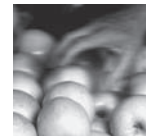

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‘Prosuming’ conservation? Web 2.0, nature and the intensification of value-producing labour in late capitalism

Bram Büscher
Erasmus University, The Netherlands; University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Jim Igoe
Dartmouth College, USA

Abstract
Recent insights from critical social theory suggest that consumption and production co-constitute each other; a phenomenon referred to as ‘prosumption’. It is further suggested that contemporary prosumption dynamics could alter the form of capitalism. In this article, we argue that recent literature and research on the intersection between capitalism and nature conservation are highly relevant in engaging these claims. Predominantly but not solely through interactive web 2.0 applications, conservation organisations are increasingly drawing consumers into the production of conservation, thereby enabling them to ‘prosume’ and co-create (narratives about and images of) ‘nature’ as well as their own identities as environmentally conscious citizens. We argue that prosumption is an intensification of earlier capitalist attempts at generating ‘value-producing labour’ from commodity-sign values. Ethnographic engagements with nature conservation in eastern and southern Africa, in turn, show that this value-producing labour is inherently material through its concealed connections with contradictory conservation realities in the context of late capitalism.

Corresponding author:
Bram Büscher, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands.
Email: buscher@iss.nl

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Introduction

This article applies recent insights from critical theory on consumption and branding to the field of nature conservation. Specifically, it examines the phenomenon of 'prosumption', which according to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010: 14, emphasis in original) 'involves *both* production and consumption rather than focusing on either one (production) or the other (consumption)'. Prosumption is about the 'apparent blurring of production and consumption that occurs as a consequence of increasing participation of the consumer' (Beer and Burrows, 2010: 6). So-called 'web 2.0' applications that allow people to form, rate and change online content are especially seen as archetypal examples of prosumption whereby consumers co-create the products they consume, so 'adding value' to the production process in ways that producers by themselves cannot (Zwick et al., 2008). In this process, moreover, consumers actively co-produce their own identities in association with the products they create (Baumann, 2007).

According to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010: 18), 'putting consumers to work' became a trend in the USA in the mid-1950s when consumers were induced, for example, to serve themselves in restaurants and filling stations and assemble their own furniture. These early examples, however, offered consumers little or no influence over the power relations behind their prosumption. This changed with the introduction of the interactive web 2.0 internet, which according to Ritzer and Jurgenson allowed 'a dramatic explosion in prosumption' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010: 19). Through web 2.0 and user-generated web applications, consumers can increasingly 'co-create' and produce the online activities, sites, services and information they consume, so enabling one to start imagining a far(ther)-reaching blurring of consumption and production.

This trend has also influenced the field of nature conservation (Igoe, 2010), which at first blush might seem a curious issue-area when it comes to consumptive co-creation. If prosumption occurs primarily in the virtual world of web 2.0 and conservation is ultimately about material dynamics of nature and biodiversity, it is not immediately clear how they might be co-created by conservation consumers. As a rich tradition of environmental anthropology has shown, however, humans construct the very natures that in turn influence their own (material and discursive) realities. This is often referred to as 'second nature': 'a nature that is *humanly* produced (through conceptualization as well as activity) and that therefore partakes, but without being entirely, of the human' (Biersack, 2006: 14; see also Büscher, 2013).

While seeing the world through 'second nature' has a long history (Smith, 2008), the developments briefly described above have introduced a remarkable array of

new possibilities for the production and manifestation of 'second nature'. Recent work on convergences of conservation and capitalism show that human relationships with material ecologies are increasingly mediated through commodified representations of nature (Brockington, 2009; Büscher et al., 2012; Dressler, 2011; Fletcher, 2010; Igoe, 2010; Igoe et al., 2010; Sullivan, 2009). Within these convergences conservation organisations increasingly deploy web 2.0 in their efforts to influence consumers buying into solutions for global environmental problems, such as loss of biodiversity and climate change (cf. Zižek, 2009: 52–55). We argue that these developments provide an interesting empirical arena from which to engage recent claims around prosumption and co-creation. Moreover, we believe it can shed light on the claim that prosumption can (potentially) change the nature of capitalism. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) ask 'are we entering the phase of ''prosumer capitalism''"? They believe that the 'unique characteristics' of the web 2.0 'world of prosumption' 'allow us to begin to think of it as possibly a new form of capitalism'. This 'new form of capitalism' can be identified by four points:

> . . . capitalists have more difficulty controlling prosumers than producers or consumers and there is a greater likelihood of resistance on the part of prosumers; the exploitation of prosumers is less clear-cut; a distinct economic system may be emerging there where services are free and prosumers are not paid for their work; and there is abundance rather than scarcity, a focus on effectiveness rather than efficiency in prosumer capitalism. (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010: 31)

In contrast, we argue that the discussion about web 2.0 prosumption reflects less the 'form' of capitalism (in the sense of an overarching way in which capitalism is expressed and experienced) but the intensification of *particular* capitalist dynamics with a much longer history (cf. Nealon, 2008). Our starting point is that prosumption should be seen in the historical context of capitalism trying to overcome the consumptive limits to increasing production. In this, we follow Goldman (1994) who argues that in the process of overcoming barriers to capitalist commodity circulation, the 'commodity form' has 'annexed the semiotic universe' (p.186) in order to stimulate a consumption that can keep up with ever greater powers of production. Goldman thus follows Baudrillard in 'appending a theory of signs to the Marxian critique of political economy' (p.186) but with a crucial difference. Where Baudrillard strangely argued that we will see the end of production, Goldman (1994: 188) argues for more material specificity in that the production of sign values is directly related to the production of capitalist accumulation and its ideological facades (p.193). About this political economy of sign value he states:

