

BEYOND MILITARIZED CONSERVATION: THE POLICE LABOUR REGIME AND ITS EFFECTS IN THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Abstract

Where the restoration of law and order is privileged in response to an intensification of rhino poaching, this thesis invites a more critical look at what political implications this holds for those conservation workers who do conservation policing. It argues that we adopt an expanded conceptualization of police, one that goes beyond the everyday policing functions of field rangers and that the use of force involved in these enforcement duties works in conjunction with forms of power. This thesis proposes to move the debate of violence in conservation beyond that of militarized conservation and focuses our attention to how police, in its wider meaning, shapes the conservation workplace and in what ways it intersects with characterizations of the broader South African workplace, typified by structural features that perpetuate low wages, precarity and racism. This thesis is informed by a twelve-month extended ethnographic study of field ranger anti-poaching practices in the Kruger National Park (KNP), South Africa. It relies mainly on participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with close to 200 respondents related to the rhino poaching issue in and around the KNP; event ethnography of key environmental and conservation practitioner summits; observations of criminal proceedings in the Skukuza Periodical Court; a short comparative study of responses to rhino poaching by KwaZulu-Natal provincial conservation authorities; and engaging the services of a co-researcher who spent six months living in households of community members to the south west of the KNP to investigate what impacts militarized conservation holds for those communities. In response to the many institutional obstructions from the KNP in terms of access to data and internal documentation related to the rhino poaching issue and the labour process, this study also relies heavily on archival and open source information to complement the observations made in the Park.

This thesis makes several core interventions. Firstly, at a metatheoretical level, it demonstrates that police is a political technology in the maintenance of order, one that seeks not only to regulate society with the effect of maintaining class and racial distinctions but that its utility also reaches into the ordering of labour who do violence work. Police, in effect, has very little to do with crime prevention but is more concerned with maintaining asymmetrical social order. Secondly, interrogation of archival sources has opened up many opportunities to trace continuity and change in the KNP and in what ways ideas, practices and people have been recycled from a time when the Park was embedded in the counter revolutionary responses of the apartheid state during the 1980s and in what ways those practices have become reconstituted in its present-day responses to the 'war on poaching' despite somatic and managerial changes. These historical forays also illuminate the ways in which labour was simultaneously produced, erased and controlled in the making of the Kruger landscape and that a distinct mode of racialized paternalism and a cheap labour regime shaped and continues to inform the labour process in the Park.

Thirdly, this thesis found that police structures the conservation workplace and the labour process in distinct ways, giving birth to a new politics of production. Melded with the historical features of the colonial and apartheid workplace regimes, it gives rise to a distinctive form of labour regime, the *police labour regime*, a form of workplace organization that holds particular

consequences for field rangers who do violence work. This thesis shows that a historical anxiety over labour value and productivity has shifted from loyalty to privileging violence and aggression in ways that are at times irregular, arbitrary and extrajudicial. It also shows that these transgressions do not occur in a vacuum of voluntarism but that intense political pressure and features in the labour process in the form of significant supplementary income and incentives, together with institutional complicity and the threat of workplace marginalization, structure these irregular practices in field ranger encounters with rhino poachers.

Lastly, it shows that the police labour regime also shapes the institutional life in the KNP in distinct ways. Most notably the Park's proclamations of ranger wellness are not matched in reality and field rangers suffer considerable mental health and moral injuries due to their continued exposure not only to violence and the fear of violence but the irregular nature of that violence. It shows that efforts to mitigate these effects are seen as operational burdens and that institutional whiteness and institutional racism remain as notable, at times hard to detect, features in the workplace. Policing is also turned inwards in instances of mistrust, leading to workplace victimization, torture and animalization of workers. It also shows that financial indebtedness, stimulated by significant irregular income, acts as a new mode of labour control and precarity under the police labour regime.

Keywords: police, power, labour, politics of production, institutional life