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## Research Articles

# Conservation's Friends in High Places: Neoliberalism, Networks, and the Transnational Conservation Elite

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*George Holmes*

Despite a massive worldwide crisis of biodiversity loss, there have been considerable successes in global conservation.<sup>1</sup> An ever-increasing amount of land is contained in protected areas, which now cover over 12 percent of the world's land surface area, and over 25 percent in some countries.<sup>2</sup> International conservation NGOs are growing in size and influence, and global political structures give increasing prominence to conservation issues.<sup>3</sup> Representations of biodiversity as exotic and endangered, occupying places where humans are destructive intruders, have become ubiquitous. Accompanying these successes have been profound changes in the way conservation works. Conservation is increasingly planned at a global scale. The roles of NGOs, corporations, and the state are increasingly indistinguishable. Market mechanisms and logics are becoming seen as the only way to do effective conservation.<sup>4</sup>

This article argues that at the heart of this trend lies a well-connected and networked elite, shaping conservation discourses and practices. It draws its membership from across NGOs, states, corporations, science, and the media and it works through personal contacts. Elite connections have been central since the emergence of a global conservation movement over a century ago,<sup>5</sup> but the current elite is bigger, more diverse, more powerful, more effectively structured and more influential than the elites of the past. Its emergence and structure are consequences of shifts in global environmental governance and

1. Although there are many understandings of conservation (Adams 2005), here it is defined as the protection of nature, particularly as biodiversity and in its threatened parts, for its own intrinsic value through protecting the places in which it is found. This is distinct from environmentalism, a concern for humanity's relationship with nature in general.
2. IUCN-UNEP 2005.
3. Chapin 2004; and Princen and Finger 1994.
4. Brockington, Duffy and Igoe 2008.
5. Adams 2005; Brockington 2009; Jacoby 2001; and Mackenzie 1988.

the global political economy of nature. Here I outline the shape and workings of the elite, contributing to an emerging body of literature on changes in the organization and functioning of conservation.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on the neoliberalization of conservation, the movement towards a decreased role of the state and a greater role for civil society and markets in conservation. It then explores the different parts of the transnational conservation elite—NGOs, the state, corporations, intellectuals, and the media—focusing on the interactions among them. A series of vignettes showing the elite in action briefly illustrates the arguments, showing how the elite functions and how money, influence, and ideas are mobilized. The conclusion considers the potential for global conservation hegemony posed by the elite.

While conservation involves diverse actors, discourses, and policies, this argument concerns one small part of this phenomenon. The argument refers to actors who have global-scale (or at least continental) goals, and who can move influence, money, discourses, and other resources of power around the world with relative ease. These processes and actors are distinct from, and may have a fractured relationship with, those operating at national or local scales. The picture presented here generally portrays a powerful and relatively successful conservation elite, yet it is but one part of a wider picture. Neoliberalized conservation is not homogenous worldwide, but skips around, strongly present in some places but absent in others.<sup>6</sup>

The claims made here are based on a reading of the existing literature on global conservation, rather than on original empirical data. There are a number of studies of global conservation at work, from ethnographies of conservation meetings to insider accounts of conservation NGOs' strategies. Taken collectively, this expanding body of work points to the existence of a transnational conservation elite, and allows an exploration of how it functions. In describing the elite and its links and connections, the article aims to inform and guide further research into conservation politics and its neoliberalization.

### **Elites, Neoliberalism, and Conservation**

The argument made here takes inspiration from two bodies of literature: one focused on the emergence of global networks of actors working around global environmental issues and the other focused on the neoliberalization of nature. Within the former, studies reveal how new institutions, mechanisms, and techniques to deal with particular global environmental problems are created as diverse actors come together.<sup>7</sup> Literature on epistemic communities explores the coalitions of knowledge producers forming around certain issues.<sup>8</sup> Others dis-

6. Brockington and Scholfield 2009.

7. Adger et al. 2001.

8. Berkes 2004.

cuss discursive coalitions: diverse actors from a broad range of organizations and backgrounds who loosely coalesce around, develop, thrive upon, and sustain particular storylines of environmental change.<sup>9</sup> Struggles in environmental politics are battles to assert discursive hegemony: to ensure that one's own storyline is taken to be the authoritative, accepted version, forming the basis for policy. These ideas all describe a broad mix of actors from a range of institutions and constituencies coming together to shape how a certain issue is thought about, discussed, and acted upon. They fit well with modern writings on elites which define elites not as a fixed upper tier in society, but as groups of individuals distinguished by their disproportionate influence in particular areas.<sup>10</sup> This approach is based on ideas of societal networks, where influence is transient and context-specific and works through relationships. There can be multiple elites, working at different scales and influencing different issues. Elite membership is heterogeneous—for example, parliamentarians are often viewed as the quintessential elites, yet television presenters and academics can also be highly influential, albeit in different ways.

