

The Political Ecology of Conservation at a Violent Frontier Constellation in South Kivu, Eastern Drcongo

ABSTRACT

Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is famous for its biodiversity, ecosystems and enormous geological wealth. The region is also notorious for violent conflict, a lack of state capacity and infrastructure, and the assortment of non-state armed groups which fragment control of its landscape. In this PhD thesis, I explore the implementation and effects of environmental conservation in eastern DRC's South Kivu Province. In a chapter on methodology, I explain how Kahuzi-Biega National Park and Itombwe Nature Reserve were selected as case study sites, the first of which represents a case of a militarised 'fortress' conservation area, the second a more consensual 'community' conservation area. In a chapter on the theoretical framework, I conceptualise conservation as an activity which takes place on a commodity frontier which links up to global capitalist networks. In eastern DRC, the conservation commodity frontier forms part of a broader constellation of commodity frontiers, notably including those concerning the extraction and trade of mineral resources.

In the first empirical chapter, I propose processes of territorialisation at mining and conservation commodity frontiers need to be disaggregated. Territorialisation for mining occurs at artisanal, semi-industrial and industrial scales. Territorialisation for conservation includes both flexible and strict designations for protected areas – which can sometimes exist within a single park or nature reserve. I suggest that the move towards more flexible forms of conservation governance and semi-industrial and artisanal forms of mining represent systemic responses which allow different frontiers to overlap and therefore expand into previously inaccessible areas. This effectively enables more and more value to be derived from the resources located within individual parcels of land. I propose states with weak regulatory capacity where the boundaries between legal and illegal have become blurred, are likely to be particularly propitious to the emergence of double frontiers. As opposed to consolidating centralised government control, the coincidence of conservation and mining frontiers serves to further pluralise and fragment public authority.

The expansion of different commodity frontiers can result in diverse responses from below, ranging from resistance to attempts to secure economic incorporation. In the second empirical chapter, I present what appears to be a classic case of resistance to fortress conservation in Kahuzi-Biega National Park whereby a population dispossessed of its lands and resources rose up against conservation rule. In the third empirical chapter, I demonstrate how although fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement have generated grievance and resistance, they play only a marginal role in defining the structures shaping the actions of armed groups in Kahuzi-Biega National Park. The seemingly perpetual mobilisation of armed groups inside the park is primarily the product of wider socio-structural features of the landscape in which the park is embedded, including the legacies of insecurity and poverty, the geographical features of the park, including its significant reserves of mineral resources,

and the presence of illicit trading networks. Some of these structures are reproduced (and/or reshaped) by the individual members of armed groups over time and space.

In the fourth empirical chapter, I present data from Itombwe Nature Reserve, a consensual community-based conservation area in a region where militarised conservation dominates. Where the state is largely weak or absent, I suggest people looked to reserve as a sort of replacement 'social contract' that would usually be delivered by a functioning government. This entailed accepting certain obligations and restrictions on their lives in order to receive certain benefits from conservation. Conservation social contracts of this sort are likely to produce unintended consequences when left unfulfilled or broken, for example by encouraging communities to look to other frontier actors as a source of development and security, such as the extractive industries.

In a final conclusion, I reflect on the transversal themes touched upon throughout the thesis and assess the relevance of my findings for broader debates about different conservation strategies in violent frontier regions, including around displacement and indigenous peoples, militarised enforcement of conservation regulations, and community conservation and the decentralisation of regulatory responsibility. Lastly, I offer some practical solutions for the future of conservation in eastern DRC and reflect on how my positionality as a researcher has changed throughout this doctoral journey.