mean that social scientists often took the sides of the 'weak' and (seemingly) 'powerless', especially local 'communities' in and around protected areas and tried to bring their plight to the fore with specific aim to strengthen their position vis-à-vis other actors.
3. For modern-day examples of this type of writing, see: Chapin (2004) and Dowie (2006a,b).

4. This is not to imply that social scientists cannot themselves be conservationists: to the contrary, they can be and often are.
5. Although perhaps dominant, this is not the only explanation of the historical roots of modern nature conservation. Grove (1989) for instance links the rise of conservation to shortages of timber for naval expansion. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.
6. See also, for example, Beinart (1984), Ranger (1985), McGregor (1995) and Scoones (1996).
7. Mirroring the genealogy of the critical turn in development studies as narrated by Quarles van Ufford et al. (2003).
8. For an exploration and critique into this 'notion of collective guilt' that underpinned the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee, see Alexander (2002).
9. Of course, this is a simplification of the complex arguments made with respect to global–local interactions and how actors on all sides have agency and sources of power.
10. See here the work by Ferguson (1994) and Schedler (1997). Schedler argues that this move to do away with 'politics' is a more general phenomenon characteristic of neoliberalism.
11. Or 'traditional knowledge' or 'local knowledge'.
12. In this line of reasoning usually understood as knowledge that belongs to the 'hard' sciences.
13. As will become clear in the following section, we hasten to add that this does not exclude a critical social science approach.
14. We agree with Brosius (1999) and Bending (2003) that the radical critique on development can be extended to include conservation due to the often-seen merging of the two in practice due to the rise of 'sustainable development'.
15. We leave out the problematic of how to define and establish a collective. For this, see Latour (2004).
16. In one specific place, in one specific moment in time, etc.
17. This could both relate to the 'politics of conservation' (for example: the emancipation of 'local communities') as well as the politics of academia (for example: hastily publishing pieces in order to gain a promotion).
18. For an elaboration of the contestations that can accrue from asking for checks and balances from ones' research subjects, see the foreword in Mosse (2005).

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