In recent years, scholars from across a number of disciplines have argued that changes in governments, markets, and business across the globe over the last three decades are part of a wider process of neoliberalization. Although the term has been used to describe a very broad range of phenomena, it is commonly used to describe the movement towards the rolling back and shrinking of the state and the growing role of civil society, markets, and market mechanisms in providing services. Neoliberalism refers to the ideas and theories behind it. Within this process, geographers and other cognate disciplines have identified a process of neoliberalization of nature, whereby the control and ownership of bits of nature, and the economic and political forces to which nature is subject, are changing in line with this general movement. While there is no one neoliberalization of nature—it varies across scales and between places—some common features have been identified.<sup>11</sup> Pieces of previously state-controlled or commonly held nature are increasingly being privatized. Nature is increasingly given a value and turned into a global market commodity. The state is rolling back, decreasing regulation of nature and its use, except where it is re-regulating nature to facilitate privatization and marketization. Market logics of efficiency and competitiveness are increasingly incorporated into the state and civil society. The interchanging of roles between the state civil society and corporations, and the shared faith in market logics, has blurred the boundaries between for-profit, non-profit, and state. Neoliberalization of nature is increasingly recognized as a process, a transformation of society. It is a deepened and extended trend, rather than something radically new.<sup>12</sup>

Conservation has always been part of wider political structures, such as na-

9. Hajer 1995.

10. Woods 1998.

11. For the best exploration of this complex topic, see Castree 2008a and 2008b.

12. Castree 2008a and 2008b.

tionalism, colonialism, and earlier forms of capitalism, and it has naturally become affected by neoliberalism.<sup>13</sup> By studying NGOs, corporations, and state bureaucracies, a few key features of conservation's neoliberalization have been identified.<sup>14</sup> First, following general neoliberal principles of state roll-back, the state's role in conservation has been widely reduced, except where it has been redeployed to regulate and facilitate markets. It has been replaced by corporate actors and especially by NGOs, who have never before had such a close relationship with government. States are increasingly entering into arrangements for joint governance of issues and places, such as running protected areas, with other organizations, particularly NGOs—or in some instances, devolving control entirely.<sup>15</sup> Such developments blur the lines separating state, for-profit, and non-profit actors.

In the context of global neoliberalism institutions like states, corporations, multi-lateral financial institutions and conservation BINGOs are increasingly interlinked by dense networks of actors, ideas and money. In fact, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish where these institutions end and the networks that connect them begin.<sup>16</sup>

Changes in the state are reflected by changes in NGOs, which have upscaled to connect with national governments and international institutions, while disconnecting with grassroots.<sup>17</sup>

Second, the view that the only way to save nature is by turning to businesses and market mechanisms is spreading, and programs aiming to commodify nature in order to save it are expanding.<sup>18</sup> Conservation has long promoted market solutions, yet it has never before been so enthusiastic about the possibilities of capitalism as it is today. Keynote speeches at the most important conservation conferences urge audience members to engage with business and business models, touting carbon credits, wetlands offsets, ecotourism, and other market schemes as the most effective way to save biodiversity while simultaneously saving the economy.<sup>19</sup> Much of this relies on finding new ways of turning protected biodiversity into tradable commodities, particularly by repackaging it through representation and symbols.<sup>20</sup>

As detailed below, conservation has become neoliberalized because of the desire of key neoliberal actors (states, corporations, international financial institutions) to use conservation to their own advantage, and because of active repositioning by conservation actors to better fit and make themselves more

13. MacDonald 2010.

14. Brockington and Duffy 2010; and Igoe and Brockington 2007.

15. Brockington and Duffy 2010.

16. Brockington and Duffy 2010, 439.

17. Brockington, Duffy and Igoe. 2008; MacDonald 2010; and Sachedina 2010.

18. Brockington and Duffy 2010; and McAfee 1999.

19. Igoe, Neves and Brockington. 2010; and MacDonald 2010.

20. Igoe, Neves and Brockington 2010.

influential in a neoliberal world.<sup>21</sup> Rolled-back states have looked toward NGOs to fill the gap in service provision.<sup>22</sup> The rise of neoliberal thinking correlates with the rise in size and stature of NGOs.<sup>23</sup> Large NGOs have changed their discourses and practice, particularly engaging with business, to expand and improve their work, following what they consider to be the best way to conserve biodiversity.<sup>24</sup> Neoliberalized conservation has replaced a situation in which NGOs were smaller and more distant from corporations and the state, and although not necessarily critical of capitalism, certainly less enthusiastic.

Ideas on elites and neoliberal conservation are not incompatible. The transnational conservation elite reflects both. It is described below as a broad coalition of elite actors from a range of backgrounds and constituencies, who promote saving biodiversity through repositioning the state, corporations, and NGOs and through market mechanisms. Literatures on elites and on neoliberal conservation both discuss the increased power of NGOs and the blurring boundaries among state, for-profit, and non-profit sectors. Elites and neoliberalism have been successfully studied simultaneously,<sup>25</sup> and many studies of neoliberal conservation have emphasized the importance of elites.<sup>26</sup>

The crisis of global biodiversity loss is real and serious, and highly motivated conservationists have developed ever more complex methods and structures to counter it and to fund their efforts. Critiques of the politics, social impacts, and neoliberalization of conservation have been controversial, but they rarely aim to undermine the efforts of conservationists or diminish the vital challenge of reversing biodiversity loss. Indeed, conservation has become neoliberalized and the transnational conservation elite has emerged precisely because key actors believe these are the most effective means of tackling this crisis; the expansion of NGOs and protected areas is testimony to their success. This article is not an *ad hominem* attack on the mission or integrity of conservationists, but an exploration of their work and the consequences of their strategies.

