



## Commodity conservation: The restructuring of community conservation in South Africa and the Philippines

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### ABSTRACT

The world over, neoliberal modes of conservation are hybridising with, or even replacing, other forms of conservation. Under the banner of ‘win–win’ policies, planners actively work to commoditize natural resources and the social relations that determine the use and conservation of these resources. While these general processes seem to hold sway globally, it is crucial not to lose sight of the context specific ways in which neo-liberalism influences conservation practice and local outcomes. The paper examines how neo-liberalism’s global pervasiveness becomes manifest across different levels and scales in South Africa and the Philippines. The conclusion suggests that as a result of these neoliberal pressures, emphasis is shifting from local constructions of ‘nature’ by communities to what the environment should mean for communities in terms of commodified resources and growing capitalist markets.

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### 1. Introduction

Conservation practices the globe over are changing, and changing fast. Yet, while change is the norm historically, its contemporary character is distinctly peculiar. On the one hand, ever more ‘hybrid’ institutional forms and local variants of conservation are emerging around the globe.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, a remarkable feature underlying these hybrid forms is that global conservation initiatives show striking resemblance in how they are operationalised ‘on the ground’. Arguably, this is firstly attributable to the global spread of community-based conservation and related ‘grass roots’ initiatives. With the discrediting of older forms of top-down fortress conservation (at least in discourse), comparable types of socially inclusive conservation have arisen in many regions, taking on various labels and approaches, especially in the context of ‘free’ markets. A second, perhaps even more important driver of the congruency between the design and implementation of approaches has been the simultaneous global rise and influence of neo-liberalism (McCarthy, 2005; Büscher and Dressler, 2007; Igoe and Brockington, 2007; Igoe et al., 2010). Neo-liberalism, simply stated, entails the (re)fashioning

of socio-cultural and political dynamics in market terms across different scales.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of neo-liberalism have increasingly been able to penetrate and steer community-based conservation discourses and outcomes toward market-oriented governance solutions (Roth and Dressler, this issue). Neoliberal conservation thus reflects the ‘bridging’ of neo-liberalism and community-based conservation to produce locally and contextually specific conservation practices that share similar underlying governance dynamics (McCarthy, 2005).

The ways in which neoliberal policies have become enmeshed and driven community-based conservation remains understudied, particularly from a multi-sited global perspective. In particular, little, if any, qualitative comparative analysis has considered how global neoliberal discourses influence local contexts in strikingly similar ways despite moving through different conservation practices. Obviously, this is no easy task, as Castree (2008, p. 135) has pointed out:

“Where one is dealing with sui generis forms of neoliberal environmental governance – at the national or local scale, say – the hoary question of how far one can compare from case to case in geographical research arises. Ostensibly similar, but causally or substantively unconnected, forms of national and local

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<sup>1</sup> Hybridity in this paper refers to the process whereby multiple fields of reality are co-constituted to produce new organizational forms, motives, behaviours and actions over time and space (Haraway, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, markets, market relations, free markets and the like refer to capitalist markets.

governance can be meaningfully compared only if there is real clarity and consistency in the specification of the ‘neoliberal element’ of the situations”.

As such, we need to move beyond the simple definition provided above as neo-liberalism is not merely a ‘state of being’. Rather, and in line with much of the current literature, it is preferable to speak of the *process* of neoliberalization, which according to Brenner and Theodore (2002, p. 353) “requires not only a grasp of their politico-ideological foundations but also, just as importantly, a systematic inquiry into their multifarious institutional forms, their developmental tendencies, their diverse socio-political effects, and their multiple contradictions”.

A key element of neoliberalization that comes out of this literature is its *variegated* character across time and space: “it produces geo-institutional differentiation across places, territories and scales; but it does this systematically, as a pervasive, endemic feature of its basic operational logic” (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 2). Hence, when we speak of neo-liberalism as the ‘(re)fashioning of social and political dynamics in market terms’ – the stimulation of commodification, marketization and commercialization of many social facets of life – then this refers to the ‘basic operational logic’ of an otherwise broader *process* of variegated neoliberalization (see also Perreault and Martin, 2005). Of course, as much as this ‘basic operational logic’ is not consistent across time and space, powerful actors at the global and local level often assure that similar neoliberal logics are put forward in theory and practice; in effect, they work hard to provide the ‘enabling environment’ to implement such capitalist logic in practice. In this sense, the process, logic and impact of neoliberal conservation fuses and incorporates itself with spheres of social life, such that it is rearticulated according to a ‘contextually specific’ free market logic.

In line with calls in the literature (Castree, 2008; King, 2009), our main aim in this paper is therefore to give this broader debate place-based relevance and nuance by examining neoliberal conservation discourses and practices in two developing countries: South Africa and the Philippines. The authors each have long-standing experience in these two countries through long-term field research. These experiences enable the comparison of practices across vastly different regional scales to achieve a deeper understanding of both the variegation and operational logic of neoliberalization. We draw on the two cases to argue that in the hybridization of community and neoliberal conservation, emphasis is shifting from local constructions of ‘nature’ or the environment by communities to what these should mean for communities in terms of commodity resources and capitalist markets. The cases will show that this is done differently in the two countries, South Africa being a case of ‘neoliberalisation from above’, while the Philippines represents ‘neoliberalisation from below’. As these scales converge over time and space, both, in turn, ensure that extra-local conservation becomes a local matter of production and consumption: local communities ‘produce’ conserved nature to be ‘consumed’ and paid for by global constituencies (cf. West, 2007). Paradoxically, the further embedding of neoliberal community conservation, then, means *less* and more circumscribed agency for local people rather than the expanded socio-political spaces that community conservation should provide.

We first discuss the causes and consequences of the rise, spread and persistence of the neoliberal conservation project (as an ideology and strategy of governance). Next, we describe and discuss the two cases from South Africa and the Philippines. We conclude by reflecting on the importance of analyses that link the global and the local in ways that do justice to both the operational logic and variegated impacts of neoliberal conservation.