> Though the process of continuously constructing differentiated sign combinations collapses traditional reference points and privileges simulations, it also numbs desire and devalues the quest for transcendental signifieds. Instead of focusing on the dystopic and apocalyptic implications alone, we must also observe how the mechanisms by which a political economy of sign value reproduces itself also undermine

> and *contradict* the motivations for engaging in sign consumption or sign valorization. (Goldman, 1994: 188; see also Goldman and Papson, 2011: 187)

The last sentence is particularly important: over the last 100 years, consumers have had to gradually do more 'realisation labour' in terms of interpreting (and, ideally, take 'appropriate' action on) the ever-intensifying and increasing number of commodity signs thrown at them on a daily basis. Commodity signs, after all, do not reach their producer's desired effects all by themselves. Consumers need to respond to signs in particular ways and through this 'labour' help realise the sign's material value. This sheds different light on web 2.0 and dynamics of prosumption. If consumers have for long had to do increasing amounts of realisation labour due to the ever-increasing velocity of commodity-sign circulation (cf. Goldman and Papson, 2011: 187) then prosumption – the *blurring of production and consumption* – holds a long pedigree. Prosumption from this angle is symptomatic, we argue, of the intensification of the production and circulation of commodity-sign values, which are 'materially inseparable from processes of ideological reproduction' (Goldman, 1994: 193). This allows us to bypass the thorny question of some sort of teleological direction in the development of (different forms of) capitalism to ask the more productive questions when and why acts of online prosumption lead to different types of understandings and experiences of political economies of capital accumulation. This may include some of Ritzer and Jurgenson's points, but not as part of a 'new form of capitalism'.

Nature conservation is a particularly expedient realm in which to examine these arguments. After all, commodified prosumer acts of nature conservation are (ultimately) appealing because of their promised positive effects on material realities of human–nature interactions. Interrogating this appeal enables us to both analyse the production and circulation of sign values in prosumption and their relation to (some) important material dynamics of late capitalism. In what follows, we begin by outlining and explaining recent developments in the 'brave new world of prosuming conservation'. We then analyse the ways in which this prosumption triggers sign values and their connections to the material realities of producing conservation. This will show that the intensification of value-producing labour through prosumption works through concealed contradictory and harmful impacts of continued and intensifying capitalist conservation. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to attend to the background experiences and methodologies that inform the article.

Background and methodology

We both began our work on nature conservation with field research in Africa when connections between consumption, prosumption and conservation were just becoming visible. Long-term and multi-level ethnographic research based on participant observation, interviews, archival and discourse analysis revealed blatant discrepancies between the rhetoric and reality of conservation (Büscher, 2010b;

Büscher and Dressler, 2007; Igoe, 2004; Igoe and Croucher, 2007). We were especially concerned about the displacement and impoverishment of people by protected areas and paradoxical socio-ecological effects such as the disruptive effects of tourists on ecosystems and the proliferation of schemes that claimed that protected areas could mitigate the harmful ecological impacts of extractive enterprises (cf. Brockington et al., 2008).

These transformations are associated with the rapid increase in size and power of large conservation organisations (Chapin, 2004) and their association with major corporations (Chapin, 2004; Dowie, 2009; Igoe et al., 2010). In fact, these organisations were themselves behaving like for-profit businesses, with elaborate marketing and branding campaigns. These in turn were increasingly being connected to specially branded consumer goods such as – inter alia – Starbucks Conservation Coffee, Endangered Species Chocolate, McDonalds Endangered Animal Happy Meals and, recently, Coca-Cola's Arctic Home polar bear cans.

Igoe (2010) examined these transformations in Tanzania (2005–2006) and Büscher (2010b) in Southern Africa (2005–2009). This led to a broader – and ongoing – survey of biodiversity conservation branding and marketing campaigns, which found elaborate presentations of partnerships between corporations and conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These connect to, and are themselves interwoven with, ample opportunities for consumption and, increasingly, prosumption. They turn on visually compelling claims about positive socio-ecological outcomes at locations that are distant and exotic for Western consumers (Igoe et al., 2010; see also Dressler, 2011). Furthermore, as Brockington (2009) has argued, conservation NGOs are increasingly using celebrities to distinguish their interventions and sell their brands and corporations (or related foundations) to fund their work. It is against the background of these dynamics that we became interested in how conservation organisations together with celebrities and companies aim to construct a 'mediagenic world' that can seemingly be 'saved' by consumption/prosumption. This led both of us to increasingly complement our African ethnographic field research with web-based research on internet sites and other (new) media through which conservation is consumed and prosumed.[1]

The two case studies we offer in this article are not meant to be comprehensive but illustrative of these trends. We have chosen them because they are familiar to us through long-term ethnographic engagement, and they offer detailed forays into mapping changing 'landscapes of capital' (Goldman and Papson, 2011). Such maps, we hope, will provide direction for continued investigation.

