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### On Being Edgy: The Potential of Parklands and Justice in the Global South

In July of 2013, Maryland Congresswoman Donna Edwards introduced legislation in the United States Congress proposing a new national park—*on the moon*. The proposal called for the protection of artefacts from the Apollo voyages in anticipation of future commercial lunar visits. Perhaps in 1995 this proposal would have been hailed as a democratic innovation, a forward-looking reflection of the “American Mind” or other conservation tropes. But in the past 20 years, the study of national parks has evolved from a conventional and institutional, perhaps even heroic enterprise to a wide-ranging set of debates over the contestations among humans in areas designated parks.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, modern debates over the conservation of natural resources and the allocation of the benefits of such conservation are hardly new, yet fresh critiques over the social consequences of parks have emerged among both social scientists and natural scientists.<sup>2</sup> Historians, for their part, increasingly came to question not only what was *natural* about national parks, but what was *national* about them as they arose in countries from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. In response to this questioning a new view of parks developed, one that showed they were mired in colonial relationships, complicit in conflicts among users and dwellers, and shaped by the whims of society, markets, and science in peculiar ways. In other words, parks became places to unpack politics rather than paradises of pristine nature. Some of this critique was a product of the larger context of the cultural turn in history during the 1990s and its penetrating view that the modern world is a socially and culturally constructed place. But more emphatically, this critical approximation came from the vulnerable edges of the world in a ferocious little pink book about South Africa’s Kruger National Park.

Jane Carruthers’ *The Kruger National Park* introduced a Global South perspective to the study of conservation with a case study of a park in the southern hemisphere. This geo-

- 1 Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Ambrosio González and Víctor Manuel Sánchez L., *Los Parques Nacionales de México: Situación Actual y Problemas* (México: Instituto Mexicano de Recursos Naturales Renovables, 1961); J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper, *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).
- 2 For recent provocative examples with responses, see Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier, “What is Conservation Science?” *BioScience* 62, no. 11 (2012): 962–69; and Michael Soule, “The ‘New Conservation’,” *Conservation Biology* 27, no. 5 (2013): 895–97.

graphical corrective broke traditional barriers by illuminating the entwining of people and a particular place over time. Shifting the centre of park history from the United States, the book introduced the idea that parks are cultural, political, and historical artefacts, not “sui generis” natural places.<sup>3</sup> It focused attention on parks as places worthy of study themselves but also as rich “mirrors” of society. And what a place Kruger was. With characteristic clarity and sharpness, Carruthers took the reader on an expedition through San hunting and gathering, Afrikaner Nationalism, game hunting, and scientific study. Kruger National Park in particular and South Africa in general had long attracted international attention for the spectacular mammals, reptiles, and birds that supplied zoos and museums worldwide. But it was another leap altogether to historicise those species in the context of their setting within the park where they occurred endemically. This endeavour ensured that the people, landscapes, and animals of the Global South were part of the conversation about the history of conservation. It brought parks on the periphery to the centre of historical study as places of global significance.

Carruthers showed that Kruger National Park was the product of networks and interchanges that transcended national boundaries. The colonial state was prominent in these systemic forces, but Kruger National Park was also contested by people concerned with scientific investigation, sport hunting, and international tourism. These webs of knowledge that interlaced conservation policies “have not been homogenous and do not derive from a single cause.”<sup>4</sup> The desire to protect certain aspects of nature came from a layering of experiences in a particular place, plus the global context and the timing of national politics.

Nationalist, colonial, and internationalist forces created mutually reinforcing experiences in this first and most famous of South Africa’s National Parks. Today we would casually call these forces “transnational” but in 1995, Carruthers revealed how collaboration among sportsmen, scientists and settlers, practical and scientific insights about wildlife and rangelands, and various degrees of public engagement from a range of political groups all shaped the history of Kruger. While *The Kruger National Park* was not an explicitly comparative history, Carruthers was clearly drawn to the question of difference. Yellowstone looms in the background, and her writings on Australia added

3 For other critiques in a similar vein, see Antonio Carlos Diegues, *O Mito Moderno da Natureza Intocada* (São Paulo, Brazil: NUPAUB-USP, 1994) and Arturo Gomez-Pompa, “La Conservación de la Biodiversidad en México: Mitos y Realidades,” *Boletín de la Sociedad Botánica de México* 63 (1999): 33–41.

4 Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press, 1995), 6.

another comparative dimension later. But others in the international scholarly community could now use South Africa and the story of Kruger National Park to shift the norm from the Yellowstone model.

The book revealed a park deeply embedded in the society that created it, with all of society's burdensome and penetrating aspects. Kruger was a symbol, but an ambiguous one as it had different meanings for different social groups, meanings that incubated along racialised lines. Resisting the compensatory tradition of repeating heroic narratives and anecdotes, Carruthers' text sought to explain the philosophical and political milieu that created an exclusive form of nature conservation, one in which "game reserves are white inventions which elevate wildlife above humanity and which have served as instruments of dispossession and subjugation."<sup>5</sup> Rather than offering a narrative of gradually democratising spaces or prescient scientists, this lesson from the Global South revealed how the inequalities of colonial experiences, including imbalances of power and public participation, shaped conservation laws that exaggerated the differences among human populations. It became impossible to see parks as neutral; too many had been used to reinforce systems of exclusion and domination (whether white over black, outsiders over locals, scientists over traditional managers, or others).<sup>6</sup> This critique continues to unsettle the conservation world.