## 2. A brief genealogy of the global rise of neo-liberalism

The global rise of neo-liberalism can roughly be broken down between 1980s/early 1990s structural adjustment and Washington Consensus neo-liberalism and the mid-1990s/2000s ‘consolidated’ neo-liberalism. Overbeek (1999, pp. 248–249) postulates several important moments in ‘the process of global restructuring and the neoliberal ascendancy’. He argues that 1980s neo-liberalism should be seen as a ‘constructive’ project, imposing structural adjustment, privatization, and liberalization, while the 1990s saw the hegemonic *consolidation* of neo-liberalism as ‘the global rule of capital’. Similarly, as Peck and Tickell (2002, p. 384) note, “there seems to have been a shift from the pattern of deregulation and dismantlement so dominant during the 1980s, which might be characterized as “roll-back neo-liberalism,” to an emergent phase of active state-building and regulatory reform – an ascendant moment of “roll-out neo-liberalism”. Peck and Tickell argue further that state-driven neoliberal *reregulation* has increasingly replaced 1980s neoliberal *deregulation*. They suggest that the ‘destruction and discreditation of Keynesian-welfarist and social collectivist institutions’ had reached its limits and resistance was becoming ever more intense and violent. As a consequence, the neoliberal project had to be adjusted to sooth this opposition and find new ways and means to ensure the further progression of capitalist expansion.

The state proved essential in this regard: “if the era of ‘structural adjustment’ policies of the 1980s and earlier 1990s meant attempts to ‘get the prices right’ and to hack away indiscriminately at the state, then we are now in the age of ‘getting the state right’ to implement the same goals as before” (Moore, 1999, p. 64). Scholars have observed this same trend in both regions of interest, South Africa and the Philippines. In relation to Africa, Ayers argues that “the neoliberal project “conceals its own massive use of state power, transnational and local, for the construction of civil society in its own image” meaning – *inter alia* – that “the reconstitution of the public and private domains is undertaken actively by state managers and is predominantly about reorganizing (rather than bypassing) states” (Ayers, 2006, p. 328). In relation to Southeast Asia, Haque (2004, p. 363) argues similarly that “under the influence of a global market ideology, the state-centric thinking in public administration has increasingly been replaced with market-biased theories and models”. This strengthening of neoliberal models across the public and private sectors at different scales and different regions of the world has led some commentators to proclaim that the universal ambition of neo-liberalism is close to completion. As Harvey (2005, p. 3) states, “neo-liberalism has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world”.

While this is a valid point, other recent scholarly work – as noted above – points to the variegated character of multiple forms of neoliberalization (Brenner et al., 2010). In fact, Perreault and Martin (2005, p. 192) point out that because of the ‘common-sense’ argument and neo-liberalism’s “seemingly omnipresent character – in part a product of triumphalist neoliberal discourses – neo-liberalism in practice eludes simple identification”. In other words, it is crucial not to lose sight of the many different and specific ways in which neoliberal modes of devolved governance are embedded in particular regions and local communities around the globe. What we have seen, therefore, is the active transformation of a wide variety of sectors once dubbed as ‘non-commercial’ to become enmeshed in market logic and dynamics institutionalized across various scales and levels. Conservation is one of the sectors that have been central in this transformation, which, globally and regionally, has come increasingly under pressure to adopt

neoliberal strategies and connect with (global) markets (Igoe et al., 2010). This is especially important as devolved conservation has become a key instrument by which market-based governance can be driven further into the rural frontiers of the world. Studies have shown that as devolved management approaches become entangled in and hybridized with (inter)national bureaucracies and neo-liberalism, conservation governs local resource use behaviour in frontier areas in line with producing more financial ‘value’ from commodified nature so that less is used for household reproduction (see Dressler, 2009).

The broader outcome has been ‘neoliberal conservation’ – the continuing reconstitution of the relationships between people and between people and ‘nature’ according to the market – with a special emphasis on devolved governance that facilitates self-regulation according to generic neoliberal modalities. According to Castree (2008, p. 157), it is the identification and analysis of these modal forms that can aid and direct our understanding of the fundamentals of nature’s neoliberalisation ‘in specific places, regions, or countries’. Familiar examples are modes of competition and commercialisation that transform the inherent use values of things, services and even agency into monetized exchange values (Kovel, 2002). Well documented is how social relations (f.i. between people and natural resources) become ‘commodified’ and monetized as use values take on monetary exchange values under the pressures of capitalist expansion. In the process, monetized social relations emerge as ‘commodity relations’. Where social relations once supported familial reproduction (culturally, economically etc.), they now support the production of commodities for markets owned by others (Bernstein, 1979). As a result, a loss of local means of (re-)production through incorporation often reinforces marginalization. As we show, conservation has been increasingly implicated in this dynamic. Indeed, many of neo-liberalism’s core (theoretical) connotations lead to a preference for devolved conservation governance that fashions its own self-reinforcing tendencies by gradually (or sometimes rapidly) subjecting local ways of life to market-based activities, which are assumed to be ‘less consumptive’ than subsistence uses.

In theory, competition around and commoditization of resources ought to ‘stimulate’ neoliberal subjects to regulate themselves in order to do more with less (natural) resources in rural areas. In turn, these self-regulating dynamics often become part of local subjectivities, often fueling further ‘internalization’ of aspirations to be ‘modern’ through conservation markets (see Agrawal, 2005; West, 2007). While rural people’s sense of self, social experience and reality is never completely dominated by just one mode of reasoning, as local and capitalist markets are multi-faceted, the capacity of local life to meld productively with a stronger market logic becomes difficult when more and more social and economic transactions are dominated by commodity relations and free market competition. Neoliberal conservation through devolved governance, then, becomes the tightening of ‘TINA<sup>3</sup> screws’ in practice: the subjecting of local social, political and environmental conditions to market dynamics simultaneously and on multiple scales. In a sense, then, neo-liberalism has turned capitalist marginalization into what we refer to as ‘stimulated self-marginalization’.

