

# Rachel Carson Center

## Perspectives

How to cite:

Gissibl, Bernhard. "National Parks as Cosmopolitics." In: "The Edges of Environmental History: Honouring Jane Carruthers," edited by Christof Mauch and Libby Robin, *RCC Perspectives* 2014, no. 1, 47–52.

All issues of *RCC Perspectives* are available online. To view past issues, and to learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit [www.rachelcarsoncenter.de](http://www.rachelcarsoncenter.de).

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

© Copyright is held by the contributing authors.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research

Deutsches Museum 



Bernhard Gissibl

## National Parks as Cosmopolitics

Like few other topics, the study of national parks and equivalent protected areas has the potential to open the writing of environmental history towards ongoing discussions over transnational and global history, the history of development and foreign aid, and the recently burgeoning studies of cosmopolitanisms in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>1</sup> This latter interest in actually practised and existing forms of cosmopolitanism has, however, not made much inroad into the writing of environmental history. Yet, if anything, environmentalism, conservation, and park making have been cosmopolitan projects, transnational in their constituency and composition, planetary in their commitment and consciousness, universal in their claim and ambition, and certainly convinced about the legitimacy and urgency of their mission. “Everybody,” IUCN President Martin Holdgate demanded in the context of the 1992 World Parks Congress, “should be a ‘parks person.’”<sup>2</sup>

From their origins in nationally compartmentalised movements in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century, conservationists have self-identified as environmental citizens of the world and acted in ways that Sidney Tarrow has characterised as rooted cosmopolitanism: oriented towards the future wellbeing of planet and humankind, engaged in transnational relations and mobilities, at the same time as they drew upon the domestic resources of nation and nation-state, especially when it came to funding or political support.<sup>3</sup> The foremost global environmental organization of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) is a case in point: it consists of a cosmopolitan institutional core composed of the council, secretariats, and a number of scientific expert commissions. At the same time, it rests upon a membership of well over a thousand organizations and governmental bodies “rooted” at the national level.

- 1 Comprehensive surveys of this field are provided by Gerard Delanty, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), and Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).
- 2 Martin W. Holdgate, “Foreword,” in *Parks for Life: Report of the IVth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas, 10–21 February 1992*, ed. Jeffrey A. McNeely (Gland: The World Conservation Union, 1993), v.
- 3 Sidney Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates: Movements and States in Contentious Politics* (New York: CUP, 2012), ch. 11.

A renewed emphasis of the cosmopolitan aspects of conservationist park making could help to acknowledge the genuine moral commitment of activists to the future wellbeing of humankind and planet. These cosmopolitan intentions sometimes receive rather short shrift in political ecology studies that highlight the degree to which the self-styled David of conservation, in its engagement with the Goliath of a global capitalist economy, has itself attained hegemonic and oppressive tendencies, particularly in the Global South. Top-down infrastructural projects that they have often been, parks had and have the potential to open up rural backwaters to the world, particularly the worlds of tourism and science. Compared to other cosmopolitan projects emanating from Western societies, conservation stands out as peculiar in its enthusiastic embrace of the otherness and diversity of the non-human, its advocacy of the rights of Nature, and its insistence that species, habitats, and places far away from one's own home do actually matter. This multispecies orientation is probably the most distinctive sensitivity that conservation can import into the study of cosmopolitanisms. Vice versa, the unquestioned anthropocentrism of cosmopolitanism, its concern with human rights, and its sympathy for cultural difference and multiple identities brings out more starkly the often anti-human flipside of conservation's integration of the non-human. Indeed, conservationists always had difficulties grappling with the otherness of those humans who, for a variety of reasons, refrained from joining the community of "parks persons," who had doubts about the universal wisdom of a non-human ecology, and who perceived differently the peculiar piece of planet that the "parks people" had singled out for eternal protection.