The following sections outline the different constituencies that make up the transnational conservation elite, covering NGOs, the state, corporations, science, and media. Despite this distinction among different types of actors, the movement of ideas, influence, and individuals across constituencies has blurred boundaries so that the elite should be considered as a collective. This elite functions through personal contacts, often deliberately cultivated. It works as ideas are swapped and lobbying happens at meetings, conferences, and social occasions and through the creation of joint projects involving different actors in the elite.

21. Büscher 2008.

22. Brockington and Duffy 2010.

23. Brockington and Scholfield 2010.

24. MacDonald 2010.

25. Sklair 2000.

26. Corson 2010; Holmes 2010; MacDonald 2010; and Spierenberg and Wels 2010.

## NGOs in Globalized Conservation

Large conservation NGOs could be considered the originators of global conservation and they are principal actors in its current form. Since their inception over a century ago, they have mobilized political and financial support from one location to create protected areas in distant places.<sup>27</sup> Excluding a few younger organizations such as the UN Environment Programme, NGOs are the only organizations with global manifestoes on environmental issues and the only ones focusing specifically on biodiversity conservation. They have long benefited from being seen as the most capable actors in conserving biodiversity globally, becoming entrusted with prominent roles in global treaties and structures.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, NGOs lead conservation thinking: they employ large numbers of conservation scientists, and they produce the most innovative research as well as key papers and editorials in leading journals on biodiversity and beyond.<sup>29</sup> This ideological influence belies their political and financial weakness relative to states, international institutions, or corporations. Their position is strengthened by claiming to be neutral, expert, honest brokers, a view actively cultivated by representing themselves as always successful and as the best bulwark against corporate environmental damage.<sup>30</sup> While most large international conservation NGOs originated previously, the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s allowed NGOs to grow in size and influence and to globalize; they came to be promoted as providers of services and were given power and money to replace the state in many areas.<sup>31</sup>

There is a consensus that the size, mobility, and influence of the few largest international conservation NGOs mark them as different from other organizations.<sup>32</sup> Their directors and senior staff lie at the heart of the transnational conservation elite. These NGOs are characterized by their global-scale aims and operations and their contacts with politicians, bureaucrats, scientists, and the media which allow them to influence conservation thought and practice. NGOs in this category include WWF-US and WWF-International, The Nature Conservancy, African Wildlife Foundation, Wildlife Conservation Society, Conservation International (CI), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and Birdlife International. Although these organizations have historical roots in local issues and campaigns, over the last two decades they have consciously become global actors: changing their structure, detaching themselves from local issues, and gaining access to the political and financial resources of contemporary globalization, particularly those associated with development aid and international

27. Adams 2005; and Mackenzie 1988.

28. Princen and Finger 1994.

29. Da Fonseca 2003.

30. Corson 2010; and Igoe, Neves and Brockington. 2010.

31. Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington 2007; and Scholfield and Brockington 2008.

32. Chapin 2004; Da Fonseca 2003; Igoe and Brockington 2007; Rodriguez et al. 2007; and Scholfield and Brockington 2008.

financial institutions (see below).<sup>33</sup> Tellingly, of the ten conservation NGOs who spend the most money in Africa, only one has its headquarters in the continent.<sup>34</sup>

There are sufficient connections and contacts between the boards of these large conservation NGOs to consider them collectively as a community. First, directors and senior staff move between different organizations or sit concurrently on multiple NGO boards. New NGOs are sometimes created from fissures within others—Conservation International was formed by disenfranchised directors of The Nature Conservancy, augmented later by defectors from WWF.<sup>35</sup> Second, they interact at conferences such as the World Parks Congress and through joint initiatives created to coordinate lobbying and strategies.<sup>36</sup> Third, directors from different NGOs interact by sitting on the board of a third organization, mirroring the strategies of corporate directors who sit on multiple boards to gain access to a greater number of influential people and to maintain close links to their peers.<sup>37</sup>

Close connections between leading figures allow ideas to spread, forming a relatively homogenous set of practices. Many NGOs share similar attitudes and relationships with corporations, and copy one another's fundraising strategies.<sup>38</sup> Big NGOs represent nature and solutions to its preservation in very similar ways.<sup>39</sup> In recent years, large NGOs have all scaled up their fundraising and operational focus to encompass entire landscapes, promoting similar ideas under different brand names (such as "hotspot" or "ecoregion").<sup>40</sup> Alongside transfrontier protected areas and biodiversity corridors, such large-scale projects reinforce the dominance of large NGOs while excluding smaller ones, on the premise that only large NGOs have the resources and ability to work at such scales. These projects are considered particularly neoliberal because of the prominence of market mechanisms within them, and because many involve devolving control of protected areas to NGOs.<sup>41</sup>

## Supportive States in Transnational Conservation

The neoliberalization of conservation has altered relationships between states and NGOs. With increasing devolution of control and implementation of certain policy areas, states are creating new arenas for work and new areas of

33. Birchard 2005; Corson 2010; MacDonald 2010; and Sachedina 2010.

34. Brockington and Scholfield 2010.

35. Chapin 2004.

36. Corson 2010; and Jepson 2005. Such formalized structures and coordination between these large NGOs suggests they self-identify as a global network.