The brave new world of prosuming conservation

Oltupai was first identified as one of the dominant bull elephants in the Amboseli Elephant Research Project in Kenya. Once presumed killed, remarkably, he showed up (with many families that had not been seen in Amboseli for four years) in Tanzania's West Kilimanjaro Area. Oltupai is quite friendly, but only when visitors

> approach by vehicle. (Elephants that have spent time in Amboseli National Park are used to tour vehicles. But a human on foot could be a potential threat). During the heat of the day, he tends to seek shade in an oltupai thicket, which is where he gets his name.
>
> More information on Oltupai is included in the Factsheet, which will be delivered along with a plush elephant and a personal adoption certificate (suitable for framing) to you or the person of your choice. Your adoption also includes an annual African Wildlife Foundation membership, and one-year subscription to our quarterly, 'African Wildlife News'. [2]

This example comes from the website of the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), illustrating one way that the NGO tries to encourage sponsorship. When consuming Oltupai by 'adopting' a virtual construction of him, materialised by a 'plush doll' and personal adoption certificate, people can save African wildlife. With it comes an impression of Oltupai's adventures and an idea about how he treats visitors when they approach him either in tour vehicles or on foot. The website also asks:

> Have you ever wished you could "do more" to save African animals? Ever wanted to share your passion for a particular species and get your friends and family to help too? Now there's a way you can by creating your own personal web site with AWF and e-mailing your friends and family to urge them to check it out.[3]

The NGO urges people on, as follows:

> It's easy and fun! In just a few simple steps, you can set up your personal site to tell friends and loved ones why you want to help save a particular species. You can set up your own guestbook, post your favorite pictures, let them add to your picture collection or write a blog to you, and even sign a guestbook. What's more, you can ask them to remember you when your next birthday or the holidays roll around by making a donation to AWF to help you realize your goal of saving your favorite species. What could be more meaningful than helping you make a difference for an animal you are passionate about?[4]

This is a clear example of 'prosuming conservation': the consumer is asked to start up a website and associated 'personal fund' to save one's 'favorite African animal'. Like all web 2.0 applications, 'friends and family' can add comments and help shape content in order to help the fund owner to raise more money. This, the AWF argues, is one of the most 'meaningful' things a person can do.

Many large conservation NGOs now enable consumers to co-create the nature they wish to conserve. Conservation International invites website visitors to link up with them on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Delicious and join their

'Team Earth',[5] while The Nature Conservancy invites visitors to join 'my.nature.org', which according to them is 'the intersection between you and nature'.[6] You can join *My Nature* 'for free' and 'get green living tips, nature images, invitations and conservation news tailored to your interests!'.[7] Once signed in, you can check 'My Impact', 'My Investment', 'My Stories', and customise your *my.nature.org* site. In other words, you can produce the (representations of the) natures you find interesting, while simultaneously producing yourself as an activist-consumer. The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) hosted a site called 'connect2earth', the 'green online community where you and experts can exchange ideas, debate, and learn about today's pressing environmental issues'.[8] Like the others, WWF emphasised the co-creation element in joining up:

> By joining the connect2earth community, you can debate with others by posting text, images, audio, video and then follow the discussion live as it plays out on the web or on your mobile phone. You also take part in regular competitions: community members, together with a jury of green experts, will pick a winning contribution, giving the winner an opportunity to take even more action.[9]

In January 2011, however, WWF decided to stop connect2earth and focus more on their social media outlets in Facebook, Twitter and others to connect to (potential) supporters.

A central element of these examples is a conviction that being green is a life-style with all the appropriate virtual accompaniments that go with this in the early 21st century. Indeed, conserving nature these days depends heavily on professional corporate marketing, about which Zwick et al. (2008: 168) note:

> Marketing's desire to produce cultural conditions that allow for more subtle ways to insert brands and products deeply into the fabric of consumer lifeworlds has resulted in a style of marketing practice that now aims at completely drawing consumers into the production and, more importantly, *innovation* process itself.

While web 2.0 applications are especially visible to the ways in which conservation is adapting itself to late capitalism, the consumption and prosumption of conservation does not end there. As Graham (2007) argues, value in contemporary capitalism is increasingly located in 'expert ways of meaning' and their 'institutional contexts of production'. These developments must be understood within the contemporary context where 'it is not the muscle-power of people that provides the most highly valued labor forms' but where 'far more intimate aspects of human activity have become technologized and exposed to the logic of commodification' (Graham, 2007: 174). Prosumption from this angle opens up new avenues to pursue the insertion of brands and products into people's lifeworlds, something which we believe can be further explained by combining Debord's (1967) ideas about spectacle with theories of sign value, especially by Goldman (1994) and Goldman and Papson (2011).

Debord (1967: thesis 4) emphasised that spectacle is not merely 'an assemblage of images,' but 'the mediation of relationships between people by images'. Igoe (2010) expands this definition to include the mediation of relationships between people and the environment by images. Prosumers of conservation co-create the way this mediation occurs. They themselves set up and co-develop the imagery that defines their relationship to (imagined) natural environments, and so 'add value' to the work of conservation organisations in 'aleatory and subtle' ways (Coté and Pybus, 2007: 103).[10] However, as Debord argued, the mediation of relationships by images depends upon significant concealment of connections and contexts that define those relationships. It also creates unique possibilities for elaborate and pervasive presentations of connection and context, which are visually compelling to the point of being mistaken for the connections and contexts that they simultaneously draw upon and conceal.

It is these unique possibilities that conservation organisations are exploiting in myriad ways. A true 'virtual smorgasbord of media productions' has erupted (Igoe, 2010: 377) and with it swiftly increasing production and circulation of sign values meant to encourage people to become better caretakers of the natural world. As Goldman and Papson (2011: 38) note, however, 'the greater the velocity of sign values, the greater the tendencies towards clutter and the likelihood of entropy in the value realization process'. This problem of the 'decomposition of value' has forced producers of sign value 'to customize products for even the smallest of niche markets – You'. This is, we argue, where prosumption becomes central to value creation in late capitalism.

So for instance, participants in the 'Nike Human Race' can help raise money for the World Wildlife Fund's work to foster a green global economy. In order to do so, however, a runner must first purchase a special Nike running shoe that contains a device that records and maps their run and automatically uploads its data onto the runner's iPod, which in turn uploads it to the Nike Plus website. From here the runner can post the data to her/his Facebook or Twitter account in competition with other runners who become part of her/his Nike Plus community. Data from cities around the world is also aggregated and posted to the Nike Plus website and displayed on giant digital billboards that are prominently displayed in those same cities.