These self-regulating dynamics are propagated by dominant actors at different scales in society, whether South Africa or the Philippines, driving the ‘operational core’ of neoliberal conservation. In line with Overbeek’s idea about the hegemonic *consolidation* of neo-liberalism as ‘the global rule of capital, Igoe et al. (2010, p. 486) note further that the discourses of sustainable development have long been embedded in (and driven) a market-based logic that defines the status quo of interventions from ‘above and

below’. This entails that the tenets of neoliberal conservation converge across scales, driven by common-sense ideas of the free market financing ‘sustainability’ through the very capitalist system that does violence to people and nature. Devolved conservation governance, then, entails a convergence and restructuring of networks that extend into rural areas according to the principles of market logic. As our cases show, this takes serious the actions of dominant actors to rouse and ‘implement’ neoliberal operational logic by *decreasing the options available for rural people to determine their own resource-based livelihoods*. The next section investigates in greater contextual detail how the processes which give rise to global neoliberal conservation become manifest at regional and local levels.

### 3. Experiences from South Africa and the Philippines

South Africa and the Philippines make for an interesting comparison because both countries retain landscapes of significant biological diversity and unique physical features that have become part of the global conservation consciousness. At another level, these countries have also been at the forefront of combining community development with biodiversity conservation whilst experiencing the thrust of global neoliberalization. The two case studies, albeit focused on particular localities, are analyzed at different scales with the South African case emphasizing ‘neoliberal conservation from above’ and the Philippines case a prevailing ‘neoliberalization from below’.

#### 3.1. Neoliberal South Africa

After apartheid’s demise, South Africa has generally been regarded as a country that saw a ‘miracle transition’ from a brutal non-democratic minority regime to a majority democracy with a golden future. While the prevention of the civil war should certainly be regarded as a major feat, it cannot be said that the post-apartheid aspirations of creating a more equal and just society have lived up to the (enormous) expectations (Lesufi, 2002). In fact, Alexander (2002) argues that after apartheid, South Africa has come to follow a typical bourgeois path, where wealth further accreted in the upper echelons of society. Already two years after it had gained power, the ANC government substituted its progressive and redistribution oriented Reconstruction and Development Programme for the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR). Since then, South Africa has remained ‘as severe a case of uneven socio-economic development as exists anywhere on earth’ (Bond, 2000, p. 18). Bond (2000, pp. 18–19) writes further that ‘[that] along with apartheid policies [this] helps explain why the top 5 per cent of South Africa’s population consume more than the bottom 85%, resulting in a Gini coefficient (the main measure of income disparity) of 0.61, matching Brazil and Nigeria as major countries with the worst levels of inequality’. Examining the GEAR programme, Lesufi (2002, p. 296) finds that ‘all the evidence shows that, on the one hand, those targets promoting the interests of capital have either been met or exceeded; while those targets concerned with the interests of the poor have not been met at all’.

In this setting, the rural poor in particular have faced massive disenfranchisement as a result of major structural adjustments, not least by state, NGO and private sector-driven conservation efforts. As has been shown for the Limpopo Province area, particularly areas around the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (Büscher and Dressler, 2007; Dressler and Büscher, 2008), mass industrial and environmental (en)closures have left rural people with high unemployment and restricted access to resources for subsistence and commercial production (Kirkland et al., 2007; Shackleton

<sup>3</sup> There is no alternative – the famous saying by Margaret Thatcher.

et al., 2007). In the end, this enabled conservation agencies and the private sector to meld ideology with investment to either replace or accommodate the social and economic needs of rural livelihoods (see Ramutsindela, 2007; King, 2009). Similar situations have unfolded in other parts of the country and while their social and environmental effects differ from place to place, many share similar rationales and outcomes. The Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Project serves as another grand conservation scheme that further illustrates the impact of neoliberal conservation across scales and levels.

### 3.2. The Maloti–Drakensberg transfrontier project

The Maloti–Drakensberg Transfrontier Project is a Global Environment Facility funded project that seeks to conserve the biodiversity of the Maloti–Drakensberg mountain range between South Africa and Lesotho. In line with community conservation ideas, the MDTP also tries to stimulate community development through the promotion of ecotourism. In 2008, the MDTP completed its first five-year phase, driven by two so-called ‘Project Coordination Units’ (PCUs), one for each country. The PCUs used a variety of tools to achieve project objectives, including bioregional conservation planning, research and data management, protected area planning and management, tourism development, institutional support and ‘pilot projects’. However, besides these official tools, several new ways of connecting conservation, development and new markets were experimented with during the first phase of the MDTP.

Resonating with wider trends in conservation (Corbera et al., 2007), the concept of ‘payments for environmental services’ became an influential devolved governance strategy in the MDTP. The South African PCU most enthusiastically embraced this market-based strategy. The coordinator of the Lesotho PCU also deemed it ‘a brilliant concept’, but to be implemented in subsequent phases of the project (Lesotho PCU coordinator interview, 26 October 2005). The concept of payments for environmental services effectively drew on neoliberal ideals of ‘managing’ nature and transforming the social relations around natural resources. According to a consultancy report produced for the MDTP in South Africa:

‘Payment for environmental services provides an incentive for directing landowners towards environment management actions that address priority environmental services, such as water security. As a payment system directly links buyers and producers of environmental services, it build relationships between people who are economically linked and allows market based transactions to take place, reducing the need for further state regulation. Furthermore it focuses on measurable deliverables and consequently sharpens the performance of conservation actors (public, private or communal)’ (Diederichs and Mander, 2004, p. 5).

