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## Guest editorial

## Conservation in violent environments: Introduction to a special issue on the political ecology of conservation amidst violent conflict

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords

Conservation  
Violence  
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Green militarisation  
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This special issue analyses the specificities of conservation in situations where protected areas are embedded in violent conflicts or larger geographies of protracted violence, civil- and colonial wars, and political violence. This is important to study because many conservation initiatives operate in wider contexts of violent conflict to protect the environment, but increasingly also to address the causes and dynamics of conflict. Together the papers in this special issue examine the different kinds of conservation partnerships, types of practices and the range of outcomes that characterise these initiatives.

Within conservation circles a central challenge is: what are the best ways to conserve nature during, or in the aftermath of, war. Recent studies, mostly quantitative, have highlighted that war and protracted violent conflict can negatively impact biodiversity and the integrity of protected areas (Daskin & Pringle, 2018). Instead of withdrawing from the protection of key species in these areas, certain scholars make a strong case that conservation efforts should continue and can actually be central to post-conflict peacebuilding efforts (see Ali, 2007; Conca & Dabelko, 2002); these efforts include the active involvement of international conservation actors (NGOs, donors, private sector, international organisations) which should step-in to avoid the destruction of flora and fauna (see e.g. Eckersley, 2007). Some argue that this is especially important in contexts where national authorities either do not prioritize conservation, have inadequate resources and/or political will to engage in effective conservation, and that it is therefore critical that external actors step in to fill a conservation vacuum (Hanson et al., 2009). This can result in a particular form of externally funded 'crisis conservation', which is implemented along a range of other international interventions such as peacekeeping, security sector reform, and justice and reconciliation programs. Furthermore, increasing amounts of development aid are allocated to conservation efforts, often with the stated ambition to contribute to statebuilding and stabilisation in countries such as Afghanistan, Mali, Myanmar, and the Democratic

Republic of Congo (Marijnen, 2017).

To date, however, political ecologists and geographers have not paid sufficient attention to this increasing involvement of conservation actors in areas characterised by ongoing violent conflict. To date, political ecology literature on the intersections between conservation and violence has convincingly demonstrated how the politics of conservation (and conservation itself) can contribute to (violent) conflict. These literatures focused on the emergence and spread of 'green violence' (Büscher & Ramutsindela, 2016), 'green wars' (Büscher & Fletcher, 2018; Ybarra, 2012), 'green militarisation' (Duffy, 2014; Duffy et al., 2019; Lunstrum, 2014; Massé, 2018) and the greening of counter-insurgency (Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014; Verweijen & Marijnen, 2016). These studies, however, largely overlooked the impact of wider violent and conflict dynamics on conservation (with some notable exceptions, Ojeda, 2012; Lombard, 2015; Kelly, 2015; Marijnen, 2018; Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018). The involvement of conservation actors in conflict-affected settings means there is a need to develop a more precise understanding of how these conservation dynamics alter when they are entangled within wider landscapes of protected violent conflict or war.

This special issue fills this gap by focusing on the linkages and dynamics between conservation and larger contexts of violent conflict or war by critically analysing 'crisis conservation' in times of war, and its practices, discourses and consequences. The collection also contributes to the environmental peacebuilding debate by offering political ecology critiques of initiatives that approach conservation as a 'win-win', as a form of collaboration between warring parties to save nature and contribute to peace (Ali, 2007; Conca & Dabelko, 2002). The articles all demonstrate that it is important that such environmental peacebuilding initiatives should not depoliticize and render legacies of violent pasts invisible, nor be blind to current dynamics that reproduce violence even when war 'officially' has ended. This special issue is a first step, but more

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in-depth research on conservation practices in larger violent geographies is vital.

