Editorial

Conservation, Neoliberalism, and Social Science: a Critical Reflection on the SCB 2007 Annual Meeting in South Africa

Conservation biology is actively reinventing itself to fit the neoliberal world order: the increasingly all-pervasive trend to conform social and political affairs to market dynamics. This much is clear from attending the 21st annual meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), with the theme "One World, One Conservation, One Partnership," which was held in July 2007 in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Here I offer a critical reflection on the meeting in which I argue 2 points. First, in their drive to conserve biodiversity, conservation biologists are too eager to realign their field with seductive neoliberal win–win visions. As a consequence, discourses are created that ultimately reinforce an ideological system that is inherently unsustainable. Second, this realignment leads conservation biology increasingly into the social sciences, whereby conservationists oddly seem to throw overboard 2 scientific principles they have always held so dear: acknowledging and critically analyzing complex realities and grounding arguments with rigorous empirical research.

Attending a large conference such as the SCB annual meeting provides one with several entry points for learning. The most obvious one is through what is presented in paper and poster presentations. A second, probably equally important, yet less familiar, way is through participatory observation: studying the conference as a confluence of social and political dynamics from the perspective of an insider. As a social scientist studying the effects of neoliberalism on conservation-development interventions, I gained many insights during the annual meeting. Many of these were based on the latter mode of learning: participatory observation. I paid particular attention to the types of discourses that seemed dominant during the meeting and the various networks that supported these. This amounts to a "snapshot" of one conference, which rarely provides a good methodological basis for generalizations. Nevertheless, although I accept the limitations of the approach, the fact remains that the SCB meeting is arguably the largest and most important of its kind and should therefore provide a rich microcosm of the trends that occur in conservation biology at large.

Neoliberalization as such means that more and more facetsof life are becoming embedded within a competitive-market framework whereby goods, services, and agency can be traded monetarily (commercialization). Relationships, for instance between humans and nature but also among humans, that were previously free from commerce are transformed into commercial relationships, whereby the laws of demand and supply increasingly determine values. I consider these trends problematic for conservation biology.

From this perspective, one central, worrying trend stood out: the overwhelming neoliberalization of the field of conservation biology. As stated earlier, neoliberalism can be described as a social order characterized by the urge to bring everything into the sphere of the market. Neoliberalism, thus, is more than a model. It is an ideology about how social and political life should be organized that is explicitly global in its ambitions and therefore notoriously hard to define. Better, then, to focus on some of its modalities—competition and commercialization—that are increasingly leaving their mark on conservation science and practice.

To be sure: I am not against conservation biology or biodiversity conservation. Like many social scientists, I am a concerned academic who is deeply convinced that our current way of treating the planet is not sustainable, that something must be done about this, and that we must continue to hope that reversing the current unsustainable trend is possible. Nevertheless, I am also convinced that sustainability—in its multiple interpretations—is ultimately not feasible within a politico-ideological framework of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, despite its ability to incorporate and deal with many systemic contradictions, ultimately devours the resources it depends on for its continued existence. One merely has to think about the commercial possibilities unleashed by environmental degradation (e.g., those benefiting from and marketing

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mitigation services to deal with pollution) to understand how real this danger is. Neoliberalism furthermore stimulates and entrenches inequality and is perverse: it commercializes both its alternatives and its excesses and brings them back into the neoliberal mindset, thus discrediting any real transformative alternatives. Its continuous expansion and penetration into every part of society can be very obvious or very subtle, both of which were evident at the SCB meeting in South Africa.

Conservation biology's most obvious acquiescence to neoliberalism was illustrated by the enormous emphasis on ecological services and ecological economics in many (social science oriented) presentations and sessions. The meeting clearly demonstrated that the field of conservation is busy reinventing itself in order to remain politically acceptable in a neoliberal world. Some were very open about this. One keynote speaker, for example, advocated calculating conservation priorities in monetary terms in order to get "the biggest conservation bang for your buck." Many others, however, stayed away from the wider political context in which the ecosystem services concept has arisen; some merely counted the increasing amount of times the term *ecological services* appeared in journal articles, which seemed sufficient reason to ride the popular wave. What is problematic about this is not that conservation biologists are adapting to new political realities. Rather, it is striking that this exploration of new concepts or avenues for action is not accompanied by any criticism or investigation of possible counter arguments supported by empirical research. Considering the fact that the SCB meeting is very much also an academic gathering, this is indeed worrisome because one would expect academics to critically explore and analyze various sides of a debate.