Such tensions are inadequately captured by the terminology of "global versus local," "environmental globalization," or "global governance" that we currently employ to describe the history of park making across continents. Rather, we are confronted with the frictions arising from mainstream conservationist cosmopolitanism and the cosmopolitics of conservation or national parks. Both globalization, with its overtones of an irresistible one-directionality, and governance, as a benevolent rule-making assemblage of all involved "stakeholders," are close to the self-perception of conservationists as pursuing a progressive and essentially apolitical concern. Cosmopolitics already encapsulates the agonistic nature and the conflicting processes behind conservation governance in the term itself. As Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers have emphasised, the composite of cosmopolitics forges together "the strongest meaning of *cosmos* and the strongest meaning of *politics*," where the *cosmos* "protects against the

premature closure of *politics*, and *politics* against the premature closure of cosmos.”<sup>4</sup> While cosmopolitanism is about attitudes and the peaceful handling of difference, cosmopolitics alerts us to the conflicts and contestations arising from the rival perceptions of the world that have been involved in the making of a “protected planet.” This common planet is not a given, but remains to be built out of the pluriverse of worlds that meet in the project of conservation.

There are many aspects of the global history of national parks that could benefit from a cosmopolitical (re-)reading. The explicit reframing of selected parks as a “heritage of mankind” and their inclusion under the governance architecture of the UNESCO World Heritage since 1972 would be one example;<sup>5</sup> the series of World Parks Congresses held once a decade since 1962 another. Surely, these conferences were instances where the community of parks people developed a sense of “global” unity and mission across borders and continents. The voluminous proceedings of these meetings convey how the self-identifying group of “parks people” worldwide grew in numbers, professionalism, and cultural diversity. But the World Parks Congresses were cosmopolitical as much as they were cosmopolitan. The centenary rededication of Yellowstone National Park “to the people of the world”<sup>6</sup> in the context of the 1972 World Parks Congress, for example, and the generous offer of funding and expertise for park making worldwide made particularly by the United States at their “home” congresses in 1962 and 1972 must be seen as part and parcel of the broader attempts at US Cold War environmental diplomacy. These involved the worldwide activities of the National Park Service and the Peace Corps as well as the conservationist engagement of US philanthropic foundations and USAID.<sup>7</sup> Yellowstone may have served as a reference point for conservation worldwide before,<sup>8</sup> but it was not until these joint efforts in the 1960s that the active and systematic export of Yellowstone as a “model” really began.

4 Bruno Latour, “Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 450–62, 454; Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 994–1003.

5 Andrea Rehling, “Universalismen und Partikularismen im Widerstreit: Zur Genese des UNESCO-Welterbes,” in *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 8, no. 3 (2011), <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Rehling-3-2011>.

6 Hugh Elliott, “The Work Continues,” in *Second World Conference on National Parks, Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, USA, September 18–27, 1972*, ed. Hugh Elliott (Lausanne: Arts Graphiques Heliographia SA, 1974), 12; “Centennial Celebration at Yellowstone,” in *ibid.*, 17.

7 See Tom Robertson, “‘This is the American Earth’: American Empire, the Cold War, and American Environmentalism,” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 4 (2008): 561–84.

8 See the contributions in Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper, eds., *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).

There is a third example of conservationist cosmopolitics that deserves more critical attention from environmental historians: the rooted cosmopolitanism of transnational conservation NGOs and their mediation between their social constituencies “at home” and conservation projects far away. Organizations like the WWF, Fauna & Flora International, The Nature Conservancy, or the Frankfurt Zoological Society all draw upon constituencies of members and donors in their countries of origin to support their conservationist projects overseas. Usually, they have registered charity status and they are acknowledged as do-gooders and the institutionalised green global conscience of Western societies. In order to elicit the funds supporting their work, these organizations allow their supporters to “inhabit the world from afar”<sup>9</sup> by means of a highly professionalised system of fundraising, public relations, marketing communication, and handling of the mainstream media. Take the example of the Frankfurt Zoological Society (ZGF), one of the leading NGOs in international conservation and renowned for its long-term engagement in the Serengeti and the Galapagos Islands. Probably no one has done more to stimulate the emergence of a cosmopolitan environmental consciousness in West German society than the ZGF’s celebrity director Bernhard Grzimek. His media campaigns since the late 1950s have made the wildebeest and zebra of the Serengeti National Park the concern of conservationists worldwide. Still, Germany’s commitment to the Serengeti is special because it is the ZGF’s home fundraising market. Here, Serengeti shall not only not die because it is a unique savannah ecosystem but because Grzimek’s heritage and the continuation of half a century of German emotional and financial investment are equally worthy of preservation. Over the decades, the ZGF has more or less monopolised access to the Serengeti for journalists and filmmakers. For the majority of these travelling journalists it has been enough to start at the ZGF’s headquarters at Seronera and to continue by visiting carefully selected villages and speaking to an equally selected cast of sources, like the Maasai Joe Ole Kuwai. This was usually enough to make their home audiences believe that Western-style conservation was beneficial for Maasai and rural Africans at large. The recently deceased Kuwai was, however, one of the very few Maasai who was educated in Western conservation science to work for the Frankfurt Zoological Society. It hardly comes as a surprise that alternative voices, the whole world of pastoralist mobilization, and the politicization of conservationism have hardly featured in mainstream German media coverage of the Serengeti in the last decades.

