

The conservation and development implications of Kruger National Park's commercialisation process: Through a neoliberal lens

Dzingai Nyahunzvi – Graduated 2011

Abstract

Neoliberal conservation has become a common mode of governance of protected areas throughout the world. Indeed, a number of researchers have observed that neoliberal conservation in general and the commercialisation of national parks in particular, is not only cast as a win-win-win solution to the state, biodiversity, tourists, the private sector and local communities but regarded as common sense by its proponents. However, there exists limited empirical evidence to support the foregoing claim. There are also limited studies that use a neoliberal lens to analyse conservation policies. In recognition of this research gap in existing studies, this study uses a neoliberal theoretical framework. This means that the analysis is framed within the general approach of political ecology. Using this theoretical framework, this study set out to critically examine the development and conservation implications of Kruger National Park's (KNP) commercialisation process that was launched in 2000. The term 'development' is used in this study in its collective sense to refer to a process that leads to the general improvement in the material and social well-being of society as a whole. This expanded construct of development encompasses the goal of self-determination and the true empowerment of individuals or communities i.e. a process that leads to a situation where individuals or communities can determine and take control of their lives. The term 'conservation' refers to biodiversity conservation in protected areas.

In doing the above, the study sought to document and interpret the perceptions of a range of KNP's stakeholders in the commercialisation process. Thus, the study views the commercialisation process from the perspectives of park and concession employees, tourists and residents of one neighbouring community. The study adopts an interpretive stance using semi-structured interviews as its primary means of data collection.

The study empirically demonstrates that KNP's commercialisation process has mixed socio-economic, political and environmental consequences. In terms of conservation, the commercialisation process generated additional revenue for SANParks' conservation efforts within a context of decreased state funding. It also led to the adoption of rigorous environmental standards for concessionaires. In socio-economic terms, both local and non-local elites who had invested in concessions gained financially. However, a large section of KNP's neighbouring communities, found no role to play in the 'economic space' opened up by the commercialisation process. In this respect, the study conceptualises KNP's commercialisation as a politicised process that determines stakeholders' access to ecological resources and in turn socio-economic opportunities. Further analysis also revealed that the outcomes of the commercialisation process were limited in terms of both true empowerment and conservation. In light of the foregoing, the study's key findings and the reviewed neoliberalisation of nature literature are distilled into a management framework to guide the design and implementation of commercialisation by protected area managers.