



Capital and Control: Neocolonialism Through the Militarization of African Wildlife Conservation

Emily Jones

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ABSTRACT - Biodiversity loss is occurring at catastrophic rates worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, wildlife conservation efforts have centred around creating and managing protected areas. However, contemporary African states and their environmental policies are inseparable from the legacies of their former colonial powers, who sponsored the creation and continued management of protected areas to best serve their interests. By reviewing existing literature and a case study on the colonial history of Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this paper examines how African wildlife has been accumulated as capital belonging to the nation-state, legitimizing the use of military force against perceived threats. Through this framing, former colonial powers have funded and sponsored militarized conservation in Africa, effectively retaining control over the narratives and management of the continent's natural resources in the postcolonial period.

As the global climate crisis intensifies, biodiversity loss is accelerating worldwide. The African continent is home to an estimated one-fifth of the world's known species, all of which are projected to decline in number as human activities continue posing new threats to ecosystems worldwide (Sintayehu 2018, 226). Efforts to slow the catastrophic acceleration of biodiversity loss in Africa have centred around the creation and management of protected areas.

However, both the creation and continued enforcement of laws in protected areas have involved violent neocolonial practices of forced displacements and prolonged conflicts. For the purposes of this paper, neocolonialism should be understood as the way “developed countries are seen to exercise subtle forms of domination, exploitation, and control over former colonies” (Mkono 2019, 697). In protected areas throughout sub-Saharan Africa, boundary enforcement and anti-poaching efforts have become justifications for increased military presence, allowing states to expand their national security apparatuses to achieve various goals (Lunstrum 2014; Merijnen and Verweijen 2018). Former colonial powers have strategically facilitated the creation and management of these protected areas in Africa to extend neocolonial control over former territories. Through the forced displacement of former inhabitants and securitisation of the issue of wildlife conservation, African governments and their Western backers have accumulated protected areas as sources of revenue for continued military activities, including those unrelated to goals of protecting wildlife. Existing literature on contemporary wildlife conservation practices in Africa traces their origin to colonial conceptions of the sovereign nation-state and racist tropes of Western moral superiority. This paper will show how these notions have continued and been amplified in the digital age through media representations of the ‘War for Biodiversity,’ drawing the attention and financial backing of Western capitalists. A historical examination of the colonial origins and contemporary case of Virunga National Park located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) will further demonstrate how

the creation and management of protected areas is an effective strategy for neocolonial control.

Colonialism and Moral Boundary Drawing

The concept of global sovereignty is a product of the colonial imagination (Grovogui 2001, 124). Based on constructed hierarchies of racial superiority, colonial powers afforded themselves the authority to regulate international morality. They then used this self-afforded authority to justify their assertions of control over territory and people. The assumptions made within the colonial ideology and their accompanying assertions of authority have continued in the postcolonial period. However, post independence, the methods of colonial control have been forced to manifest through more subversive methods, such as the militarization of conservation practices. Siba Grovogui (2001) outlines the ways in which the ideologies and norms that informed the colonial distribution of world power and resources continue to “[undermine] alternative discourses and modes of representations” in what he terms the “colonial regime of sovereignty” (30-33). In the postcolonial era, these power dynamics continue as former colonial powers reassert their control through a combination of political, military, and moral means. In the context of wildlife conservation, Esther Merijnen and Judith Verweijen discuss the discursive technique of “(moral) boundary-drawing” that relies on “established notions of African otherness” to give white conservationists authority to set boundaries and enforce their own policy agendas within them (Neumann 2004, 822). The geographic boundary-drawing of protected area creation facilitates moral boundary-drawing. Since being drawn by colonial powers, the boundaries of protected areas have served as a “symbolic divide between nature and culture” (Neumann 2004, 817). Within the bounds of parks, actors are governed by a higher moral standard supposedly reflective of “humanity’s moral commitment to biodiversity protection” (Neumann 2004, 817). Practices like hunting, while legal in other settings, are prohibited within park boundaries; while

inversely, shoot-on-sight policies—which are generally prohibited outside of combat zones—are authorized (Neumann 2004, 817). Even when the effectiveness of the policies implemented within the borders of protected areas comes into question, they are still accepted as a more sophisticated alternative to Indigenous methods, simply because they come from the imposition of the ‘modernized’ Western lens. Evidently, the creation of protected areas was more informed by colonial visions of dominance and moral superiority than by true concern for the protection of wildlife.