37. Rothkopf 2008; and Sklair 2000.

38. Chapin 2004; and Dowie 1995.

39. Igoe forthcoming.

40. Rodriguez et al. 2007.

41. Büscher and Whande 2007; and Grandia 2007.



influence for NGOs, who are invited to replace the reduced state in implementing conservation because of their perceived expertise relative to the state.<sup>42</sup> International development agencies have encouraged NGOs to work on issues where Southern states are perceived to be weak or reluctant to act, which has benefited conservation NGOs.<sup>43</sup> As the CEO of the African Wildlife Foundation put it, "Basically, AWF is becoming an extension arm of USAID in Africa."<sup>44</sup>

Although neoliberal shifts in governance may drive the devolution of some state activities to NGOs, personal contacts shape which actors have influence and a position in resulting structures and processes, in both development<sup>45</sup> and conservation. Conservation NGOs carefully foster close personal relationships with state actors as a strategy to earn support.<sup>46</sup> Many personal contacts are cultivated by movement of personnel, from former heads of state joining NGO boards to exchanges at lower ranks, increasing NGOs' lobbying ability. Such movement makes it difficult to distinguish between who works for the state or NGOs, blurring boundaries between the sectors. NGOs take politicians and senior bureaucrats on trips to foreign parks to campaign for international development funding for biodiversity.<sup>47</sup> Close contacts between key bureaucrats and directors of large NGOs were allegedly pivotal in creating the global ban on trading ivory.<sup>48</sup> Close connections between NGOs and heads of state have driven rapid growth of protected areas in Gabon, the Dominican Republic, and Costa Rica.<sup>49</sup>

Conservation NGOs have similarly cultivated relationships with multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, following increased interaction between these organizations and NGOs generally.<sup>50</sup> Personnel have been exchanged, from board level down to movement of technical experts. Importantly, these organizations have been under pressure to green their activities. Lacking conservation expertise or experience, they have turned to NGOs for help, giving them money, political influence, and key roles in biodiversity structures and treaties.<sup>51</sup> With the rise of community conservation, NGOs have reclassified their activities as "development," increasing their potential for donor agency funding.<sup>52</sup> Multilateral donors provided 27.7 percent of international conservation funding during the late 1990s in Latin America, the biggest source of funds.<sup>53</sup>

Close connections have fostered two-way exchanges of ideas and dis-

42. Corson 2010.

43. Igoe and Brockington 2007.

44. Sachedina 2010, 608.

45. Mitlin, Hickey, and Bebbington 2007.

46. Corson 2010; and Sachedina 2010.

47. Corson 2010.

48. Bonner 1993.

49. Boza 1993; Garland 2008; and Holmes 2010.

50. Fisher 1997; Jepson 2005; and Mitlin, Hickey, and Bebbington. 2007.

51. Goldman 2001; Kull 1996; and Princen and Finger 1994.

52. Adams and Hulme 2001.

53. Castro and Locker 2000.

courses, reinforcing the position of NGOs. NGOs have shifted to supporting free market conservation promoted by multilateral donors, who have in turn adopted NGOs' discourses (such as "ecoregions"), and use NGOs' criteria and standards to assess the success of the conservation projects they fund.<sup>54</sup>

### Corporate Elites and Conservation Elites

Corporate funding for conservation NGOs is increasing, driving the rapid growth of some large NGOs.<sup>55</sup> An important and common critique is that NGOs are reticent to criticize the environmental record of their corporate donors.<sup>56</sup> Yet corporations provide only around 10 percent of funds for large NGOs.<sup>57</sup> A more significant form of influence comes from corporate domination of NGO boards. Fifteen of the twenty-six board members at The Nature Conservancy are or have been directors of large transnational corporations, as have twenty-six of thirty-six board members at CI and thirteen of twenty-one at WWF-US.<sup>58</sup> In all cases, directors with a corporate management background have displaced and now greatly outnumber those with biological training or other "technical" backgrounds. In addition, these NGOs each have a business council, made exclusively from corporate directors, to advise the board of directors.

Corporate directors were invited to join NGO boards to bring in management expertise and allow NGOs access to the corporate world. This has successfully facilitated flows of ideas and influence from corporations into conservation. NGOs have adopted corporate strategies and structures, often copied directly from companies controlled by board members, engaging in corporate practices of consolidation and expansion. Such strategies have been key to the growth and international expansion of the largest conservation NGOs which have created special units staffed by business experts to better engage with corporations.<sup>59</sup> Corporations in turn are attracted by the business opportunities created by emerging markets in nature and by opportunities for greenwashing.<sup>60</sup>

Although closer corporate ties and the adoption of corporate practices have increased NGOs' influence and finances, these practices have also purportedly made them less inclined to criticize companies with whom they have links, and more likely to pursue expansion for its own sake rather than to better pro-

54. Adams 2005; and Bundell 2006.

55. Adams 2005; Chapin 2004; and Rodriguez 2007.

56. Chapin 2004; Dowie 1995; and McAfee 1999.

57. Brechin et al. 2008.

58. The Nature Conservancy, "About Us: Our Governance," available at [www.nature.org/aboutus/leadership](http://www.nature.org/aboutus/leadership), accessed 12 March 2008; <http://www.conservation.org/about/team/bod/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed 14 April 2008; and World Wildlife Fund, "Who We Are: Board of Directors," available at [www.worldwildlife.org/who/board/index.html](http://www.worldwildlife.org/who/board/index.html), accessed 14 April 2008.