The McDonald's Endangered Species Happy Meal is 'designed to inspire and empower children to make a difference'. The Happy Meal Box features links to an interactive online game, which allows children to create a 'virtual passport to explore the virtual world. A child can travel throughout this world, while in a safe environment, collecting animals and landscapes that s/he stores in his personalized passport'. Parents of these children are also invited to visit the virtual headquarters of Conservation International in virtual Washington, D.C., to learn about McDonald's and Conservation International's partnership to protect rainforest ecosystems, thus helping to combat climate change and make a donation.[11]

These examples point at the extent and complexity of prosumptive conservation and how it adds value to conservation organisations and corporations. In both

examples, prosumers of conservation mediate their relationship with the environment by co-creating and self-customising (online) images that define the connection they feel or aspire to have with nature. Prosuming conservation offers people opportunities to join virtual communities. It helps to alleviate concerns that consumption may be harming the environment and/or other people through commodities that are 'eco-friendly' and 'ethical'. Finally, it allows people to save the planet vicariously by supporting others who will save the environment on their behalf (Brockington, 2009).

When people engage in these kinds of prosumption, they are entering into relationships with other people and environments, which are far from straightforward. As Goldman and Papson (2011: 185) argue, however, 'while [. . .] floating signifiers are empirical features of a spectacular culture, we must be careful not to let their appearance confuse us. In actuality, these cultural representations are deeply determined by the material base, even as they float'. Crucially, therefore, prosumptive 'value-producting labor' is at once symbolic and material (Goldman, 1994: 193) and prosumers' relationships can turn out to be far different from prosumers' imagination of them. We must therefore juxtapose the above discussion to 'concrete differences in the material world' (Bakker and Bridge, 2006: 21) of producing conservation.

The material world of producing conservation

Behind the worlds of co-creation and the spectacle of nature are other worlds in which 'nature' is again loaded with different meanings and roles. As such, Goldman and Papson's (2011: 13) statement that 'the landscapes of corporate capital are defined as much by what they veil as what they stress' holds equally true for landscapes of 'conservation capital'. It is through what is veiled that the 'prosumption' of conservation is actively channelled and mediated in an effort to achieve certain desired outcomes. In this section we offer two illustrations of these dynamics and relations with the aim of connecting the virtual world of prosumption with the material world of people and landscapes from which conservation sign values are derived. Firstly, virtual renderings of Oltupai (above) will be connected to the ways in which material realities in Tanzania are transformed according to long-standing fantasies about African nature (cf. West and Carrier, 2004). Secondly, we delve into the production of Southern African 'Transfrontier Conservation Areas' (TFCAs) to show how different spectacles and forms of co-creation leave behind particular material and non-material 'legacies'.

Importantly, we are not arguing here that consumption is inherently bad for the environment. Like all living creatures, humans consume to survive. Throughout our existence as a species, consumer-related activities have been the stuff from which 'the variety of forms of life and patterns of inter-human relationships relations could be and indeed were moulded – with the help of cultural inventiveness driven by the imagination' (Baumann, 2007: 26). When connected to certain kinds of environmental knowledge and practice, human consumption can have

reciprocally beneficial relationships with the environment (Ingold, 2000). Even in post-industrial contexts, many forms of consumption are environmentally neutral (Wilk, 2010). Thus we are not concerned with the general effects of consumption, but particular implications of consumerism (and 'prosumerism') for the ways in which basic human wants and desires get caught up in environmental contradictions of capitalist expansion. Thus, for instance, the partnership between McDonalds and Conservation International is presented as softening negative effects of fastfood supply chains on rainforest ecosystems.[12] Partnerships between Coca-Cola and the World Wildlife Fund are presented as offsetting the negative effects of soft drink production on water systems.[13] At issue in these cases is not whether consumption is bad for the environment, but the ways in consumption/prosumption appears connected to fixes that consumers cannot verify, while effacing larger environmental concerns related to systems of consumerism in which we are all enmeshed (cf. Carrier, 2012).

While such broad environmental contradictions are rather easy to see, our case studies reveal that the realities of prosuming nature are loaded with a plethora of much less immediately visible contradictions, with often-harmful effects on people and/or nature. While we emphasise that 'prosuming conservation' and the material realities of producing conservation are never singularly or dichotomously 'negative' or 'positive', we do believe that they should be seen within a broader history of the expansion of capitalism, its recent intensified engagement with environmental conservation and the often deleterious consequences for constructive human–nature relationships that follow from these dynamics (see Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher et al., 2012; Harvey, 1996; Igoe et al., 2010; Smith, 2008).

The Tanzanian elephant and landscape conservation

Elephants are one of the most popular and recognisable animals in the world. These large and intelligent creatures have distinctive personalities and live in family groups. They have long enthralled Western consumers in circuses and zoos. They also figure centrally in children's programmes and nature films. Certainly, no African tourist safari would be complete without encountering these charismatic creatures (Duffy and Moore, 2010). It is no coincidence that elephants feature prominently on both Tanzanian and South African currency, as well as in the logo of the AWF. They are integrally involved in the proliferation and intensification of commodity signs in East African conservation and its connections to Western consumers.