Conservation: A Just War?

African wildlife conservation has captivated foreign audiences in an exceptional way, a phenomenon that can be attributed to the discursive tactics of former colonial powers. Neumann (2004) traces the militarized enforcement of wildlife conservation laws in East Africa to “international and domestic pressure” to slow the decline of the region’s elephant and rhino populations in the 1980s (814). Governments, media, and journalists alike soon began to refer to global efforts to mitigate species decline as a ‘war against poachers,’ identifying poaching as the primary culprit. The ‘war against poachers’ later evolved into the ‘war for biodiversity’ (Neumann 2004, 814). The narrative of the ‘war for biodiversity’ was promoted internationally by organizations like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and even the World Bank (Neumann 2004, 814). Promotion by such powerful organizations brought an added level of perceived legitimacy to growing popular concern for the cause of protecting African wildlife. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, entertainment media, and consumers all began expressing beliefs that included African wildlife as existing “inside the boundaries of [their] moral community” and conceptualizing species like rhinos and elephants as “near-human cousins” (Neumann 2004, 827). Since then, while not explicitly stated as such, wildlife conservation has effectively been treated as a humanitarian crisis and the ‘war for biodiversity’ has become a ‘just war’ that

warrants militarized tactics (Lunstrum 2014, 819).

Proponents of the war for biodiversity fail to understand that the inclusion of the animal inhabitants of protected areas within this human moral community has led to the exclusion of the original human inhabitants, who were forced out upon the areas’ creation. Beyond forced displacement, a violent practice in itself, the discourse and rhetoric of ‘war’ has also fueled notions “that Africans found inside protected areas should be shot on sight” in what has become “a war on people in defense of wild animals” (Neumann 2004, 815). Shoot-on-sight policies have either historically been used or are currently employed in Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and several other sub-Saharan African countries (Neumann 2004, 829). Hundreds of people have been killed as a result of these violent policies, some of whom have been armed poachers, but a large proportion of them have been “poorly armed, impoverished rural residents in pursuit of subsistence” in protected areas that were once their own ancestral territory (Neumann 2004, 829).

Humans undeniably have a certain moral obligation to defend wildlife, the full limitations of which are beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless, the moral obligation to protect wildlife should not come at the expense of human casualties. Further, justifications for shoot-on-site policies in protected areas do not come from a place of concern, but rather the colonial ‘othering’ of poachers that frames them as lacking the same morals possessed by white conservationists (Neumann 2004, 823). In effect, militarized responses to poaching are not only morally questionable, but they are also damaging to the long-term goal of wildlife conservation. Lunstrum (2014) discusses how the “arms race between poachers and anti-poaching forces” has transformed protected areas into de facto warzones (817-818).

A recently conducted quantitative study on the ecological consequences of civil war in Southwestern Africa found evidence of a strong negative correlation in support of the hypothesis that conflict zones in general can lead to the depletion of large wildlife populations,

demonstrating that militarized conservation may work to the direct detriment of populations its proponents claim to protect (Braga-Pereira et al. 2020, 6). However noble the cause, the reality is that former colonial powers have co-opted it to fit their own narratives and serve their own interests, independent of any real concern for wildlife.

Capitalism and the Appropriation of African Nature

The creation of protected areas relies on the racist “notion that those indigenous to a particular land do not properly respect, appreciate, and care for the ecological brilliance of their own habitat” (McClanahan and Wall 2016, 134). On the basis of such notions, former colonial powers became the self-appointed custodians of African wildlife. However, it is important to note that Western notions of nature and land ownership present a significant departure from Indigenous conceptions of land use, namely through the capitalist drive to assign monetary value to the natural world. McClanahan and Wall (2016) theorize that militarized wildlife conservation is not only a product of these colonial ideologies but that it relies upon those notions for its legitimacy (136).