This paragraph makes clear that neoliberal conservation aims to capture and discipline relevant actors within an ‘environmental services market chain’. Their subsequent conservation performance is ‘sharpened’ and can be ‘measured’ to allow for donors and governments to seem accountable. Furthermore, state regulation is no longer needed as all actors become embedded in an apparently closed (ahistorical and apolitical) framework whereby their social relations and their individual behavior are directed by market incentives. Lastly, it commoditizes and rationalizes biodiversity, assigns priorities and allows one to make value decisions: the trade-off between nature and development is – in this logic – more easily made when both are captured in monetary terms or ‘exchange values’. The MDTP long-term transfrontier strategy document describes how the project subsequently took the report further:

‘An initial baseline study determined the initial feasibility of establishing a trade system around the water production and use patterns associated with the Maloti–Drakensberg region. In effect, it suggested that there was scope for investigating and piloting this trade system. In this regard, a consultancy was appointed in 2006 to do just this. They are still in the process of rolling out this pilot phase, the results of which will only be available in December 2007’ (MDTP, 2007, p. 38).

Notwithstanding the pending results, it was clear that ‘payments for environmental services’ had become a priority for the long-term planning of the social-ecological change processes in the Maloti–Drakensberg area, as exemplified by the transfrontier strategy document (MDTP, 2007, p. 106):

‘Both countries recognise the vital role that environmental economics tools play in (i) placing a monetary value on ecosystem goods and services (where their lack of monetary value in the past has meant they are treated as “free resources” often resulting in overutilisation), and (ii) in defining how such values can assist decision-makers in mainstreaming ecosystem goods and services into accounting and other business practices. The tools are vital to determine the value of biodiversity to the economy and to people’s lives. In addition, some monitoring of the status of these goods and services needs to be implemented in order to inform policy, strategy and action around the pricing and trade of these goods and services’.

In this reconstitution of the Maloti–Drakensberg polity in neoliberal terms, the MDTP is not the only actor involved. The report mentions that the South African government explicitly promotes this development (Diederichs and Mander, 2004, p. 46), while the World Bank is equally eager. According to the first World Bank MDTP task team leader, there is a ‘need for conservationists to show the economic value of nature’, adding that ‘if the global community or South African government want nature to be preserved, they should be willing to pay for it’ (World Bank task team leader interview, 25 April 2005). In all, the consultancy report, MDTP transfrontier strategy and the World Bank aim to ‘outsource’ the conservation of ‘nature’ in the Maloti–Drakensberg area to whoever (the ‘South African Government’, the ‘international community’ or others) is willing to pay for it.

Noticeably, in none of the MDTP outlets or discussions, the assumptions underlying the payments for environmental services concept are discussed, let alone problematized. The problems and paradoxes in the reference to an ‘international community’ and the ascribing of roles to actors in a system of devolved governance that professes to value individual choice; the mistrust of commonage property relations to conserve nature and the associated tendency towards privatization; the placing of monetary values over intrinsic values and the reductionism of the myriad of human-environment interactions to economic and methodological ‘management’ are all swept aside to accommodate this ‘latest trend’.

Equally but not surprisingly, the rationalizing and reductionist properties of a payment for environmental services system also allows for more marketing opportunities. According to a staff member of Ezemvelo KwaZulu Natal Wildlife during a South African strategic planning workshop in March 2007, “we must stop being scared of placing proper value on biodiversity”, because “if we can’t put a value on it, we can’t convince people”.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is the major paradoxical aspect of the neoliberalization of the MDTP polity: the commercialization of nature is seen as necessary to place

<sup>4</sup> Although not everybody agreed with this statement, the vast majority of participants did. One participant explicitly noted that biodiversity should not have to pay for itself or create livelihoods *per se*: ‘there can be spin-offs but it mustn’t be the primary motive’. This shows that the neoliberalization of conservation/development is also resisted from within.

nature on the political agenda and show its importance. Thus, **Diederichs and Mander (2004, p. 47)** advise the MDTP to do proper ‘packaging of the message’:

‘Biodiversity conservation has little appeal to decision makers in South Africa. Biodiversity conservation has to be shown to be a human development tool, where investing in the natural asset enables humans to benefit as directly as possible. (...) Package the message appropriately and gain the support of the politicians’.

While this ‘upward orientation’ to receive legitimacy for interventions seems to be a general feature of conservation/development interventions (**Mosse, 2005**), they nonetheless still need to engage with ‘the local’ in order to come to real-world ‘solutions’ for linking conservation and development. Yet, in the case of the MDTP, this engagement with the local remained superficial at best (**Büscher, 2009a**). Both the South African and the Lesotho PCUs tried to engage with local communities through training, ‘capacity building’ activities and pilot projects, but these in the end only infiltrated and influenced local dynamics to a very marginal extent (**Büscher, 2010**). Hence, if the neoliberalisation of conservation in the MDTP area now lays the political groundwork for actors to self-regulate according to market principles, the question remains: what are the likely effects on the local level? One brief example of the reality of market-based conservation in the area should suffice; that of the proposed establishment of a golf course, which now is a regular feature in the South African Drakensberg Area, and often seen as a good way for communities to earn money from tourism (see **Büscher, 2009b**).

Within the TFCA, close to one of the main protected areas and the town of Clarens – a booming tourist town on the South African side – the Royal Maluti company aims to establish a large two-times 18-hole golf estate. The company advertises itself as ‘the rare exception’ and boasts of possessing “a place of untouched beauty (...) where the mountains meet the sky. A place where you can live, breathe and relax, where freedom and security come together”.<sup>5</sup> In order to obtain this ‘place of untouched beauty’, however, an environmental impact assessment had to be conducted, the results of which were communicated to local stakeholders in workshops. Attending one such a workshop in January 2007 (first author), the following scene unfolded.

The meeting was attended by some 200 people, mostly black people from the Clarens township of Kgubetswana, who could write their names on a register if they were interested in potential jobs at the golf estate once it was operational. They were apprehensive, however, about whether the jobs would actually materialize, as the owner of another nearby golf course had also failed to uphold a similar promise. In an effort to persuade the community members of this venture, the Royal-Maluti representative remarked that if the communities would allow the process to stall for months or years, his company would go somewhere else and the Clarens area would lose the investment and employment opportunities. This had the intended effect. Hence, even though most local people did not understand the – very technical – presentation, they gave in as the potential prospect for low-wage (subservient) jobs was still more appealing than the destitute circumstances most people were living in. The Royal-Maluti representative then stated he was happy that the community chose to join the company ‘hand-in-hand for sustainable development’.

