THE ENDURING POWER OF FORTRESS CONSERVATION IN AFRICA

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Introduction
What is fortress conservation? It is a well known term, but perhaps too often used. What does it actually mean? The phrase connotes images of strongly protected conservation areas, surrounded by fences and barbed wire, policed by well-armed rangers, defending nature from powerful external threats. It is a term too which suggests imposition and injustice, where the strong boundaries exist because conservation is unpopular, because conservation goals have to be fenced off and protected otherwise they would be swept away by popular discontent, or at least by well-armed opposition.

Fortress conservation is a practice of exclusion, as these popular images capture. It is about restricting access to nature in order that that nature be protected. That can require force and is often unwelcome for the people who were accustomed to use those resources. But, while there are elements of truth in both these popular notions, there is more to fortress conservation than that.

Fortress conservation is also an ideal. Behind it lies the concept that nature and people should be separated, either because people (or at least the wrong sort of people) are too dangerous to be allowed to be part of the landscape, and/or because the idealized perfect landscape is simply conceived to be 'wilderness', a place without people. This notion, as William Cronon and Roderick Nash have shown, is a North American vision born after the independence of the USA and made popular by romantic idealists, and colonial rulers thereafter (Cronon 1995; Neumann 1998; Nash 2001). Fortress conservation is therefore the physical, sometimes violent, creation of these landscapes. It is the purifying force and policy necessary to create people-less lands deemed to be the natural, proper state of nature.

But fortress conservation is not just a manifestation of American values. It enjoys popular and substantial support in many governments worldwide (Brockington *et al.* 2008). Fortress conservation, as we will explore later in the essay, is an important source of revenue and prestige for African governments. It provides spaces for tourists and can be integral to modernization goals and agendas. Fortress conservation may have begun as a foreign imposition, but, it has been thoroughly well grafted onto and accepted by its host countries (Adams 2004).

The purpose of this essay is to explore the prospects of fortress conservation in African contexts. It is well recognized that this policy can cause unwelcome costs locally, if not considerable impoverishment (Adams *et al.* 2004). It is also a policy upon which many conservationists want to rely less (Hutton *et al.* 2005). Many would prefer a move to more inclusive and just forms of conservation, to more community-based measures. However if that is to happen we need to understand better the nature of the strengths of fortress conservation. Only then can we understand the nature of the barriers which impede moves to community-based conservation.

My argument is, essentially, that fortress conservation is much stronger than many of its critics admit, and that we have to appreciate these strengths if any alternative is to become possible. In order to make that argument I first present, in some detail, an archetypal example of fortress conservation – that of the Mkomazi National Park in Tanzania. By exploring the details of that case we can appreciate much better precisely how strong fortress conservation policies can be. I then summarise from that case some of the more general reasons behind the enduring strength of fortress conservation. Finally I consider what hope there is, given these forces, for the prospects of community conservation on the continent.

Mkomazi – an Archetypal Case

The case of the Mkomazi National Park has become an archetype in the field of conservation studies and is routinely cited in literature on fortress conservation.[1] This park was first gazetted as a game reserve in the 1950s and contained several thousand people and tens of thousands of livestock for much of its existence. It was cleared of residents in the late 1980s, and, with the support of US and UK conservation NGOs, was rehabilitated as a pristine area of wild Africa. It was declared a national park in 2006.

The case is well cited because it provides such a clear example of fortress conservation in action. It demonstrates the power of the policy, for it was able to remove thousands of people and tens of thousands of animals from the landscape. This in turn demonstrates the injustice of this policy, for these actions caused impoverishment locally. Yet it also demonstrates the beguiling and appealing nature of fortress conservation's vision, which has been able to raise millions of dollars to support the cause of this park. And thus this juxtaposition of impoverishment with conservation success demonstrates too the nature of fortress conservation's power – it can be relatively impervious to some forms of local opposition.

Yet, while these headlines are well known, it is not always clear that the study is as well understood as it is cited. For, once the painful details of this case become apparent, it is plain that fortress conservation is not just powerful, successful and unjust, it is also a remarkably creative force. Fortress conservation does not just preserve wild landscapes and precious species. It conjures them into existence. This makes fortress conservation a potentially expansive policy that can bring more lands under its sway. It is not restricted by the decline in wilderness and spread of humanity. Fortress conservation turns back that tide.

[1] For the summary in this section I draw upon my earlier book on this topic (Brockington 2002).