This can be seen in the history of the AWF's conservation work in East Africa. By the mid-1970s the status of African elephants as material commodities was clearly threatening their continued existence in the eastern part of the continent, where they were being poached to extinction. Ironically, during this period, images of slaughtered elephants became new kinds of commodities in the context of the ivory ban campaign. They featured prominently in the pages of *National*

Geographic and figured centrally in highly successful fundraising campaigns by the AWF and other conservation NGOs who quickly followed suit (Bonner, 1994).

The resulting global ivory ban, combined with other factors, contributed to the dramatic growth of the elephant population in both Eastern and Southern Africa. Yet the idea that elephants remain endangered justifies the need for intensified conservation interventions in this area, while their abundance enhances its touristic value. This apparent contradiction is neatly reconciled in the AWF's Conservation Heartlands, which the organisation describes as 'vast landscapes that function both ecologically and economically'.[14] Heartlands emerged at the turn of the millennium as part of a highly successful branding and funding strategy by the AWF (Sachedina, 2008). The Maasai Steppe Heartland is one of the AWF's premiere Heartlands, and is distinguished by its dense elephant population and the colourful culture (from a Western perspective) of the Maasai people who live there. By offering unique consumptive experiences, the Maasai Steppe story goes, the area will attract significant tourist revenues, providing incentives for local people to protect wildlife. Images supporting this story not only suggest a world in which consumption is good for nature; it enhances the AWF's Heartland brand and its attractiveness to potential supporters (Igoe, 2010).

At the same time the Maasai Steppe and other Heartlands provide space for the production of complex stories and commodity signs. Tourists, volunteers and officials who visit the Heartland enjoy consumptive experiences, while reproducing its image and brand. The website of the Manayara Ranch conservancy, an important private sector partnership for the Heartland, features an image of tourists chasing elephants on horseback, accompanied by the message 'A Wilderness Exclusively for You'.[15] Supermodel Veronica Varekova, one of the AWF's goodwill ambassadors, enjoys a performance by Maasai women at a cultural village in the Heartland, highlighting the community benefits of wildlife conservation.[16] In a special issue of *Stilleto* she describes how climbing Mt Kilimanjaro inspired her to work with the AWF and become a spokesperson for the Hublot 'Big Bang Out of Africa Watch', sales of which support the AWF and its conservation efforts.[17] As a highly visible consumer of high-end tourist safaris and expensive watches, she at once produces brands, Heartlands, elaborate narratives and her own celebrity (see Figure 1). The Hublot watch that she endorses proudly displays the AWF elephant logo (see Figure 2).

Elephants also figure in presentations of conservation science for which Heartlands provide a backdrop. A website inviting consumers to 'join' (give money to) its Elephant Conservation Research Project, proclaims:

> Africa without elephants? At AWF we know that's not an option. That's why we have embarked on one of the most ambitious research and conservation projects in East Africa. In the Kilimanjaro Heartland, AWF's Elephant Research Scientist, Alfred Kikoti, is searching for a way to give both elephants and people the space they need. By collaring 10 elephants with satellite-tracking technology, Kikoti is collecting data on elephant habitats and movement patterns. The information he gathers will

Figure 1. Veronica Varekova supporting Hublot and the African Wildlife Foundation. The text reads: 'Veronica Varekova, ambassador of the African Wildlife Foundation, she gives back to nature the benefits nature gave to her. The Fusion between beauty and intelligence. The perfect ambassador for the Hublot lady collection'. See: http://www.awf.org/content/gallery/detail/4353 (accessed 29 February 2012).

Figure 2. Hublot Big Bang Out of Africa Watch (retail US$19,000.00, replica retails US$189.00). Source: http://www.awf.org/content/headline/detail/4372 (accessed 10 February 2012).

> help AWF and its partners develop conservation strategies that will give migrating animals in this transboundary area the widest berth possible. Alfred is planning on collaring additional elephants in the next few months to increase the accuracy of the data he is collecting.[18]

Kikoti has worked closely with the elephant Oltupai, and his research observations provide narratives for the fundraising appeals connected to the AWF's virtual adoption centre. Consumers can follow the work of Kikoti online and 'join his research team' by making a donation and they can spread the word by inviting others to make a donation. Kikoti's persona provides vicarious proximity to elephants and important research essential to their survival. Some may even be inspired to travel to East Africa to visit AWF Heartlands. Together, these ways help to produce an intensifying context within which to help produce the AWF brand through various kinds of consumption and 'value-producing labour'.

The work done by researchers like Kikoti also contributes to narratives and images producing conservation's commodity brands. The story and personality of Oltupai is the product of this kind of research. In turn, this is connecting to other commodities to form a consumption chain linked to the work of conservation. From the virtual space that is the AWF adoption centre, consumers can further consume – via a link that reads 'sweeten your adoption'[19] – 'Endangered Species Chocolate'. In addition to a plush Oltupai and a certificate of adoption, consumers are assured that their chocolate is 'sourced from ethically traded cacao farms ensuring fair trade, responsible labor practices and sustainable farming' (see Figure 3).[20]

On St Valentine's Day 2012, both the AWF and Endangered Species Chocolate prominently featured the AWF gift set on their Facebook pages. The Endangered Species Chocolate post links to a contest featuring the gift set. Contestants must answer the following questions: (1) what is your favourite wild animal; and (2) have

Figure 3. Plush Oltupai and Endangered Species Chocolate Gift Box. Source: http://chocolatebar.com/products.php?product=Adopt-a-Elephant-%28%2475%29 (accessed 10 February 2012).

you ever tried Endangered Species Chocolate? Forty-four comments follow, many of which have 'retweeted' the contest. A post from 'lovemesomeshoes' shares, 'dark chocolate peppermint crunch is my favorite and helps my favorite penguins'.[21] Below the Facebook post another 'friend' has shared an article describing the unfair labour practices of Hershey in West Africa. She concludes: 'Endangered Species Chocolate is the best. If you don't believe me ask my friends – LOL!'.[22]

While raising important environmental and social issues, these conscientious consumers also labour to reproduce and interpret commodity signs. Their posts become part of the wider story of which Oltupai, the AWF, and Endangered Species Chocolates are a part. For the most part, however, actual connections to positive material outcomes are nearly impossible for most consumers to verify. They must accept images, narratives and commodity signs as proof of their veracity (cf Brockington et al., 2008: chapter 9).