In effect, what transpired was that local people were induced into further self-marginalisation by the threat of the company leaving and taking the employment opportunities with them. Simultaneously, they and other local people, especially from across

the border in Lesotho, would be further cut off from the land. While officially private farm-land, much of it was used *de facto* as commonage land, where people grazed their livestock and obtained other resources, such as reeds for weaving. Hence, who was to ‘live, breathe and relax’ in this space all of a sudden became much more narrowly and unequally defined, favouring extra-local golf enthusiasts over locals seeking access to subsistence. Yet, this is not how this scene is generally interpreted. A local newsletter reported that “a project of this magnitude will most certainly have a positive impact on low skilled communities, who will find an abundance of work either temporarily or permanently”.<sup>6</sup> And while the staff of the TFCA project disagreed with Royal Maluti’s methods, they were more concerned with extending the ‘employment benefits’ to the Lesotho side, rather than stopping the development or negotiating access to the land. After all, one of the transfrontier intervention’s key objectives was to help develop the right ‘enabling environment’ within which private capital could be attracted to help secure the conservation of environmental services and provide jobs through tourism. Added to this, finally, should be the note that while Royal Maluti stated to take care of the environment, it is ambiguous at best that the two golf courses and luxurious housing and catering around it truly signify ‘sustainable development’ or have little impact on environments close by and far away.

This example is typical for South Africa. It is a country where ‘big capital’ and ‘poor communities’ live side-by-side and compete (unequally) over resources (see **Ferguson, 2006**). The idea behind PES in the MDTP, to “build relationships between people who are economically linked” and to allow “market based transactions to take place” (**Diederichs and Mander, 2004, p. 5**), then, does not guarantee to ‘address’ the livelihoods of the rural poor who must compete with much stronger actors. In fact, the MDTP’s ‘neoliberal conservation from above’ equates with an increased chance of loss of livelihood opportunities for the poor and the (further) subjugation of their labour. The case in the Philippines shows similar neoliberal rationale at work, but adds to the South African case by showing in detail how ‘market-based’ conservation governance articulates itself ‘on the ground’.

#### 4. Neoliberal Philippines

Not unlike South Africa, the Philippines has recently experienced rapid changes in state governance from a highly centralized to a deregulated structure enmeshed with neoliberal dimensions (**Balisacan and Hal, 2003; Haque, 2004**). We consider how the rise of community-based conservation in the context of ‘market forces’ has affected the viability of swidden agriculture – a form of shifting agriculture – through various pressures to intensify and commodify resources. Nowhere in the Philippines has such conservation-induced commodity production been so acute, comprehensive and enduring as on Palawan Island, the Philippine’s ‘last ecological frontier’. We show how this process unfolded amongst migrant paddy rice farmers, the Tagbanua and Batak people – indigenous swidden cultivators and ‘hunter-gatherer’ types living near the island’s flagship protected area, the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park.

##### 4.1. The advent of neoliberal conservation

Since independence from Spanish and American colonial rule in 1946, the Philippine government has drawn on a mix of conservation policies and practices with aim of sedentarizing and stabilizing swidden (*kaingin*) agriculture. Efforts to curb swidden

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.royalmaluti.com>. Last viewed: 17 May 2010.

<sup>6</sup> EISH news, June 2007, volume 2. Retrieved from [www.eish-news.com](http://www.eish-news.com). Last viewed: 7 June 2009.

cultivation grew out of colonial forestry principles seeking to maximize timber yields by reducing the threat of swidden-induced deforestation – interventions designed to maintain state revenue (Gatmaytan, 1992). After independence in 1946, the Philippine Republic secured further control over ‘*kaingineros*’ [sic] by drafting laws that supported the identification, management and/or resettlement of swidden farmers (Scott, 1979; Population Center Foundation, 1980). In 1975, Dictator Ferdinand Marcos implemented various decrees with which to manage indigenous uplanders on state lands. State enforcement of these regulations was often coercive such that any uplander caught cultivating swidden would be levied a fine or thrown in jail. These policies existed throughout the Philippines, but were particularly acute at Puerto Princesa (then St. Paul’s) Subterranean River National Park. Declared in 1971, the national park’s 3901 ha boundary was monitored and enforced with a heavy hand, landing many swiddeners in jail (Dressler, 2009). Such actions stood in contrast to migrant farmers who, as surplus and revenue generators, were free to settle and clear forest for paddy rice (Dressler, 2006).

After the first People Power Revolution had ousted Marcos in the mid-1980s, the restoration of democracy enabled the state and NGOs to support indigenous rights to land and livelihood in the uplands. On Palawan Island, in particular, while government agencies and NGOs exposed human rights abuses and extensive logging on indigenous lands (Vitug, 1993; Vitug, 2000; Eder and Fernandez, 1996), many soon drew on market-driven integrated conservation and development and, later, ‘community-based’ policies to stabilize swidden for fear of deforestation. Many practitioners sought to ‘add value’ to permanent cropping in order to give farmers incentives to clear less forest (DENR, 1996). This was accommodated at the national park, where the country’s first Debt for Nature Swap (US 2 million) in 1988 granted the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Philippines substantial funds for modernizing enforcement capabilities, sustaining the park’s agenda of coercive conservation (Dressler, 2009).