To illustrate the relationship between capitalism and African wildlife, Massé and Lunstrum (2016) outline the concept of ‘accumulation by securitisation’ (228). The Copenhagen School’s Ole Waever (1993) defined securitisation as the “moving of a theme or issue into the field of security and thereby framing it as a security threat” (21). Once an issue like wildlife conservation is framed as a matter of national security, states can sanction exceptional measures, like shoot-on-site policies, to ensure its protection.

In the context of wildlife conservation, securitisation is driven by the Western-directed and colonially derived narratives of sovereignty and land ownership that frame threats to wildlife as threats to “the sovereign nation-state, its territorial integrity, and its borders” (Lunstrum 2014, 827). Massé and Lunstrum (2016) conceptualize that this initial framing, when followed by a “subsequent move

to address these issues via security measures often instituted by security actors,” both state and private, has led to the violent displacement and disruption of livelihoods, effectively perpetuating neocolonial subjugation (229). For example, following an increase in commercial poaching of rhinos in South Africa, a new protected area, the Greater Lebombo Conservancy (GLC), was created as an extension of the country’s Kruger National Park along the border with Mozambique (Massé and Lunstrum 2016, 231). Many of the rural residents of the Mozambican borderlands of the park were evicted and relocated, their former villages even burned to prevent their return (Massé and Lunstrum 2016, 227). Upon the GLC’s designation as a protected area, the residents who long depended on hunting and farming in the area for subsistence soon found that their livelihoods were effectively outlawed (Massé and Lunstrum 2016, 233). Development of the Conservancy was promoted by both the South African and Mozambican governments as primarily an effort to mitigate the threat of rhino poaching. However, interviews conducted by Massé and Lunstrum (2016) shortly after the Conservancy’s designation revealed that the Mozambican government saw the GLC as an opportunity to “promote regional economic development” through tourism and safaris that would be “potentially lucrative for [...] well positioned state elites” and similarly for private landholders with stakes in the continued security of the area (231).

Also reflected in the case of the GLC is Alice Kelly’s (2011) examination of wildlife conservation as it pertains to the concept of primitive accumulation, defined by Karl Marx as the act of “divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Kelly 2011, 683; Marx 1867, 873). Kelly demonstrates how protected area creation violently and disruptively leads to “the dispossession of the holders of this property and the creation of the conditions for capitalist production that allow a select few to accumulate wealth” (687). Kelly’s use of Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation in her analysis also aids in the drawing of historical connections between conservation-induced land dispossession and colonialism. Just as early colonial conservation practices “benefited

the emerging capitalists of the day,” former colonial powers have now used their appropriation and securitisation of wildlife conservation to enable further capital accumulation and dispossession through violent means to the benefit of contemporary capitalists (Kelly 2011, 686).

The former residents of protected areas have been forcibly removed from their lands and livelihoods in the name of wildlife conservation, often suffering significant financial losses as a result. In stark contrast, the conservancies and parks that have emerged in their place have since become immense sources of revenue for both governments and Western capitalists (Massé and Lunstrum 2016, 233). In the age of digital media, “the production of consumable images of warscapes, heroic (white) military trainers and (African) armed park guards” by NGOs like the WWF has spectacularized the ‘war on biodiversity,’ capturing Western audiences, and their donations more than ever before (Merijnen and Verweijen 2016). This most recent spike in Western economic interest in African wildlife conservation has led to an “emphasis on private investment and market-based revenue generation” that does not benefit local populations, whilst further endorsing the use of violence “believed to be necessary to enable market-based economic activities” (Merijnen and Verweijen 2016, 282). In effect, the external involvement of both foreign governments and NGOs, such as the WWF, both legitimizes and is legitimized by the ongoing violent practices of militarized conservation, as these images also aid in the securitisation of African nature. The normalization of the violent practices involved in the ‘war for biodiversity’ has allowed former colonial powers to benefit from and maintain control over African land in the name of environmentalism. To provoke further investigation of the ways Western capitalist ideologies have driven the militarization of conservation, Elizabeth Lunstrum (2014) coined the term ‘green militarization’ to encompass “the use of military and paramilitary personnel, training, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation effort” (817). Lunstrum’s research focuses on the specific way