The material realities of elephant conservation in Tanzania are much different from what the recieved popular stories suggest. Protected areas in northern Tanzania are extensive, and all have entailed evictions and exclusion (Bonner, 1994; Brockington, 2002; Neumann, 1998). Not surprisingly, therefore, work by the AWF to secure landscapes for conservation outside of protected areas has been highly controversial and contentious. Local people consistently claim that promised benefits were far less than they expected, while livelihood costs are too

high. Many others found their homes and farms overrun by elephants who raid fields and have learned to take the roofs off people's houses to access food stored inside. Many farmers despaired that they could not survive in these areas but lacked a viable place to go to (cf. Goldman, 2011; Igoe, 2010; Igoe and Croucher 2007; Sachedina 2008).

In light of these contradictory realities, Sachedina (2008) suggests that the AWF and the Tanzanian Government may be achieving 'epiphenomenal conservation', meaning that elephants are succeeding in removing human beings, where official conservation policy has failed. In addition to their impacts on local farmers, large herds of elephants can strain the environment and even threaten other species because of their ability to fundamentally alter local ecosystems (Bonner, 1994). They may thus be good for capitalism and bad for the environment. Tourists will pay large sums of money to see them, especially in large and concentrated numbers. In such circumstances it is it difficult to achieve more nuanced approaches to conservation: ones that are concerned about whole ecosystems and genuine local prosperity.

Southern African Transfrontier Conservation Areas

Our second illustration of the contradictory realities behind the popular consumption and prosumption of nature conservation also revolves around elephants and landscapes, but emphasises the latter. Southern African TFCAs, or 'peace parks', are large conservation areas that cross international state borders. They are supported by powerful actors, especially major corporations and wealthy business tycoons linked to the 'Peace Parks Foundation' (PPF), a NGO solely dedicated to the establishment and management of TFCAs (Ramutsindela, 2007). The unprecedented scale of TFCAs has attracted much attention from the global conservation community, and is actively used to market conservation to new potential consumers. According to the PPF:

> The peace parks concept is as glorious as it is bold: vast conservation areas straddling national borders, of sufficient scale to incorporate entire biomes, of sufficient integrity to restore the ancient patterns of diverse ecological systems and reconnect the shared cultures of local communities. Southern Africa's peace parks today incorporate over half of the declared conservation estate in the region. These areas are astounding in their extent (collectively measuring some 800 000 km^2) and in their natural magnificence, rich biodiversity and cultural significance.[23]

TFCAs, or 'peace parks' are also supported by prosumption-oriented projects on social networking sites, prominent amongst which is 'Pifworld'. 'Pif' stands for 'Playing it Forward' and is marketed as follows:

> Playing it forward is doing good in a simple way. Join Pifworld and invite three friends to do the same. It's power in numbers. If your friends also invite three friends

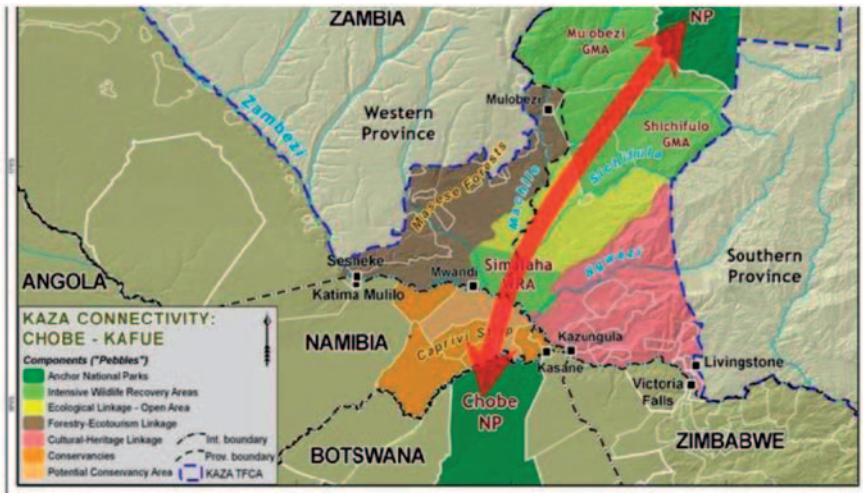

Figure 4. Peace Parks Foundation map 'KAZA connectivity'. Source: www.pifworld.com.

> and these friends invite three others we will reach the number of ten million people in no time. Together we could do almost everything, imagine the power of that![24]

'Doing good' involves many different things: 'Pifworld offers all kinds of projects: enable kids to go to school, free child slaves, protect endangered animals or even build a massive wildlife park'.[25] This wildlife park is the Kavango-Zambezi (KAZA) TFCA between Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe (which, not wholly incidentally, is also an AWF 'Heartland'). The PPF is a very active 'player' on Pifworld, urging prosumers to give money to establish an elephant corridor from Botswana via Namibia to Zambia. Figure 4, which was posted on 31 March 2010 on Pifworld by the PPF,[26] shows what this corridor should look like.