At the time of the Debt for Nature Swap, the National Integrated Protected Areas initiative conducted a Suitability Assessment to determine whether the park could become part of the National Integrated Protected Area Strategy (NIPA). Although the park was eventually dropped from the short-listing, the Strategy had made a strong case for tourism development, advocating the support of tourism and recreational areas around the national park; markets locals could tap for cash. Other NGOs soon worked to support indigenous peoples’ livelihoods and land claims, following similar anti-swidden discourse. Following suit, the NGO Haribon Foundation launched a campaign to garner support for forest conservation in Palawan. In 1988, after a successful campaign for a 25 year moratorium on logging, the substantive component of the Debt-for-Nature Swap was delivered via a four-way arrangement between Haribon, the NGO Philippine Business for Social Progress, the WWF-US, and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) (WWF, 1991).<sup>7</sup> The WWF-US was responsible for raising the funds required to purchase debt from the national government, which were then turned over to the Haribon Foundation to develop market-based, integrated conservation and development projects with the DENR (McDermott, 2000). New visitor fees, tourism facilities, market-based livelihood projects and management

infrastructure had been set. The path was paved for neoliberal conservation.<sup>8</sup>

Using funds from the Debt for Nature Swap earmarked for conservation, an ambitious campaign set out to implement integrated conservation and development programs among Tagbanua households. Most projects involved the Tagbanua rearing domestic livestock for sale in local communities and markets nearby. Without Tagbanua receiving adequate training and being seasonally mobile as swiddeners and fishers, most livestock was ‘lost’, butchered, traded for other implements, or simply perished due to neglect (e.g., hunger and disease). Few, if any, Tagbanua had the cultural inclination and/or financial means to invest in small-scale piggery operations and the like. More appropriately, other NGO initiatives included ‘adding value’ to non-timber forest product harvests, such as rattan, honey and basket weaving, by ensuring a fair trading price and selling local products in City markets with an ‘ethnic label’. For example, several local NGOs set up an Area Servicing Unit where NGOs would purchase these commodities from Tagbanua at a fairer price than offered by middlemen who often indebted indigenous collectors. Many products were then sold at a better price to buyers in Puerto Princesa City, with proceeds going back to Tagbanua. However, because patron–client relations remained strong between middlemen and Tagbanua, the latter returned to trade with the former. The NGOs had effectively misjudged the strength of patron–client relations in the forest. Similarly, the sale of honey and ‘indigenous baskets’ all eventually faltered in the absence of well-established domestic markets, dashing Tagbanua faith in market sales. In all cases, Tagbanua responded by going back to what they knew best: cultivating swidden and collecting non-timber forest products. Despite these intangible benefits, the roots of market-based conservation were spreading in local forests.

#### 4.2. The recent rollout of neoliberal conservation

Since 1992, several national, provincial and local laws supported a stronger push toward market-driven devolved conservation to limit the viability of swidden agriculture among the Tagbanua (and soon the Batak). Here we see how the mediating domains of socio-cultural relations, particularly of swidden, have been partly ‘washed out’ by anti-swidden discourses merging with neoliberal conservation ideals of a clean, green, productive and marketable landscape. In many ways, Tagbanua farmers have effectively internalized and articulated the government’s anti-swidden discourse by partially accepting that swidden is harmful, needing eradication through fixed-plot, commodity farming.

Officials from the national Department of Environment and Natural Resources have drawn on country level laws, including the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (1997) and the National Integrated Protected Areas Strategy Act (1992) to convince Tagbanua farmers of the need to manage swidden in traditional use buffer zones of the national park. In contrast, officials from the City Government of Puerto Princesa (Palawan’s Provincial Capital) used the Strategic Environmental Plan’s (1992) zoning system, the Environmentally Critical Area Network, and related Ordinances to convince (with external organizations) the *same* Tagbanua farmers of the need to manage swidden agriculture toward ‘sustainability’ and market-based production (tree cropping, etc.) (Dressler et al., 2006).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Initial proceeds amounting to 10 million Pesos per year (40% of \$390,000) financed administration, construction, and management costs of four ranger stations and a visitor centre in Puerto Princesa City (WWF, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> The Palawan-specific Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) (RA 7611) of 1992 served as the legal “framework for protect[ing] natural resources and endangered environments of the province” (SEP Act, 1992, p. 2). The SEP and the Local Government Code provided the legal basis for local government units, such as the City Government of Puerto Princesa to exercise authority over land and forest management.

<sup>7</sup> Following the popular revolution of 1986, the Ministry of Natural Resources and its agency, the Bureau of Forest Development, were reorganized into the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. The Bureau of Forestry was now dissolved to form the DENR, which now included the Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau and the Forest Management Bureau.

Despite these different laws, the mandates of these organizations and NGOs have largely centered on finding the right blend of rhetoric and market-based mechanisms to ensure that Tagbanua and other uplanders drop swidden for intensified commodity production through livelihood support programs. In time, new ‘people oriented’ policy controls came to govern swidden for commodity production in the Tagbanua ancestral domain claim (and traditional use zone) at Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park – an area supposedly guaranteeing indigenous peoples preferential rights to land and resources. The following case illustrates the various ways neoliberal models were constituted at the local level.

#### 4.3. Agroforestry agendas and silk worm women

In 1995, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, Republic of the Philippines, and European Union entered into a Financing Memorandum supporting an institution called the Palawan Tropical Forest Protection Programme to conserve the island’s remaining forests. The Programme pursued its activities through ‘community-based catchment management plans’ whereby ‘unsustainable’ agriculture (read swidden) would be stabilized by adding ‘market value’ to plots by converting them to agro-forestry sites. In four years over 15 agroforestry related projects, from coffee nurseries, improved tree crop production and direct agroforestry initiatives were unleashed in the villages near the national park. The organizations made concerted efforts to plant thousands of fruit trees and tropical hardwoods with ‘market value’ within and around the swidden plots of Tagbanua farmers. The Programme’s micro-project list describes some of the projects: ‘mango induction initiatives’ to enhance ‘income generation from a continuous supply of mangos’, or under ‘agro-forestry’ and ‘fruit tree production’ to ‘establish 1.4 ha of fruit tree orchards with 20 participants’ and ‘set up 2 ha of high value fruit tree orchards with 20 participants in Marufinas and Sugod 1’ – two villages occupied by Tagbanua swidden farmers.