59. Birchard 2005; and MacDonald 2010.

60. Igoe, Neves, and Brockington 2010.

tect biodiversity.<sup>61</sup> Increased corporate involvement has also coincided with increased promotion by NGOs of corporate solutions to conservation problems, advocating neoliberal strategies of commodifying nature to save it, such as carbon credits and luxury ecotourism.<sup>62</sup>

Philanthropic foundations, linked to corporations through their origins, funding, board membership, and pro-corporate outlook, represent a significant, growing, and under-theorized source of indirect corporate influence on conservation.<sup>63</sup> Like corporations, foundations exchange personnel, ideas, and money with conservation NGOs, working through personal contacts. Foundations are the second largest income source for the NGO sector in the United States, giving US\$ 1 billion annually, most notably touching conservation through the US\$ 261 million Moore Foundation grant to CI.<sup>64</sup> Conservationists deliberately cultivate close relationships with foundations and the philanthropists behind them to increase their incomes.<sup>65</sup> A growing trend in conservation philanthropy is rich individuals creating private protected areas, which occupy more land than state conservation areas in some countries.<sup>66</sup>

### Science and Knowledge in the Transnational Conservationist Elite

Knowledge supports and reinvigorates conservation, giving practitioners new and better ways of acting, in new places, with new arguments and justifications. Producers and disseminators of ideas are important in the conservation elite, closely linked to NGOs and bureaucracies. NGOs have great ability to produce knowledge and to use it to get resources and shape conservation practice. Much knowledge is in the form of science, which conservationists use (or claim to use) to plan effective actions. NGOs produce more conservation research, with greater policy impact, than universities.<sup>67</sup> Science produces key concepts underpinning conservation (biodiversity, endemism, ecosystem, endangered) and ways of measuring them, which are used by NGOs as calls for action (and consequently money and influence). Such concepts do not translate easily or unaltered into policy, but they permit new arguments and ways of acting, giving new power to conservationists.

Alongside natural sciences, social science has contributed to conservation knowledge, particularly since the rise of community conservation.<sup>68</sup> Debates on community conservation have been overly reliant on simplistic narratives, using a few well-known case studies to demonstrate apparently universal truths.<sup>69</sup> By extension, this makes the few individuals behind these studies particularly in-

61. Dowie 1995; and Rothkopf 2008.

62. Igoe, Neves, and Brockington. 2010; and MacDonald 2010.

63. Vogel 2006.

64. Chapin 2004; and Mercer 2007.

65. MacDonald 2008; and Western 1997.

66. Langholz and Lassoie 2001.

67. Da Fonseca 2003.

68. Roe 2008.

69. Adams and Hulme 2001; and Hutton, Adams, and Murombedzi 2005.

fluent; the rise of community conservation in East Africa was largely attributable to a few charismatic, dynamic, and well-connected knowledge producers.<sup>70</sup> The connections among knowledge producers, NGOs, and bureaucracies make them particularly influential—particularly individuals who combine research and advocacy, such as David Western, Jane Goodall, and George Schaller.

### **Celebrities, the Media, and Conservation Elites**

Transnational conservation depends on particular representations of biodiversity, nature, and conservation to spread a positive view of conservation and promote its fundamental values. Conservationists benefit greatly from being widely seen as good people, heroically doing essential work towards an intrinsically worthwhile goal, and from representations of nature in books, film, and television as endangered, exotic, non-human, and uncontroversial.<sup>71</sup> These representations, sometimes consciously cultivated by NGOs through media tie-ins, filter into public understandings of biodiversity, creating public support for conservation and financial and political resources for conservation NGOs. Recently, representations have had a neoliberal turn, promoting messages that nature can best be saved through consumption, such as CI partnering with McDonald's to produce Endangered Species Happy Meals.<sup>72</sup>

Among the transnational conservation elite are “celebrity conservationists”: high profile individuals who embody and promote the idea of conservation and who can influence public and elite opinion. They include film actors promoting conservation, presenters of TV nature programs, well-known conservation practitioners, and even fictional characters such as Tarzan.<sup>73</sup> Celebrities sustain global conservation and the transnational conservationist elite by deliberately or inadvertently promoting it as an idea to be supported financially and politically. Many have high-profile involvement with conservation NGOs. Their influence can be directly linked to the success of various conservation projects.<sup>74</sup> Yet this media and celebrity support is for certain forms of conservation; by presenting ideas of nature as distant, separate from humans, they promotes strategies such as protected areas at the expense of quotidian nature at home, integrated with society. The transnational conservation elite can use media and celebrity to ensure they are seen as natural leaders in conservation, and promote ideas which support and maintain themselves.