As in the Tanzanian example above, the material realities of TFCAs are radically different than they appear in web 2.0 marketing campaigns. In a critical review about elephant corridors in the KAZA TFCA, Metcalfe and Kepe (2008: 114) caution that

> Zambian landscape-level planning could undermine the KAZA TFCA objectives of biodiversity conservation and improved local livelihoods because its land policy encourages investment in communal land without ensuring good conservation or equitable returns for land access. Sectoral and state-dominated natural resource tenure policy is exacerbating the social–ecological scale mismatch produced by land policy. Inefficient community–public sector governance undermines the prospects for an equitable community–private sector relationship.

Moreover, according to Dr Tobias Haller, who has done longstanding research on the Kafue flats where the elephants are supposed to move to in Zambia,

elephants do not appear regularly in the flats at the moment, but 'if they appear - and there were cases - they cause trouble'. Although very few in number, he even noted that lethal incidents have taken place.[27] If elephants increase due to the corridor, it is highly likely that so too will human–wildlife conflicts increase (Marks, 2013).

These material realities, however, find little semblance with the PPF or the Zambian government. Interviews revealed that the Zambian policy officers at the Zambian Wildlife Authority responsible for KAZA are all funded by the PPF and are reluctant to criticise their funder even though they admitted that there were problems similar to the ones described by Metcalfe and Kepe (2008) and Haller. However, a broader look at TFCAs in Southern Africa shows that these types of problems occur rather frequently.[28]

While not all material consequences of TFCAs are negative, it is clear from the literature that TFCAs in Southern Africa have not lived up to their enormous promise (Büscher, 2010b; Duffy, 2006; Ramutsindela, 2007; Wolmer, 2003). One of the worst material consequences so far is the removal of some 27,000 people from the Mozambican Limpopo National Park to make way for the 'Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park' between Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe (Milgroom and Spierenburg, 2008). On the other side of the 'Great Limpopo', the western border of South Africa's Kruger Park, poverty (partially) related to historical displacements likewise continues to be a major issue. In 2005, the PPF chief executive stated in a meeting attended by the first author, that the several million poor people living next to the South African side of the Great Limpopo are not benefiting from the peace park and that 'this is a problem'.[29]

In yet another TFCA, the 'Maloti-Drakensberg' between Lesotho and South Africa, a similar situation was noted in that people have little benefitted from the US$15.25 million intervention that sought to establish the TFCA (Büscher, 2010a). This 'Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project' aimed to make communities benefit from transfrontier conservation but even staff involved had to admit that their impact had been rather limited, partially because the vast majority of the US$15.25 million was spent on research, planning and consultants, not on tangible community benefits (DEAT Staff officer interview, November 2005, February 2007; Free State Department of Tourism, Economic Affairs and Environment staff officer interview, March 2007). This, then, gave local people in Lesotho and South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province little leeway to try and appropriate (parts of the) intervention for their livelihoods, in turn cementing the already considerable social and political inequalities in both countries (for details, see Büscher, 2010a). Interestingly, then, these large conservation interventions can be characterised both by massive negative material consequences, as well as the lack of 'impact' altogether, which leaves the often bleak material situation of local people unchanged and can even fortify inequality despite promises of 'development'.

This case illustrates not only that the sign values of conservation are far removed from the material realities that produced them, but that sign values are increasingly and ironically being given precedence over 'concrete differences in the material

Figure 5. One of the Pifworld.com sign values for 'the elephant corridor' project.

world' (Bakker and Bridge, 2006: 21). In what Büscher (2010b: 261) refers to as 'derivative nature', sign values are what matters most in mobilising support and resources for nature conservation. He concludes:

> . . . nature and rural communities in reality, then, are increasingly becoming 'underlying assets' for what has become the primary source of value of neoliberal conservation, namely idealised images within the realms of branding, public relations and marketing.

Contradictory and inconvenient local realities rarely enter the spaces where conservation is presented for consumption and prosumption. In their online realm, the 'players' on Pifworld are far removed from the material realities of the 'massive wildlife parks' they support. Instead they congratulate, support and encourage each other and proclaim online that it 'is nice to hopefully have given some elephants a (better) life' or as another 'player' writes: 'Whoot! Whoot! . . . Give Babar and his friends their corridor . . . they won't forget you'.[30] According to the website, players and their friends simply 'bundle forces for a better world' (see Figure 5).

Conclusion

Nealon (2008: 34) describes Foucault's understanding of 'intensification' as the 'saturation of a given field' whereby 'the confrontation between everyday life and the dominant mode of power is increasingly less scarce'. A crucial part of the currently dominant mode of power in late capitalism is the ubiquity and clutter of commodity-sign values, which relentlessly hails consumers to perform value-producing (or 'value-rejecting') labour. Ironically, such transformations are marketed in terms of increasing freedom for consumers: they can tailor products to their individual interests and mediate their and other's relationship with the environment by co-creating and self-customising images, brands and stories. Ritzer and

Jurgenson (2010: 31) appear to agree with this promise when they argue that prosumption could lead to a new 'form' of capitalism whereby exploitation is 'less clear-cut', more 'services are free' and 'abundance rather than scarcity'.

In contrast, this article has conceptualised prosumption as a particular and intensified dynamic of value-producing labour in late capitalism. Our forays in online web 2.0 and rural African spaces showed that prosumption is in fact embedded in far-reaching material realities over which specific consumptive-prosumptive acts are unlikely to have much effect. The freedom that prosumers enjoy is consequently limited. As Debord (1967: thesis 6) opined, spectacle appears as a multitude of choices and possibilities, when it is actually 'the omni-present affirmation of choices that *have already been made* in the sphere of production and the consumption implied by that production' (emphasis in original). Or as Appadurai (1990: 307) put it, 'the consumer has been transformed by commodity flows.. into a sign (and made to) believe that he or she is an actor, when he or she is at best a chooser'.