## 1. The way forward: A research agenda

Collectively the nine papers in this special issue indicate that there are three different themes between conservation, violent conflict and space, which need to be critically investigated when analysing conservation practices in geographies of violent conflict. Further research needs to uncover and put at the centre of our analyses, any remaining colonial durabilities in the structuring, and understanding of these relations. First, it is important to scrutinise collaborations, negotiations and partnerships evolving around conservation in the face of protracted conflict and violence; second, there is urgent need to situate (militarised) conservation within contexts of larger political projects to remove/control populations, and to counter resistance; and third, research is needed on the use of (military) technologies in conservation, and how these may be used, mis-used and appropriated by different actors in violent environments. We introduce these three themes below, in relation to the individual papers in this special issue. However, in advocating further research on these themes, it is vital that the forms of knowledge production, the theories, methods and practices of research challenge persisting relations of domination, in other words, that narratives, and conservation approaches are decolonized. This is important because colonization inherently restructured landscapes, and nature-society relations.

### 1.1. Conservation collaborations, negotiations and partnerships in the face of violence

Several papers emphasize the importance of the *interplay* between conservation and conflict, rather than regarding conflict solely as threat to conservation (especially protected areas), which can serve to justify and legitimate intervention by external or military actors (Hanson et al., 2009). Instead the papers highlight the importance of examining continuities and place conservation efforts in their broader historical and political contexts, -paying attention to the unequal power relations upon which conservation partnerships are built (See Minarchek, 2020; Lombard & Tubiana, 2020 Titeca et al., 2020). Moreover, Verweijen (2020) argues that in addition to describing these legacies of unequal power relations, we also need to interrogate how and when such unequal partnerships (including the transnational influence of donors and NGOs) result in direct forms of physical violence.

### 1.2. Controlling populations and countering resistance

In violent environments, conservation efforts risk fulfilling the additional political, social or even economic objectives of other actors (especially states). In such contexts, conservation objectives are often of secondary importance to controlling populations, curtailing resistance, and wider objectives of securitization and militarisation. In these cases, conservation (knowingly or unwittingly) offers an additional tool for the repression, removal and controlling of populations (Constantinou et al., 2020; Dutta, 2020; Minarchek, 2020; Muralidharan & Rai, 2020; Woods & Naimark, 2020). Conservation can either be the core-motivation for this 'state of exception' or an addition to other motivations for state-authorities to control people, territory and resources.

### 1.3. The perils and potential of (military) technologies

In the critical conservation literature, the use of military technologies and equipment like drones, infrared and GIS, scholars highlight the ways they can (problematically) render issues as technical and apolitical, and they point to the risks of abuse and violation of rights to protect, control and contain wildlife as well as people living in conservation areas, and because they risk rendering political issues technical

(Sandbrook, 2015). Several contributions to the special issue acknowledge these risks and offer a broader analysis of the perils and potential of using such technologies (Millner, 2020; Verweijen, 2020; Woods & Naimark, 2020). Millner (2020), for example, demonstrates how communities and people effectively use their agency through technology to rework the spatial order as imposed by states, elites and conservation actors. Woods and Naimark (2020) show how in Myanmar, technologies adapted from military applications simultaneously support exploration for creation of a protected area and support Government strategies to territorialize the state in rebel held areas. Verweijen (2020) highlights the ways the use of such technologies contributes to specific instances of actual physical violence.

## 2. Concluding remarks

We hope to inspire further research on conservation in geographies of violent conflict and war, by further interrogating the three themes described above. There is an urgent need to integrate these dynamics to a wider study of nature-society relations in these areas. Nearly twenty years after Peluso and Watts (2001) "Violent Environments", there still is a need to consider and challenge the persistence of numerous a-priori assumptions about the relationship between society and nature in contexts of violence. It is often too easily assumed that people facing conflict or violence automatically become a threat to nature, and resort to the destruction and plundering of their natural environment in search of valuable natural resources. The contributions here convincingly demonstrate that people have multi-faceted relationships with nature in violent environments, and develop complex interactions with conservation territories, actors and partnerships.

## Declaration of competing interest

We hereby confirm that we have no conflict of interest in publishing this introduction to the special issue: conservation in violent environments.

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