Field site visits confirmed that most, if not all, tree crops were planted in recently fallowed swiddens, converting forest fallows into bushy orchards from which crops would be sold in weak markets. This trend continued for years. In 2007 and 2008, the Mayoral NGO, the Tagbalay Foundation, the City Agriculturist’s office and Nestle Incorporated, and the NGO, Haribon Palawan with the UNDP-COMPACT programme (the Community Management of Protected Areas for Conservation) on separate occasions introduced fruit trees, Cacao seedlings and new paddy rice production schemes for Tagbanua to intensify swiddens. In contrast, the Batak would ‘voluntarily’ adopt a comprehensive agroforestry initiative, which, once again, sought to stabilize swiddens with tree crops for sale in ‘markets’ nearby.

Most striking is that the agroforestry scheme came only a few years after the Tagbalay Foundation tried to introduce female Batak to the unusual livelihood support of Eri-Silk Production without local consent (see Novellino and Dressler, 2010). In addition to planting tree crops in swidden fallows, Batak women were now being told that they had to raise Eri-silk worm in order to harvest and weave silk for scarves for sale in local and City markets! Drawing on foreign examples of silk worm production, the project invested considerable energy in educating and training the women farmers in Eri-silk worm rearing. Despite such investments, however, most women refused to bring the rearing cages and silk-worms into their homes to engage in family-based silk production, citing cultural taboos and livelihood preferences as the reasons for doing so. Rather than invest in a new market activity with uncertain economic outcomes, women preferred focusing on swidden and other livelihood activities.

Then as now, a bewildering array of livelihood development projects have been set up with the aim of getting Tagbanua and

Batak to abandon swidden for paddy rice farming and other commodity production. The big hope is that they will produce surplus commodities to cover familial consumption and market sales. These interventions unfolded despite history showing how Tagbanua and Batak have seldom adopted intensified farming (let alone silk weaving) with any great success. Still, these projects have left an indelible cultural mark – progressively drawing Tagbanua and Batak farmers off of swidden. Tagbanua who have participated in these projects – hearing the persistent rhetoric of foresters, park manager and NGO of the need to intensify and stabilize – have come to believe and enact what they have been told over several decades. The persistence of state governance yielded results. For example, Ricardo Masbatene states<sup>10</sup>:

“We once cleared in old growth before (*giba*) but now it is strictly prohibited. Because those that hinders, like the DENR, we are not allowed to go beyond the land that we are cultivating. We are prohibited.

I do not know if they are giving our Barangay Captain ordinances. I just know that they prohibit us from doing slash-and-burn (*kaingin*)”.

Raul Dagot notes that<sup>11</sup>:

“During those times none, but now it is already prohibited. The Mayor prohibits the farming. It is just prohibited because they say it destroys the environment. No, I don’t do slash-and-burn anymore. Sometimes I join in fishing. Other times, like rainy season, I do paddy-farming. That’s it. Because it is already prohibited”.

Another Tagbanua farmer, Dargos Parden, stated<sup>12</sup>:

“Yes there is a big difference. My parents including other natives would transfer from site to site. They tend to move from place to place depending on where they can find food but now it’s different.

Because before the slash and burn farming sites vary every year but now [it is prohibited] ... we don’t practice it anymore. Today we maintain a certain area to till and make it more productive!”

These sentiments have become ever more pronounced amongst those who participate in meetings with local governmental agencies and NGOs implementing market-oriented devolved conservation. In one instance, after having dinner with a former Tribal Chieftain who then worked for the DENR’s forest watch program (*bantay gubat*), he informed the second author that “*swidden is illegal... for the reason of watershed protection, biodiversity conservation and global warming*”.<sup>13</sup> When asked why other farmers were intensifying, he simply said that they knew it was illegal and that more cash income was needed. In other instances, prominent Tagbanua leaders, who have allied themselves with Mayoral politics and NGOs, have internalized and acted out this anti-swidden sentiment by posting signs in their ancestral domain claim that declare swidden cannot be cultivated in old growth forest (*giba*); the mere presence of such signs may persuade others not to burn, reduce fallows and intensify swidden. The process of convincing Tagbanua farmers to abandon swidden draws them one step closer to reproducing ‘neoliberal conservation from below’ via commodities as direct livelihood substitutes.

The examples above demonstrate that most, if not all, community-based initiatives centered on having the Tagbanua (and Batak)

<sup>10</sup> Key informant interview, Centro, Buenavista, December, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Key informant interview, Centro, Buenavista, December 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Key informant interview, Centro, Buenavista, December 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Key informant interview, anonymous, Marufinas, July 2009.

convert swidden agriculture into more permanent forms of cultivation through market-based incentives, or by creating new commodities altogether.

## 5. Comparing the country experiences

The bridging of market interests and conservation and development in rural South Africa and the Philippines is typical of what McCarthy (2005) calls 'hybrid neo-liberalism': the consistency between neo-liberalism and devolved environmental governance where faith in the flexibility of markets is mutually supportive in meeting the supplies and demands of financial matters, conservation and local responses. For example, with the enclosure of commons as commoditized land, new property relations 'sever' customary ties and institutions by placing both under the auspices of self-regulating capitalist markets (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Zimmerer, 2006). As privatization sets into give 'value' to 'undervalued land', the market efficiently allocates new 'goods and services' from the land to resource poor farmers. That is, as commodity markets pull resource users into new market economies, the alternate cash incomes they receive are said to make them less dependent upon natural resources (and more dependent on markets), thus ensuring 'conservation'. As this unfolds, state regulatory functions are transformed to stimulate the devolved self-regulation of local resource users (Peet and Hartwick, 1999; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). Transfrontier conservation in South Africa and community-based initiatives in the Philippines build on this discourse by expecting the benefits of new markets to 'trickle down' or 'across' to rural communities. In both cases, the key ingredient for effective market-based, conservation governance was for communities to take up their 'natural' place in the 'commodity conservation' market-chain.

