

HDGC Teleconference Seminar October 1, 2003

Critique by Brian T. B. Jones¹ on the paper “Going Transboundary: Scale-making and Exclusion in Southern-African Conservation” by David McDermott Hughes

The following are comments on the paper titled “Going Transboundary: Scale-making and Exclusion in Southern-African Conservation” downloaded from the internet site: <http://hdgc.epp.cmu.edu/misc/TBPA.htm>.

I have a number of comments on the paper that fall into two categories. The first category concerns the tone and overall approach of the paper and the second category concerns the arguments developed in the paper.

Let me deal with the tone and approach issues first. I found it disappointing that the paper adopts a tone that I find somewhat arrogant and condescending. This tone is adopted throughout and is best exemplified by the concluding remarks on the last page. This impression is exacerbated by the sometimes slick use of linguistic pyrotechnics, also well exemplified in the last two pages, and particularly the last three sentences. The overall impression that I was left with, was someone to trying to demonstrate how much more clever they are than the plodding planners and the benighted bureaucrats who are involved in the Greater Limpopo Project. This is a personal response, but one that I increasingly have to a growing body of social science research.

Another example of this comes from a paper available on the internet by an eminent social scientist:

“The official report is austere and drab reading. It is the kind of description one expects from an itinerant outsider. Such an observer appears on a social scene for a brief moment in time, gives the minimum details of a happening, declares the infraction solved with those guilty of the act delivered to or pursued by the appropriate authorities. After noting a few more activities out of place and needing attention, the report ends in passing on these observations for the attention of local officials. Everything is resolved and framed within a short time period and paragraph. Such lineal flattening characterizes the stuffy, bland writing of bureaucrats and of would-be managers of others with whom they share very little”.

Apart from the dripping condescension towards bureaucrats (always an obvious and easy target) I wonder if it crossed the writer’s mind that the person who wrote this might be writing in a second language and might not have the same writing skills as the author

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(the incident took place in an impoverished African country)? The paper by David Hughes demonstrates some clear similarities in its condescending tone and in its failure to examine alternative explanations for a particular outcome. Hughes for example, page 21, writes of the remarks of "a high placed official" and "the head of a Campfire (sic) agency":

"These planners saw tall towns where there were only dispersed huts in the process of dispersing further. Indeed their bureaucratic vision suffered from a defect inverse to that of the rhino, who cannot see people unless they move. Great Limpopo planners would not recognise people unless they stood still."

Hughes uses a quote from the head of the CAMPFIRE agency to demonstrate that planners were planning on the basis of "stasis", and a lack of understanding of the likelihood, that with population growth, "communities" would need to expand. Hughes writes, and quotes, as follows (also page 21):

"With greater certainty, the head of a Campfire (sic) agency coached me on his architectural strategy for peasants: 'Ok, let us expand upwards, and, if we can have some five storey buildings, rather than expanding that way' (arms outstretched)".

Goodness only knows the context of the discussion and what the head of the agency actually meant.

I provide another example of a failure to explore alternative explanations. Hughes describes the approach of planners to "optimum habitat" and argues that this is linked to some future state rather than the present, for example if water was provided for the game. In this regard he writes and quotes as follows (page 9):

"In same year {1994}, a report of the NGO Zimbabwe Trust treated the water issue in an equally perplexing fashion: 'Before any translocation of game [to Mahenye] can take place (and this is where the visible value lies), *water for game is essential*'. Why should game be visible and water invisible when neither existed at the site?"

Again it is not clear what the person being quoted really meant. We rely on the mediation of a researcher pre-disposed to a certain interpretation. But this whole paragraph presents a number of difficulties. First, the reference to value, within the CAMPFIRE context could have linked to one of the underlying premises of CAMPFIRE – to place value on wildlife. Second, in 1994 game did exist in Mahenye, and so did water, in the form of a river (and to my knowledge, still does). Third, the whole discussion could have taken place within the context of providing water in a boma for game to be translocated, a common practice in game capture and relocation, but the full context is not provided. I have considerable difficulty with trying to use the above quote as evidence that the "planners' notion of 'optimum habitat' bridged the gap between known present and an imagined future."

Another feature of the paper and other social science research currently common is an assumption of omniscience. The actions of real people are described and interpreted and motivations ascribed to them, with little real demonstration that these motivations were in fact held by these people. For example Hughes writes of and quotes a social scientist as follows (page 10):

“Climate change exceeded the grasp of many planners altogether. ‘To me, it’s not a variable I can deal with like AIDS,’ confessed a social scientist and Great Limpopo planner, ‘One is trying to think within human management timescales’. He meant that Great Limpopo planners dealt with business scenarios rather than ecological ones, regardless of the actual time involved.”