9 Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry, “Visuality, Mobility, and the Cosmopolitan: Inhabiting the World From Afar,” *British Journal of Sociology* 57, no. 1 (2006): 113–31.

Everyone knows that public relations and marketing are not about a plurality of perspectives or the unbiased representation of the phenomena in question. Their imperative is to create consent, foster attachment, elicit donations, and present conservation as a technical problem to be fixed by management and the application of scientific expertise. The cosmopolitan concern of conservation is domesticated to appeal to specific national audiences and their experiences. NGO marketing actually shields Western publics from the complexities and paradoxes of conservation, rather than confronting them with the cosmopolitics of parks abroad and the market mechanisms of nature charity at home.

Therefore, the public relations machinery, the films, posters, journals, brochures, and press releases of transnational NGOs that feed and sustain the emotional attachment to far-distant environments should be subjected to the critical investigation of environmental historians.<sup>10</sup> Increasing worldwide tourist mobilities notwithstanding, the familiarity of most individual donors in Western societies with national parks in the Global South remains virtual and is manufactured largely by the images and imaginaries conjured up by wildlife films, the tourist industry, and conservation NGOs. But when and how did these NGOs actually discover the need to market conservation and professionalise their PR, what strategies did they pursue, and why? What imaginaries do they mobilise, how are their representations tailored to different audiences, what virtualisms do they act upon, what attitudes do they evoke, and how did all these change over time? Which cosmopolitan mobilities did they generate, not only on the part of tourists and conservation experts, but also on the part of tour-guides and locals?<sup>11</sup>

What I am suggesting is a kind of commodity chain analysis of cosmopolitan conservation, one that includes donors and their motivations, the rationales, media, and representations of transnational NGOs, the political ecology of the conservation project and the local population affected by the protected area. The Dresden-based family raising funds for the Frankfurt Zoological Society—by circulating self-made calendars with photographs from their Serengeti safari among their friends—act upon a different Serengeti than the

10 See, however, Dan Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment: Fame, Wealth and Power in Conservation* (London: Zed Books, 2009), and William Beinart and Katie McKeown, "Wildlife Media and Representations of Africa, 1950s to the 1970s," *Environmental History* 14 (2009): 429–52.

11 On the latter, see Noel B. Salazar, "Tourism and Cosmopolitanism: A View from Below," *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (2010): 55–69.

Maasai pastoralist seeking to assert his rights in an ancestral landscape.<sup>12</sup> Attention to the commodity chain of NGO-mediated conservation could reveal that the seemingly universal project of a “protected planet” is fragmented into a pluriverse of protected areas, each of which crystallises a multiplicity of worlds that are connected, yet remain apart. By confronting the cosmopolitanism of conservationist NGOs with the cosmopolitics of conservation, environmental historians could provide the transparency to which conservationist NGOs subscribe in theory but which they often deny in practice.

So why cosmopolitics? Seen from the Serengeti, conservation in the last half century has been marked less by the ever increasing connectedness (let alone progressive teleology) suggested by globalization than by changing conservationist paradigms and legitimations and their ongoing contestation by various actors on a local level. Talking of the cosmopolitics of park making rather than the globalization or governance of protected areas could serve to inject a healthy “passing fright that scares [the] self-assurance”<sup>13</sup> of practiced cosmopolitanisms. Our discipline is particularly well suited to mobilizing the cosmos against globalization, because environmental historians, unlike the social sciences of cosmopolitanism so far, have always known that the cosmos contains non-human agents who must be enlisted in the project of a common world. Above all, cosmopolitics reveals that there is no abstract globe that awaits its ever-increasing protection. Rather, we are confronted with a multiplicity of worlds whose diverse articulations need to be taken serious if conservation is to succeed in practice in the long term.

12 See *ZGF-Gorilla 2* (2013): 25.

13 Stengers, “Cosmopolitical Proposal,” 996.