

Transfrontier parks, social space and local communities' livelihoods: A crisis of representation

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Abstract

This study investigates the dominant and subordinate representations of Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) and their implications for local community's socio-economic spaces of engagement. In recognition of the uniqueness of TFCAs in their transcendence of borders, the study further examines how the 'border' is implicated in the community's approach and to, and implementation of, cross-border tourism partnerships, especially given that this is generally a major reason behind the introduction of TFCAs. In this respect, the thesis examines the dominant and subordinate representations of the transformation of the border landscape through TFCAs implementation in relation to an enhanced participatory socio-economic and conservation role for the local people. The border is therefore viewed as part of the discursive landscape of socio-economic power and a form of control and access to TFCAs natural resource opportunities. Fundamental to this examination is the concept of dialectics, in which the contradictions in the conceptualisations and representations of the border and TFCAs space are captured through Lefebvre's (1991) three moments of space. Given the centrality of the idea of 'interaction' between communities, border space and the TFCAs, the exploration further assumes a social constructionist epistemological approach to knowledge for its strength in acknowledging the existence of a diversity of actors, claims, and types of knowledge which, all combine to give shape to how TFCAs' socio-economic opportunities are conceptualised and contested.

Methodologically, this qualitative case study of the Makuleke community who own a Contact Park within the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area makes use of observations, interviews, and document analysis to record the dominant and subordinate GLTP representations in the context of the Makuleke community's desire to enhance their livelihood security options in the GLTP.

Treating TFCAs as a social space in which various stakeholders are fighting for control and access to TFCAs' resources, this inquiry opens by exploring how powerful TFCAs drivers produce, organise, and represent TFCAs, and the implications for meaningful community participation. The major idea emerging from the literature review is that 'post colonial' Africa has yet to obliterate the legacy of colonialism and therefore 'past' nature-people perspectives inspired by Western colonial 'scientific' construction of nature have resulted in a dysfunctional local people-parks relationship. The TFCAs is therefore a social space that is constructed in line with an outsider's socio-economic interest in conservation, resulting in the alienation of local communities, especially since they lack the skills and resources necessary to both independently and productively use the park for their livelihoods.

In light of the fact that TFCAs are unique in that they involve the negotiation of the border space by transnational communities, research that has explored the border phenomenon argue that the 'border' is an important non-human factor with the potential to shape border peoples' attitudes towards one another and therefore a means of arranging social space and part of place-making. This is significant in that successful cross-border partnerships are premised on the ideal existence of

cordial relationships between transborder communities. However, borders traditionally act as fences and constitute lines of separation or contact and therefore a potential source of friction. Therefore, the transformation of the border space by removing the physical barriers to facilitate TFCAs implementation may not necessarily result in the disappearance of soft cognitive barriers. In this respect, the study establishes a discrepancy between the politicians' and the community's representations of the transformation of the border space through TFCAs creation. The politicians' perceptions that the transformation of the border space is a liberating experience reflect a misreading of the community's views as findings show a counter process where some local communities are agitating for the construction of impervious boundaries to keep out regional communities. Further, findings indicate that the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) politicians' and, the Peace Parks Foundation's (PPF) representations of both the TFCAs' socio-economic realm and the border landscape that emphasise pristine wilderness and wildlife tourism, contradict some of the community's conceptualisations of the socio-economic activities that are best suited for development in the same space. Consequently, some local communities perceive the border space as the states', the private sector's and traditionally white-owned tourism organisations' socio-economic playground. This further contradicts political assertions that the community will enthusiastically embrace the transformation of the border space as an opportunity to forge cross-border tourism partnerships.

Having explored the environment in which TFCAs are produced and represented in the context of the Makuleke community' livelihood concerns in the GLTP, the study concludes that there is a dysfunctional relationship between the pursuit of economic activities such as pristine wilderness and wildlife tourism, and adhering to genuine local community integration principles in transboundary natural resource management. This is a persistent theme in the study which further supports the conclusion that to better appreciate local people-parks interactions, attention should be directed at interrogating the overall nature and socio-economic value system that seems to view local communities as unlikely to contribute meaningfully to the goal of achieving optimum levels of nature conservation and regional socio-economic development.