Ironically this is done by following the criticized path of earlier integrated conservation and development programs and other 'grass roots' initiatives (Brandon and Wells, 1992; Berkes, 2004). The 'founding assumption [of this approach was]...that people who live close to a resource and whose livelihoods directly depend upon it have more interest in sustainable use and management than state authorities' (Li, 2002, p. 265). Facilitators build on local interests and management capabilities, assist impoverished communities set priorities, make decisions for *social equity* and *reinvest in natural assets* collectively to reduce livelihood vulnerability (Western and Wright, 1994; Wittayapak and Dearden, 1999). The current market-led push behind many green conservation initiatives, such as that of the City Major of Puerto Princesa, now re-frames and redefines community-based conservation and natural resources management with an ideological blend of eco-rhetoric and laissez-faire capitalism, which, in effect, has the capacity to redirect support toward market-driven conservation. Likewise, in the Maloti-Drakensberg region in South Africa it is assumed that local people do not have the proper inclination to value common property resources. Rather, the instrument of the market should be introduced to 'produce' value *for* them. In both cases, external interventions support the creation of commodities, whether from forest resources or new materials, in new, emerging or older markets for the purposes of offering financial incentives for conservation.

Differences in scale of the two case studies, then, illustrate how neoliberal conservation gains momentum through converging and rearticulating with other political economic processes, further stimulating a 'scaled competition'. After all, a 'commodity conservation' market-chain needs the integration of different economic scales to provide the competitive framework that either forces or draws local people into the capitalist market. The rhetoric and practice in both South Africa and the Philippines obviously empha-

size the latter; that local people are attracted to the market for its 'opportunities'. Yet, in order for these opportunities to become apparent to local people, a massive amount of energy is needed to firstly develop the appropriate (market-friendly) 'enabling regulatory environment' and secondly to actually enforce the rules so that previous ways or relating to nature are now 'prohibited'. Often, as Marx already understood, this enforcement need not even be violent or harsh. A 'proper' regulatory framework can let the neoliberal machinations do the work: "under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him" (Marx, 1976, p. 381).

Yet, it is this free competition that relegates the resources users back to the bottom of the capitalist pyramid, as the South African case clearly showed. There, resources users had to compete with wealthy golf-course developers, which in general is not seen as unfair competition, but rather 'market-based transactions' taking their course. And even though the MDTP implementers had their doubts, they too had to recognize that these processes are legitimated, if not indeed stimulated, by their top-down implementation of a new payments for environmental services 'enabling environment'. In the Philippines, market-based conservation merged with the existing local political economy to have swidden farmers and other forest users move toward fixed-plot agriculture and/ or completely new commodity production, with the end goal of having them produce more profit with fewer 'added value' resources. By extension, many farmers internalized the eco-rhetoric that clearing old growth forest for swidden is illegal, ensuring degrees of self-regulation toward producing commodities in fixed plots. In many respects, subsistence production has suffered, particularly rice yields, as indigenous farmers struggle to harvest other cash crops for emerging markets. Broader governance policies and market-based community-based conservation have, in effect, tightened the screws on extensive subsistence production in order to enhance the enabling environment for capitalist production in what is fast becoming a post-frontier.

Neoliberal conservation has truly joined the ranks of those sectors engaged in the 'consolidation of neo-liberalism' as 'the global rule of capital' (Overbeek, 1999). As elsewhere, conservation planners in both South Africa and the Philippines seem to have moved beyond questioning the neoliberal way. Discussions have shifted from the 'why' to the 'how' of neoliberal conservation, leaving a wide variety of actors scrambling to find their place in a world of continuous, variegated market-led reorganization. Experiences with new 'management concepts' in protected areas in the Philippines and 'transfrontier planning frameworks' in South Africa amount to the establishment of neoliberal 'enabling environments' that work to induce the self-marginalization of those unable to cut through the glass walls of competition and commercialization.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite the vastly different contexts and intervention initiatives between South Africa and the Philippines, this paper has shown that in the rationale behind conservation initiatives, similar ideas and structures exist. The most important of these is the shifting from local constructions of 'nature' or the environment *by* communities to what these should mean *for* communities in terms of commodity resources. 'Commodity conservation' is therefore to be taken very literally: to maintain the legitimacy and constitution of what Polanyi (2001) termed 'fictitious commodities' requires constant nurture and attention; this is the only way to keep commodity markets going. In this way, the paper points towards another similarity in the two cases across regions, namely that neoliberal devolved governance is not actually 'devolved' but needs strong actors to push and 'guarantee' the effectiveness of



self-regulation for capitalist conservation. It is crucial actors, like state organs and others, who often function as ‘guardians’ of neo-liberalism’s ‘operational logic’ and so condition what is possible within given social-political contexts. In both cases, it became clear that ‘converging networks’ (Igoe et al., 2010), including the assistance of foreign donors, NGOs and the private sector, were crucial in unleashing broad-based, neoliberal conservation strategies. The mediating role of non-state actors ensures that neo-liberalism drives devolved conservation according to market-based interests, often ignoring and sometimes actively (ab)using changes and inequalities in local political economies.

In this process, two identifiable, yet interrelated dynamics emerged at the local level: pressure by outsiders on local communities to commoditize their resources – usually through past and present interventions – and communities commoditizing their resources so as to not be excluded from, or to participate in broader market and socio-political dynamics. While some community members actively adopt market-based conservation strategies, realizing that such interventions may benefit their livelihoods, others have not embraced market interventions so whole-heartedly. What is clear, however, is that greater faith is being placed in market-based principles to achieve devolved conservation (locally and regionally), poverty reduction and, increasingly, associated infrastructure development in former frontier areas. Few other ideologies have been so pronounced and dominant in international biodiversity conservation. However, further research on commodity conservation in local arenas is still needed to build a more robust framework that takes into account the contradictory claim of neo-liberalism’s global pervasiveness through local variation and hybridization. Considering the potential consequences for both social equality and the use and conservation of biodiversity, this debate is crucial.

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