in which military corporations greenwash their operations to both legitimize and obtain funds for the use of force in protected areas. For the purposes of this paper, greenwashing should be understood as “misleading consumers about [...] the environmental benefits of a product or service” (Delmas and Burbano 2011, 64). Green militarization has exactly this effect; however, rather than misleading consumers into buying a fairly harmless product, customers are misled into funneling money to military corporations through avenues such as donation campaigns, documentaries, and ecotourism (Merijnen and Verweijen 2016, 280). Lunstrum (2018) demonstrates how the discursive strategy of green militarization conveniently “provides an environmental fix to capitalism’s contradictions and environmental consequences” (1024). Environmental causes like wildlife conservation can only be achieved when they are free from the narrow capitalist lens of production and growth. In the case of conservation, this requires a full rejection of the idea that there is any sort of war to be won; especially one that is fought at the expense of human livelihoods.

The Case of Virunga: National Park or War Zone?

The DRC has long been plagued by its colonially bestowed title of ‘the Heart of Darkness,’ an image based both on its centrality on the African continent and on colonial tropes of it being a place distinctly marked by incivility and chaos. As a prime example of strategically used “notions of African otherness,” this framing has made the country especially vulnerable to the neocolonial tactic of ‘moral boundary drawing,’ the discursive counterpart to the geographic practice of protected area creation (Neumann 2004, 822). The DRC is home to Virunga National Park, Africa’s oldest, created in 1925 while the country was under Belgian colonial rule. Its creation resulted in the forced displacement of the original inhabitants of the area, most of whom “lost access to their lands and livelihood” (Merijnen and Verweijen 2018, 308). The initial designation of Virunga as

a protected area made activities like hunting and farming within its boundaries almost entirely illegal. The geographic boundary-drawing of the park was informed by moral boundary-drawing, which implied that the Indigenous inhabitants of the area were fundamentally incapable of adequately coexisting with and protecting the area's wildlife. These inhabitants were swiftly, and at times forcibly, displaced from both their land and subsistence activities, exemplifying Kelly's framework on 'conservation as primitive accumulation' (684). Forced displacements have continued into the present day, far beyond the country's independence, as the practice of 'accumulation by securitization' has taken hold in the DRC (Massé and Lunstrum 2016, 228). Today, the politics of the park are inextricably linked to politics of the state, as park management has become an extension "of the Congolese state apparatus, therefore being associated with its predatory and violent dimensions" (Marijnen and Verweijen 2018, 311).

Under the authoritarian regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko—privileged by the retained support of Belgian conservators—park guards "were given blanket permission to use armed force against poachers" found in the park throughout the latter half of the twentieth century (Marijnen and Verweijen 2018, 308). During the First (1996-1997) and Second (1998-2003) Congo Wars, Virunga existed under limited state control, drawing in a variety of both foreign and domestic armed groups. These groups did not leave upon adoption of the peace accord that formally ended the Second Congo War in 2003. Into the early twenty-first century, insurgent groups in the DRC drew support from popular sentiments of "distrust towards the state, and past and current conflicts with the park" fueled by grievances over disputed boundaries (Marijnen and Verweijen 2018, 313). Seeing the increase in support for insurgents, as it was occurring within park boundaries, the government of the DRC securitised the issue of wildlife conservation to take a distinctly "counterinsurgency-oriented approach to conservation" (Lunstrum 2014, 817; Marijnen and Verweijen 2018, 313). Through the identification of poaching within the broader category of environmental crime and "the spread

of narratives portraying [such] crime as a crucial source of funding for insurgent and 'terrorist' groups," the Congolese military has been able to drastically ramp up operations within the park with Western support that includes the externally "funded [...] military training of park rangers by Belgian former paratroopers" (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016, 282). This has created parallels between anti-poaching violence and counterinsurgency tactics; more broadly "reflecting a reawakening of the Cold War rhetoric of insurgency used to justify militarized methods of territorial control in general" including the presence of Western intervention (Lunstrum 2014, 827).

