Breaking points at the margin: Community mobilization and the continued failure of co-management of protected areas in South Africa

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Abstract

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Abstract:

In developing countries such as South Africa, where the state and its citizens seek to move toward ideals of social and ecological transformation, while at the same time grappling with historical legacies of injustice and marginalization, co-management has become seen as the key solution in cases of land claims on protected areas. Alienation from land and natural resources for black South Africans was a core feature of the Apartheid regime, and redressing this injustice has been a key focus of development policy since 1994. As of March 2013, three million hectares of land had been awarded to land claimants throughout the country. 150 land claims have been lodged against protected areas, 46 of which have been settled. Ministerial agreements tie the outcome of such claims to 'conservation in perpetuity' and co-management agreements between claimant communities and state conservation agencies. Compromises such as these are made by historically marginalized communities based on justified expectations of material benefits, such as access to natural resources and revenue from tourism. A review of four cases in South Africa has highlighted the failure of such benefits to materialize, the limited sharing of decision-making functions in practice by conservation agencies, and an unwillingness on the part of the state to consider approaches other than co-management. We reflect on the extent to which communities will continue to tolerate such experiences. We discuss recent cases of, sometimes, drastic responses by communities to the perceived failure of co-management, including the closure of protected areas by communities and the purposeful destruction of natural resources. These experiences highlight the agency of such communities, and point toward breaking points beyond which marginalized communities mobilize in pursuit of their aspirations of development and change.

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