Carruthers' insight that parks affect different populations differently opened the door to understanding claims of justice and injustice as they relate to parks and the nonhuman world. Instead of judging the morality of the case, she shifted the conversation to a historical one about resource allocation and benefits. She pointed to the curious idea, found in white settlers' published accounts, that Africans were intruders and ravagers of the environment despite the abundant wildlife and stable environment supported by their lifestyles. Another contradiction—that the agricultural transformation and introduction of markets and firearms contributed rapidly to the depletion of wildlife more so than the native stewardship—further revealed the inequality embedded in the conservation idea. And yet, this domination did not always take the same form. A

5 Ibid., 101.

6 A trilogy of books in the early 2000s influenced by such a critique used this insight to revisit US parks and look at these tensions: Louis Warren, *Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

policy of removing African populations was amended in 1905 when reserve managers sought ways to transform settlers into rent-paying tenants and labourers.<sup>7</sup> This notion that parks served many functions, among them the perpetuation of unequal power, belied the injustices committed in the name of conservation.

It must be noted that from this careful, direct, and fierce analysis emerged a critical appraisal of Kruger National Park that articulated the fluctuations of creation and management in a way that began to expand the possibilities for understanding precisely who benefited from parks and how this allocation might be adjusted. Carruthers resisted framing the problem as a choice between conservation or development, between poverty alleviation or wildlife populations. Hers was not an indictment to abandon conservation, to rework parks only to manage humans, or to evict scientists or privileged whites altogether. Unfortunately, other scholars have not been as careful.

When is the last time you read something from a social scientist that painted parks or nature conservation in positive and uncomplicated terms? Wilderness has now become “troubled,” scientists create “refugees,” and conservation is described as a brutal capitalist tool usurping sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> Cumulatively, these studies distort through fragmentation and generalisation the ways conservation has changed over time, developed in culturally distinct circumstances, and influenced or mitigated larger environmental challenges. Applying social, economic, and political perspectives sharpens the polarities of the story. But there is often a sly arrogance in the implicit assumption that “real” conservation can only originate in certain places. And the bloodline trumps the achievements. Absent in such critiques is acknowledgement that the very same forces that threaten the conservation of natural spaces also threaten the conservation of indigenous cultures. By pitting the two at odds, we take our eyes off the larger picture: the forces of insatiable consumer desire without accountability, economic systems that disregard social and ecological services, and a rapaciously hungry energy regime that has no regard for either nature or culture. An overwrought pessimism has now embroiled the scholarship in a polarised debate that Carruthers’ original text eschewed.

7 Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park*, 92. The example of the Sabi Game Reserve is elaborated here.

8 William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 69–90; Mark Dowie, *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009); Dan Brockington, Rosaleen Duffy, and Jim Igoe, *Nature Unbound: Conservation, Capitalism, and the Future of Protected Areas* (London: Routledge, 2008); Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

What would we get if we reinvigorated the history of conservation with attention to other parks in other places? In South America, we would include parks like Argentina's Nahuel Huapi (first named National Park of the South), which began with a private land grant returned to the state by a nationalist explorer-naturalist in 1903. Unsure how to set up such places, the Argentine government invited US park expert Bailey Willis to consult on developing the park and then proceeded to ignore his recommendation to model the area on industrialisation occurring near Lake Michigan. The Argentines preferred the Swiss model and made choices accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

We would also find the coalescence of scientists from Peru, Germany, Kenya, Poland, and the US in the early 1970s forging new ways to talk about species diversity and abundance in Manu National Park. Manu exemplifies conservation in the Neotropics: it was neither the first nor the last park in the Amazon but it was Peruvian designed, recently created, and extremely remote. As the almost comical park boundary on the map shows, most of the park's limits are actually imagined: they have never been traversed by a person from Lima, Germany, or the US. Over 90 percent of the park is inaccessible because of regulation and practicality. A complicated set of historical circumstances frames the isolation of the region, including Spanish diseases five hundred years ago, nineteenth-century rubber booms and busts, and even the recent, incomprehensible violence of the Shining Path political movement that resulted in the massacre of nearly 70,000 Peruvians in the 1990s. Despite and perhaps because of this context the park and its adjacent protected areas today form a place the size of Switzerland, with fewer than 500 visitors a year and fewer than 3,000 permanent inhabitants. It is no coincidence that this remote, road-less area simultaneously retains the highest biodiversity on the planet and also the largest populations of "peoples in voluntary isolation."<sup>10</sup>

As a whole, the insertion of the Global South into environmental history, the consideration of transnational knowledge networks, and the attention to questions of injustice and inequality among humans has given Carruthers' work its edge. It has greatly contributed to the expansive possibilities of conservation history and reworked the core of what environmental historians can do. It is now almost impossible to write about conservation without caveats. *The Kruger National Park* ensures that conservation

9 Bailey Willis, "El Parque Nacional del Sud," *Boletín Dirección General de Agricultura y Defensa Agrícola*, no. 2 (1913); "La Argentina Pintoresca," *El Diario*, San Martín de los Andes, 23 December 1917.

10 Eleana Llosa Isenrich and Luis Nieto Degregori, *El Manu a través de la Historia* (Lima: Proyecto Pro Manu, 2003).

history includes local social and political history. Historians must continue to ensure conservation debates do not degenerate into false binaries. Carruthers' work provides a model for questions: it pushes historians to ask expansively not just *what* happened but *why* it happened. National Parks all have political and social histories, as Carruthers' subtitle suggests. Histories are needed to unpack not only the ways conservation has shaped local populations, but also to question why native peoples and wild animals are forced to compete for the last remaining wild spaces. Conservation should not be the sole culprit here: a sequence of overlaid changes and a range of actors must be understood. Justice is not served by erasing conservation from the landscape or conflating conservation and colonialism (or capitalism) as co-equal forces. In the Global South, the effects of transnational science and the particularities of conservation continue to merit a closer look.

And perhaps we should think about the moon, too.