Furthermore, the material realities behind prosumptive conservation spectacles are often very different from what prosumers imagine them to be. At the same time conservation spectacle obscures the problems and paradoxes that make prosuming conservation possible. This concealment is essential to the construction of prosumptive conservation as a viable strategy for saving the planet. Prosumers are actively invited to completely focus on the 'animal they love' or the 'landscapes they are passionate about', creating the impression that the circumstances that might or might not conserve these animals or landscapes fall into place once a prosumer decides to lend them his or her online support. In other words, spectacle invites *speculation*, in this case that the fragmented activities of prosumption have some coherent and unified effect on the conservation of actual natures 'out there'. Yet, our case studies of East and Southern Africa showed how material realities are far more complex, mundane and contradictory from what consumers/prosumers (are made to or seem to want to) believe.

This is troubling in and of itself, but even more so when one considers their relationship to the cultural construction of nature in the Western imagination. In his essay, 'Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', Cronon (1996) opines that the idea of nature as a place without people offers a tempting escape from the complex material and political realities in which we are all enmeshed and implicated. He asserts that this view of nature paradoxically offers escape from the unpleasant problems and realities of life in post-industrial society and the solution to these self-same problems. The prosumption of conservation, as we have shown, partakes in this paradox: prosumers often engage in new forms of entertainment and self-making that are putatively connected to solving the very kinds of problems they seek to escape through their prosumption. In the process, the unpleasant aspects of the material transformations behind prosumed sign values are often concealed or distorted. While individual prosumers may experience this as a kind of liberation, it is essential to ask precisely what we are being liberated from. The answer to this question has profound implications for environmental citizenship in the context of

late capitalism. It also presents an essentially important field of enquiry in the field of consumer studies in the coming years.

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Notes

1. For this article, we have not done research with prosumers; it relies on discourse and image analysis of conservation prosumption sites and long-term ethnographic research in two parts of Africa.
2. http://shop.awf.org/adopt/product.aspx?p=136010%28base%29 (accessed 24 March 2010).
3. http://support.awf.org/site/TR?fr_id=1030&pg=tgreeting (accessed 24 March 2010).
4. Idem.
5. http://www.conservation.org/how/team_earth/Pages/team_earth_partnership.aspx (accessed 14 February 2012).
6. http://my.nature.org/nature (accessed 24 March 2010).
7. Idem.
8. http://www.panda.org/how_you_can_help/campaign/connect2earth/ (accessed 24 March 2010).
9. Idem.
10. As Coté and Pybus (2007: 103) argue for web 2.0 developments more generally, 'it is the variability of possible valorization processes that holds the secret abodes of surplus value for capital'.
11. http://www.conservation.org/fmg/pages/videoplayer.aspx?videoid=43 (accessed 17 May 2010).
12. http://www.conservation.org/how/partnership/corporate/Pages/mcdonalds.aspx (accessed 28 November 2012).
13. http://worldwildlife.org/partnerships/coca-cola (accessed 28 November 2012).
14. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYU2L0ccHMY (accessed 8 February 2012).
15. http://www.manyararanch.com/ (accessed 8 February 2012).
16. http://www.awf.org/content/gallery/detail/4458 (accessed 8 February 2012).
17. http://www.awf.org/content/general/detail/4290 (accessed 8 February 2012).
18. http://www.awf.org/content/action/detail/3596 (accessed 24 May 2010).
19. http://www.awf.org/section/engaging_you/donate/donors/adoption_center (accessed 10 February 2012).
20. http://chocolatebar.com/products.php?product = Adopt-a-Elephant-%28%2475%29. (accessed 10 February 2012).
21. http://dinedashdeadlift.com/2012/02/09/endangered-species-chocolate-review-giveaway/ (accessed 8 February 2012).

22. http://www.facebook.com/pages/Endangered-Species-Chocolate-Foundation/230415273662948?sk=wall (accessed 8 February 2012).
23. http://peaceparks.org/story.php?pid=1&mid=16 (accessed 14 February 2012).
24. http://www.pifworld.com/#/aboutpifworld (accessed 11 May 2010). Like any web 2.0 application you can customize your own prosumption of 'doing good'. For example, one is encouraged to 'Pimp your Profile by uploading your photo and giving your motivation to play it forward'.
25. Idem.
26. http://www.pifworld.com/#/players/peace/854 (accessed 11 May 2010).
27. Personal Communication with T Haller, May 2010.
28. This section leans on extensive research on TFCAs from 2003 to 2009 by Büscher (see Büscher, 2010a, 2010b; Büscher and Dressler, 2007).
29. Prof. Van Riet, former CEO of the PPF, in a presentation at the Dutch embassy in Pretoria on 9 March 2005.
30. http://www.pifworld.com/#/projects/TheElephantCorridor/61 (accessed 2 June 2010 and 17 February 2012).

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Author Biographies

Bram Büscher is Associate Professor in Environment and Sustainable Development at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, The Netherlands and visiting Associate Professor at the Department of Geography, Environmental Management and Energy Studies of the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He is the author of 'Transforming the Frontier. Peace Parks and the Politics of Neoliberal Conservation in Southern Africa' (Duke University Press, 2013). See: http://brambuscher.com.

Jim Igoe is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at Dartmouth College. He is the author of 'Conservation and Globalization' (Wadsworth 2004); Co-Editor of 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: African NGOs, Donors, and the State' (Carolina Academic Press 2005); and co-author of 'Nature Unbound' (Earthscan, 2008). See: http://spectacleofnature.wordpress.com/.