Did he indeed? This seems more like the researcher projecting his own meaning into the quote. Further, when I trained as a journalist (a previous career), one of the first things we were taught was to be careful with the use of language. “Confessed” in the text above is a loaded word that tells us more about the attitude of the researcher than it does about the social scientist.

Often, and I fear in this case, the actions and motivations of people are interpreted according to a pre-conceived set of social science theories. There is little attempt to test the theories with an open mind.

Another problem of approach, is that I find the paper full of generalisations that diminish the force of its argument. There is much reference to “southern African conservationists”, and “planners” in generalised terms. The author ascribes various philosophies and motivations to these conservationists and planners as if they were one homogenous group. He treats them rather like the way he says the planners treat communities, i.e. without recognising the considerable differentiation that exists. For example the phrase “Conservationist whites have leapt at the occasion” on page 5. Yes, well, some did, but many didn’t and don’t. There are many factions within conservation in southern Africa based on political and philosophical differences, but this is hardly recognised in most of the paper. This failure to adequately make these distinctions leads to a false impression being created in the minds of any reader. It also has the disadvantage of lumping in with the Greater Limpopo Planners, people who are as critical of the project as the author. On page 14, Hughes says “In the 1990s, the bulk of Southern African conservationists and development planners re-committed themselves to the social model of bounded communities of place.” I would strongly contest that the bulk of conservationists in southern Africa are committed to this at all. During the 1990s community-based approaches to conservation have been introduced by small groups of individuals who had influence at the time for various reasons, including political opportunities created by independence (Zimbabwe, Namibia), transition from *apartheid* (South Africa) or donor funded and externally-led programmes (Botswana). The bulk of conservationists in these countries at that time did not support community-based approaches, let alone a “social model of bounded communities of place. Most officials still believed in state authority and control, and that it was the obligation of the state to conserve wildlife, not other entities. Views among people working in conservation NGOs

were mixed, with some embracing community approaches, and others only paying lip service.

In the discussion above I have dealt with issues of tone, meaning and interpretation of meaning. The next discussion covers some conceptual issues.

The paper contains many generalisations which disguise many differences of thinking, approach and modes of implementation among conservationists and among those who promote community-based approaches. If some of these differences are acknowledged, I suggest it would be difficult to reach some of the author's conclusions. Thus those who promote community-based approaches to resource management are portrayed as wishing to confine communities to pre-determined boundaries based partly on bio-regionalist thinking and on Ostrom's common property theory (page 15). These proponents of "community" are then tenuously lumped in with the project planners.

There are a number of problems with this approach. Firstly, I believe it somewhat simplistic to suggest that community-based approaches *per se* mean the "enclosure" of communities within geographical boundaries and the prevention of expansion. Again I find myself reacting to generalisations in the text, while being ready to acknowledge that in some cases in Zimbabwe implementation of specific activities might lead to this conclusion. Secondly, community-based approaches in southern Africa owe little to far bioregionalism. If bioregionalists advocate for decentralisation and grass roots empowerment and notions of "community" this demonstrates some similarities with community-based approaches to natural resource management, but not necessarily a philosophical lineage. Community-based natural resource management and ideas of community owe much more to the work of Ostrom. However, Ostrom in her 1990 work cited by Hughes, does not refer to geographically bounded communities as he suggests. She refers to "clearly defined boundaries" as one of her design principles for long enduring common property resource institutions. But she then defines these boundaries as a) specifying those who have rights to use the resource and b) the boundaries of the resource itself (Ostrom 1990: 90-92). This is not enclosure of communities within geographical boundaries. Ostrom's points refer to defining who has access and who is excluded from access. This does not imply a pre-determined bounded "community". Nor does her point that the resource boundaries should be defined. Thirdly, community-based approaches certainly appear to have been incorporated within the implementation plan of the Greater Limpopo Project. I would suggest, however, that it is the language of community-based approaches that has been co-opted to help justify a top-down approach. The community-based approaches that the author refers to also rest very heavily on the notion of providing people with rights over land and resources. If they had these rights, governments and certain conservation NGOs would not be able to impose the new preservationist eco-imperialism that we are seeing. Local residents (or the author's peasants – surely another homogenising term) have no rights in the process, no voice and no power. Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is based on providing all

three. CBNRM and the transboundary natural resource management (TBNRM) of the Greater Limpopo Project intersect in different ways. But they are not part of the same philosophical lineage as the author tries to demonstrate. They are more in opposition than they are in collusion.

In general I agree with the author's conclusion that the Greater Limpopo project is not good for rural people, but I am not sure that I agree with the way he has come to that conclusion.

REFERENCE:

Ostrom E. (1990). *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.