### **Transnational Conservation Elite at Work and Play**

The transnational conservation elite functions through personal interactions which allow for the exchange of ideas, money, and influence. Much of this oc-

70. Barrow, Gichohi, and Infield. 2001.

71. Brockington 2009; and Garland 2008.

72. Brockington and Duffy 2010; Garland 2008; and Igoe forthcoming.

73. Brockington 2009.

74. Adams and McShane 1992; and Garland 2008.

curs in formal spaces, such as boardrooms, government and donor agency offices, and conferences such as the World Conservation Congress. Yet it also happens in very social spaces—just as business executives go to great lengths to maximize lobbying and networking opportunities at social functions and on golf courses,<sup>75</sup> the transnational conservation elite use informal occasions as prime places of advocacy and fundraising. The following vignettes show some of these interactions in more detail, drawing on various ethnographies of conservation. They are selected to demonstrate typical ways in which elite members interact, and because the first two and last involve pioneers of strategies that have been widely copied within global conservation.

#### *The International Conservation Caucus*

Despite intense competition for funding, conservation NGOs often coordinate on matters of mutual interest. The neoliberal transition of USAID in the 1980s and 1990s, from a deliverer of development programs to an organization that provides grants to others to deliver development, led USAID to give significant grants to large conservation NGOs to preserve biodiversity globally. The downgrading of biodiversity in US foreign policy priorities in 2001 threatened this practice, leading WWF-US, The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society and CI to unite to form the International Conservation Partnership, which aimed to build broad support within the US Congress for biodiversity conservation in foreign and development policy.<sup>76</sup> This initiative inspired the creation of the International Conservation Caucus, one of the largest bipartisan caucuses in the US Congress. It attracted many politicians from all sides because conservation is seen as uncontroversial, unlike other forms of environmentalism, and because the foreign focus avoids conflicts with politicians' domestic constituencies.<sup>77</sup> The same NGOs, allied with considerable corporate funding, created the International Conservation Caucus Foundation (ICCF) to support the caucus, with the mission statement:

It is our belief that as America has exported freedom, democracy, and free enterprise, we have the ability and the interest to see that America also exports good natural resource management.<sup>78</sup>

The ICCF uses networking and close connections between conservationists and politicians to earn continued political support and USAID spending on biodiversity.<sup>79</sup> They campaign extensively, provide congressional briefings on conservation topics, and fly politicians to visit protected areas abroad, chaperoned by

75. Rothkopf 2008; and Sklair 2000.

76. Corson 2010.

77. Corson 2010.

78. [http://www.iccfoundation.us/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=51&Itemid=66](http://www.iccfoundation.us/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=51&Itemid=66), accessed 22 March 2009.

79. Corson 2010.

NGO officials. There is a strong social side; NGO directors, politicians, and other interested parties mingle at the lavish galas, receptions, and awards ceremonies hosted by the ICCF, where garlands are given to celebrities (e.g. Harrison Ford), royalty (Prince Albert of Monaco) and international politicians (Tony Blair). Business executives and others wishing to use these events to network with politicians and pursue their own interests have bought tickets for between US\$ 1,000 and US\$ 50,000.<sup>80</sup> These events have been remarkably successful in ensuring continued financial and political support for conservation, particularly the visions and projects of the largest NGOs. They are vehicles for “colossal shifts of funds among *US-based* state, private and non-profit sectors in the name of *foreign* conservation, and as such, underpin a growing biodiversity conservation enterprise.”<sup>81</sup> During the 1990s, 70 percent of USAID biodiversity grants for NGOs were distributed to the five biggest conservation NGOs.<sup>82</sup>

Corson argues that the ICCF, with its links to corporations and promotion of market-based conservation and state rollback, epitomizes the neoliberalization of conservation and facilitates the expansion of capitalism.<sup>83</sup> It demonstrates how close relationships between politicians and conservationists, operating in both professional and social spheres, underpins global conservation, and how this has been used by the largest NGOs to consolidate their position in global biodiversity governance.

#### *The Strategies of Peter Seligmann*

NGOs have recently moved from mass membership as the foundation of donations toward pursuing a few, high-value donors, a strategy that has brought significant success to both The Nature Conservancy and CI.<sup>84</sup> One of conservation’s most effective fundraisers is CI chairman and CEO Peter Seligmann, revered for his pioneering ability to win very large donations by cultivating close relationships with philanthropists through social events and trips to areas of high biodiversity, techniques now widely copied. One well-known story unfolded when Intel founder Gordon Moore sent CI a US\$ 100 check. On recognizing the name, Seligmann wrote to and phoned an initially incredulous Moore, cultivating a strong relationship that has led to subsequent grants by Moore’s foundation of US\$ 35 million and US\$ 261 million (the latter by far the largest single philanthropic grant in the history of environmentalism).<sup>85</sup> In another incident, Seligmann took prospective donors including pharmaceuticals heir Fisk Johnson on a luxury cruise and diving trip to Melanesian coral reefs that CI was trying to conserve. The trip, organized by Sojourns, CI’s in-