In an attempt to end ongoing armed conflict within park bounds, the Congolese state has adopted a two-fold strategy of 'stabilisation' in the park that involves both militarized law enforcement and the facilitation of "private investment schemes aiming to promote 'development'" (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016, 281). A key element of this strategy has relied upon Western donors, drawn in through media representations of the park as the current center of the 'war for biodiversity' (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016, 279). The current conflicts taking place in the park are the subject of an Oscar-nominated and British-produced documentary, *Virunga* (2014). The film depicts park rangers "as a (para)military force fighting a 'just war'" in defense of wildlife and was funded by the Virunga Alliance, a joint public-private development initiative. Within the film itself, as well as media campaigns that followed, consumers are encouraged to donate to the Virunga Alliance to fund future conservation projects and ranger activities. However, because of the DRC's two-fold 'conservation as counterinsurgency' strategy, consumers are directly financing the increasing presence of the Congolese military within the park, falling victim to Lunstrum's concept of 'Green Militarization.' The tagline of the movie, "conservation is war," is exactly the type of rhetoric that has allowed the Congolese state to continue their securitisation of conservation to garner funding, not simply for the protection of wildlife, but for their broader counterinsurgency activities (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016, 278).

None of the funds raised by the film nor the Virunga Alliance's other campaigns have gone to displaced former residents of the park. As a result, the dynamics of militarized conservation have warranted a variety of forms of resistance. In some cases, this resistance has taken the shape of continued insurgent activity, overlapping with other non-conservation related armed rebel groups. However, in Virunga, there is also an increasingly widespread trend of 'guerilla agriculture,' or the illicit cultivation of the resources of protected areas, driven by the displacement of its original inhabitants (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015, 725). Despite the increasing prevalence of alternative forms of resistance, the militarized enforcement of protected areas persists. Through securitisation, wildlife conservation policy has been co-opted by states and former colonial powers, allowing them to retain a monopoly over the use of force in their territories past or present.

Rethinking Conservation

In the development of a strategy that is effective in protecting biodiversity, the role of external actors in strategizing and acting on wildlife conservation in Africa must be reconsidered. To truly act in the benefit of both local ecosystems and local livelihoods, the dynamics of conservation must shift to a community-oriented approach (Cassidy and Salerno 2020, 2). This requires a full rejection of the colonial notion that local actors in Africa are incapable of self-governance. This is not to say that external governments and NGOs cannot continue supporting and offering funding to the cause of wildlife conservation. Rather, they must acknowledge the autonomy and authority of local governance, customs, and norms. A transition to a community-oriented approach also necessitates long-absent collaboration between local institutions and the foreign actors that have asserted control over decision making (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016, 281). Additionally, the framing of poachers as malicious enemies of wildlife must be rejected because of the way it perpetuates racist narratives of European superiority (Neumann 2004, 822).

The business of poaching remains a threat to endangered species, in part because the forced displacements involved in the creation of protected areas created the conditions for its emergence as a recourse of those whose land and livelihoods were accumulated by the state. However, it is only with the relinquishment of neocolonial control—not increased violence—that effective conservation of African biodiversity can ever be sustainably achieved.

Conclusion

The forced relocations resulting from the creation of protected areas are acts based on the racist colonial premises that the African continent needs Western intervention and that its native inhabitants are unequipped to care for or govern over their land. Based on colonial assertions of self-afforded moral jurisdiction over the management of African wildlife, Western powers created protected areas, a process reliant on the forced displacements of Indigenous inhabitants. In the post independence period, former colonial powers have used the existence of these protected areas to securitise the issues of poaching and wildlife conservation by framing poaching as a threat to wildlife as well as to the sovereign nation-state itself. Thus, the use of state force against suspected poachers, and often anyone who enters the boundaries of a protected area, has been marketed as an essential consideration to Western audiences who have donated funds directly to the continued militarization of park rangers. Areas like Virunga National Park, home to incredible biodiversity, remain rife with conservation-related conflict. Military activity in protected areas is not only harmful to communities, but it also has detrimental effects on the environment it claims to protect. To understand why conservation-related violence persists, the power dynamics of colonialism, past and present, must be discussed in conceptualizations of African wildlife policy. While militarized conservation fails to protect African biodiversity, it is successful in another feat: allowing former colonial powers to retain access and control over the continent's natural resources in the postcolonial period.

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