The 2007 SCB meeting also displayed more subtle effects of neoliberal transformation. Two stood out. First, the incessant need for consensus and the subsequent retreat of many people into the domain of nice-sounding yet often empty words, or what I have started calling a layer of discursive blur. It was clear from many presentations that win–win constructions around biodiversity conservation, development, or economic growth were not only thought desirable but also possible. Some critical voices notwithstanding, it was remarkable that so many academic presentations put so much blind faith into the possibility that a wide range of divergent priorities can be combined productively and unproblematically. Of course, productive conservation-development outcomes can and do occur, but they are rare and never straightforward or one-dimensional. Hence, the realm in which to avoid messiness and constant contradictory dynamics is not reality, but discourse. It is therefore no surprise that the social issues—unlike the biological—were hardly supported by empirical (field) data. As a consequence, too many presenters habitually retreated into mobilizing metaphors such as *participation*, *ownership*, *good governance*, and *better policies*: all broad and conceptually vague concepts that are meant to capture a broad variety of different interests and goals into apparently immutable objectives that can be embraced by all. Although there were important exceptions, many social science–oriented speakers thus tried to build consensus for biodiversity conservation through apparently nonexclusive discourse rather than to convince audiences with intellectually sound and clear argumentation. This is a market approach to science: the best knowledge is apparently that which the most knowledge consumers (i.e., the audience) buy into.

A second related subtle effect of neoliberalism visible at the meeting was the apparent need to always be positive and think in terms of compatibility. Some presenters did posit conclusions with a negative connotation, but often they immediately then pointed to the "future positive": the promising or exciting new possibilities brought by a new model or another win–win solution. Again, this takes away the emphasis from argumentation and aims to leave the knowledge consumers thinking that all challenges can be overcome by merely capacitating decision makers, policy makers, and communities into buying into the new model or managing according to the latest conservation planning map. Debate is foreclosed as consensus is assumed and critical comment framed as unproductive or unnecessarily negative. Indeed, most social science–oriented questions were on rather neutral issues: those of methodology, the application of the model in another region, or whether one has thought to include variable x in the equation. I consider the above trends problematic, especially so for the future of biodiversity conservation because they distract from its objectives.

The Society for Conservation Biology has as its mission to "advance the science and practice of conserving the Earth's biological diversity." It is logical that its flagship annual meeting tries to build political constituencies for its mission. The question is whether this must be done based on neoliberal consensus-oriented partnerships or based on what conservation biologists do best: provide the data and analyses that allow us to see what we as humanity are doing to the planet. As a social scientist, I completely agree that conservation biology must be extended into the social sciences, but this should then be based on rigorous empirical research that shows that reality is about inequality, gray zones, and winners and losers, rather than mere neoliberal win–win ideas of consensus around competition and the market. Even if one entertains an open political agenda of biodiversity conservation, one can and should still adhere to this principle. Obviously, the link between politics and the social sciences is a hotly debated scientific gray area because every social science is inherently and always political. My point is that "the mistake is not in trying to do two things at once—every science is also a political project—the mistake

is to interrupt the former because of the urgency of the latter" (Latour 2005: 259–260). Clearly, biodiversity conservation is an urgent matter—as was often stressed during the meeting—but conservation biology ultimately does not advance the understanding of complex socio-ecological realities by brushing aside and simplifying sociopolitical ones.

Meine et al. (2006:647) state that the SCB's "success will be measured by the degree to which we can integrate scientific understanding into our community life, by the effectiveness of our approaches to sustaining the diversity of life and the health of ecosystems, and by the respect for the living world we are able to foster within our varied cultures and within the human heart." If the SCB 2007 meeting is anything to go by, I fear that the current neoliberal manner in which the SCB reinvents itself will only bring the society farther away from this objective.

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