80. Brockington 2009.

81. Corson 2010, 594. Emphasis in original.

82. Dowie, 2005.

83. Corson, 2010

84. Birchard 2005; and MacDonald 2008.

85. Dowie 2009; and MacDonald 2008.

house luxury travel firm created partly to run lobbying trips, was successful; prospective donors signed up, making the US\$ 25,000 per day yacht hire worthwhile, and Johnson joined CI's board.<sup>86</sup> The strategy of engaging with philanthropists beyond donations to include them within CI's structure aims to strengthen connections. Major donors who have joined CI's board include Gordon Moore and Wal-Mart CEO Ron Walton. Seligmann is well known for his use of celebrities connected to CI (such as its vice president, actor Harrison Ford) and their associated glamor to bring rich and influential people into the organization. Yet while successfully generating funds, the pursuit of corporate money and corporate directors has also prompted criticisms that the strategy has weakened CI and other NGOs by distracting them from their core mission.<sup>87</sup>

#### *Michael Fay and Gabon*

The West African country of Gabon has recently witnessed huge growth in protected areas and NGO spending. In 2002, it went from having no national parks to having 13, covering more than 10 percent of the country. Gabon demonstrates a particularly strong manifestation of both elite influence and conservation's neoliberalization. A key role in the parks' creation is attributed to Michael Fay, an adventurer, biologist, employee of the Wildlife Conservation Society, advisor to the ICCF, and *National Geographic* magazine's "explorer in residence." Fay travelled through Gabon in the final part of his "Megatransect," a 16-month, 1,200-mile walk transecting the Congo Basin and chronicled in a high-profile, three-part series in *National Geographic* and through regular updates on the magazine's website. Fay's charismatic, heroic persona is the focus of the coverage as much as Congolese biodiversity.<sup>88</sup> On completing his journey, he requested an audience with Gabonese President Omar Bongo to tentatively outline a protected-area system. Bongo was so impressed by Fay, his presentation, and the potential of ecotourism to diversify the Gabonese economy that he created all 13 proposed parks by presidential decree the same day.<sup>89</sup> He was also likely influenced by the potential for assistance through the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, an initiative bringing together conservation NGOs, bilateral donor agencies (particularly USAID), West African governments, and commercial forest interests to fund forest and wildlife protection.<sup>90</sup> Fay was subsequently invited to speak to US State Department officials and members of Congress, who were similarly impressed and agreed to fund the parks through USAID. One park was opened by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, chaperoned on a stroll through the forest by Fay. Fay has used his celebrity as a politi-

86. Dowie 2009.

87. MacDonald 2008.

88. Garland 2008.

89. Dowie 2009.

90. Garland 2008.

cal asset to gain access to and successfully lobby heads of state. His efforts echo the case of Carl Akeley, another US naturalist exploring West Africa, who in 1925 used his fame to successfully lobby Belgian King Albert to create Africa's first national park in the Belgian Congo.<sup>91</sup>

Gabon's conservation is strongly neoliberal. Luxury ecotourism, an industry considered neoliberal as it allows capitalism to identify and commodify new pieces of nature despite appearing not to exploit it,<sup>92</sup> is touted as the savior of both Gabon's economy and biodiversity. NGOs have been given an extremely prominent role in planning and running the protected areas, pushed by and often funded by donor agencies. Fay's employer, the Wildlife Conservation Society, drafted the national ecotourism plans. Gabon is the only country outside of the United States to host permanent offices of four out of the five biggest conservation organizations (all excluding The Nature Conservancy, which has very little presence in Africa). WWF was granted US\$ 10 million by the Global Environment Facility to run one park for seven years, alongside parks in neighboring Cameroon and Congo.<sup>93</sup> The Gabonese state ceded partial sovereignty of protected-area policy to NGOs in exchange for their expertise and resources.

#### *High Society and Fundraising*

Cocktail parties and social functions mix conservation fundraising and lobbying with other processes of networking. For example, in the Wildlife Conservation Network's calendar of social gatherings, wealthy San Franciscans pay to attend lavish fundraising cocktail parties, with the opportunity to meet and be inspired by the conservationists whose work is being supported. A US\$ 1,000 ticket to their annual Expo gala buys the opportunity to mingle with "wildlife heroes," including conservation celebrities such as Cynthia Moss.<sup>94</sup> As well as fundraisers and opportunities to meet celebrities, these events are explicitly marketed as professional networking opportunities, chances to meet other wealthy individuals to advance one's own career and business opportunities.

The life and philanthropy of Anton Rupert, South African billionaire entrepreneur and founder of WWF-South Africa, epitomizes conservation social networking at a global scale. Rupert, alongside his close friend Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, created the 1001 Club as a fundraiser for WWF. For a substantial donation, individuals or corporations who joined gained access to exclusive parties and dinners where they could mingle with other rich people and royalty.<sup>95</sup> Conservation organizations have long pursued royal patronage to raise their profile and attract funding. The 1001 Club was particularly popular with South African business executives during apartheid, allowing them to net-

91. Adams and McShane 1992.

92. Duffy and Moore 2010.

93. Dowie 2009.

94. Brockington 2009.

95. Bonner 1993.



work and do business internationally while bypassing international sanctions. Later, to support the Peace Parks Foundation, which he also founded, Rupert created Club 21. A donation of US\$ 1 million gives access to an exclusive social club, including the Foundation's three patrons (Rupert, Bernhard and Nelson Mandela), and membership in the Foundation's advisory council. The skilled networking of both Rupert and Bernhard were central to their success in their careers and in conservation: the clubs were an extension of their business networking, breaking down the distinction between fundraising for conservation and building connections for business.<sup>96</sup>

These vignettes show three key features. First, the conservation elite is a relatively exclusive closed circle; access to key places of lobbying and fundraising is accessible mainly through wealth, political power and social connections. Second, conservation events involve interactions for interests other than preserving biodiversity, such as networking for business executives. Inversely, conservation advocates can use business networking events to lobby for conservation. Third, social events allow the different constituent parts of the elite—scientists, celebrities, NGO officials, business executives, and politicians—to network.

### Global Conservation Elites and Global Conservation Hegemony

Global conservation is dominated by an elite consisting of the directors and senior staff of a few large conservation NGOs, key individuals in government and the media, donor agency and philanthropic foundation bureaucracies, influential scientists, and celebrities. It functions through personal relationships, interactions, and social networks. It is able to move money and ideas around the globe, with strong links to other powerful bodies. Through this elite, we can explain key patterns in global conservation.

Conservation is not unique in developing an elite structure as it globalizes. Strong parallels can be drawn between globalized conservation networks and those dominating international development, which also revolves around increasingly powerful NGOs, the importance of personal connections, the role of celebrity, the importance of representation, and the influence of business elites and philanthropists.<sup>97</sup> As ideas of integrated conservation and development emerged, conservationists easily latched onto development debates and donors, perhaps facilitated by how smoothly they could fit into the networked practices of international development. Conservation NGOs have a record of fitting well within development structures and adapting their own structures to fit better.<sup>98</sup> Similar networks and personal relationships underpin transnational capitalism.<sup>99</sup> Given the dominance of networked elites in various forms of globalization, it is perhaps not surprising that conservation has developed a net-

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96. Spierenberg and Wels 2010.

97. Hulme and Edwards 1997; Richey and Ponte 2008; and Vogel 2006.

98. Kull 1996; and Sachedina 2010.

99. Rothkopf 2008; and Sklair 2000.

worked elite—it may be the best way to expand and strengthen the influence of conservation ideas.

Furthermore, neoliberal practices have become so dominant in development and the global economy that only those forms of conservation compatible with neoliberalism may see their influence increasing. The organizations that have adjusted their outlook and strategies to fit best with neoliberalism—promoting market solutions, taking on state functions—have grown and now dominate global conservation.<sup>100</sup> One could argue that the transnational conservation elite are the forefront of conservation's neoliberalization. Elite interactions allow NGOs to take on some functions of the deregulating state. Large NGOs, through their strong connections with corporations, have introduced corporate logics such as direct marketing and expansion strategies into conservation and promoted market-based solutions such as ecotourism or carbon trading.<sup>101</sup> The elite in NGO boards are pioneering this turn to markets even as the grassroots lag behind or resist, causing unrest inside organizations such as the IUCN and the Nature Conservancy.<sup>102</sup>

Studies increasingly argue that certain actors and ideas in conservation have become so dominant as to be hegemonic.<sup>103</sup> Hegemony is the ability to dominate thinking and practice so that particular ideas or strategies become considered as the only feasible, possible, or conceivable options. The transnational conservation elite are powerful partly because they determine key ideas and terms used more generally, reinforcing their position. For example, conservation is widely portrayed as indisputably good and unproblematic, a vision actively maintained by NGOs to ensure continued support and which is almost never publicly challenged.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, homogenous and positive images are cultivated about the successes of both protected areas and large NGOs.<sup>105</sup> For example, debates within conservation have recently been dominated by discussions of whether community-based or fortress-type protected areas are most effective.<sup>106</sup> Yet these seemingly vibrant debates are about what type of protected area there should be, and which particular NGOs should run them. The debate challenges neither the idea that protected areas are the best way to preserve biodiversity, nor that NGOs are the most capable actors to do so. Different visions of conservation that might challenge this seemingly natural way of doing things would seem out of place.

Most discussions of hegemony in global conservation assess the dominance of neoliberalized strategies that present market solutions as the only way forward. Conservation is now considered not a bulwark against capitalist expansion, but part of it.<sup>107</sup> Much of this takes inspiration from ideas of a sustainable

100. MacDonald 2010.

101. Birchard 2005.

102. Birchard 2005; and MacDonald 2010.

103. Brockington and Duffy 2010; and Igoe et al. 2010.

104. Igoe forthcoming.

105. Igoe et al. 2010.

106. Roe 2008.

107. Brockington et al. 2008; Büscher 2008; Corson 2010; and Igoe and Brockington 2007.

development historical bloc,<sup>108</sup> arguing that conservation has become incorporated into global capitalism's dominance by offering capitalist solutions to the environmental problems created by capitalism. Conservation has had a long and fruitful relationship with capitalism, yet advocates for market-based capitalism and arguments that only market-led solutions will save biodiversity have never been so dominant.<sup>109</sup> Given its prominent role in promoting neoliberalized conservation, we must consider the transnational conservation elite when discussing the hegemony of neoliberalized conservation.

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108. Sklair 2000.

109. Igoe et al. 2010.

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