To appreciate these details we must understand how Mkomazi is represented by its supporters, and then contrast those portrayals with alternative histories and interpretations. The conservation vision of Mkomazi is beguilingly simple and comprises three strands. First it is portrayed as a lost wilderness that has been restored to its former greatness. People, this means, do not belong in this landscape. Its original, primordial and proper state is to be devoid of unnatural human presence. Second, as evidence of the inappropriateness of humanity in the landscape, Mkomazi's environment had suffered dramatic degradation while people, and particularly their livestock, were there. People in the landscape chopped down trees, set fires, caused overgrazing and poached valuable animals. They did not just despoil it with their presence, they desecrated it with their practices. After their removal from the Reserve however, people have been cared for with a variety of local development projects. This is the third strand. Clinics, schools and visits to the park, allow for the legitimate needs of the people to be met while conservation policies can still be pursued.

We must next understand how inaccurate and misguided this vision can be. The key here is the long term history of the plains that were to become Mkomazi. The earliest records we have describe the area as a 'Wakwavi wilderness' where a pastoral Maa-speaking peoples known as the Kwavi (or Parakuyo) occupied the lands north of the Pare mountains and east of Kilimanjaro in the early 1800s. These peoples were pushed out by invading Maasai pastoralists during the internecine *Iloikop* wars that broke out among the Maa-speakers in the first decades of the nineteenth century. They fled eastwards and southward, some taking refuge in agricultural communities in the hills or secluded settlements. These wars appear to have cleared the plains, and it took a while for the victors to occupy their lands. But, as the century unfolded, more and more explorers provide accounts of encounters between them and Maa-speaking pastoralists proliferated. The latest took place in 1890, when the French explorer Le Roy met thousands of cattle and pastoralists at Gonja, just on the border of the current park. Herders had re-populated the plains.

However, when Captain Smith travelled through the same landscape, just two years later, he found no people or cattle, nor did he find any wild ungulates. The plains were empty. They had been cleared by the rinderpest epidemic, which we can date exactly in this area to February 1891, as recorded by German soldiers on a punitive expedition inland. They recorded healthy herds going up country, and found the epidemic in full flow on their return.

This epidemic, which killed of 95% of ungulates, caused famine and severe disruption. Maasai pastoralists added to their woes by declaring war on Germany at the time. This was followed by World War I, which saw raiding across the border between German-controlled Tanganyika and British Kenya. Once again the plains were emptied.

The twentieth century saw peace return, and gradually pastoralists began expanding into these lands again. But, ironically, the intriguing politics of Mkomazi and its turbulent history are entirely due to the expansions this prosperity made possible, and the way that this expansion clashed with British policies to control and govern the peoples and territory of the mandate. The British perceived ethnic groups to be discrete both socially and spatially, and they sought to keep some groups (the Maasai) to particular territories at the same time as they tried to separate those resident in Kenya from those in Tanzania.

These policies became an issue because in the 1930s and '40s a particular focus of immigration formed around Lake Jipe, where pastoralists resident in Tanganyika had to water their stock from the Kenyan side of the lake, because mud prohibited their access to the lake to the south. Kenyan authorities objected and closed the border. Facing eviction this forced the pastoralists south-east where they clashed with Parakuyo herders, the descendants, most likely, of the survivors of the Iloikop wars, who were living in the plains north of the Usambara mountains. The Parakuyo herders complained about the new arrivals to the British authorities, and, in the midst of this conflict the Mkomazi Game Reserve was gazetted.

The solution the British chose to this conflict was to allow the Parakuyo to remain living inside the nascent Reserve, but to evict the new arrivals. However, what the resident Parakuyo objected to was not the presence of these immigrants, but the sudden manner by which they came. The evictees tried to return and did so using gentler means, and this time the Parakuyo let them stay, even to the extent of letting immigrants take on the names of deceased pastoralists who had been on the list of allowable residents. As one of the elders recalled:

> 'We talked to each other; we understood each other. We understood each other, we married into each other's families, we exchanged cattle. We kept quiet, we did not raise the alarm . . . we did not complain to the government. We just left it. We all lived here together.'

The result was that human numbers and cattle numbers inside the game reserve continually increased over the next 35 years.

The point of this history is that it is rather odd to conceive of the plains in which the Reserve was gazetted as a 'wilderness', a place without people. People had been resident or using these lands for much of the last 200 years, and the plains were only vacated following unusual episodes of war and disease. Mkomazi is not a 'restored' wilderness, it is a manufactured one, as human a creation as the concept of wilderness itself.

However, if these plains had long had people in them, could they cope with this expanding use? What were the environmental impacts of the influx of cattle? The growth was initially confined to the eastern side of the Reserve where residence was allowed. From the 1970s pastoralists were also allowed to occupy the western side. This meant that cattle numbers increased from 20,000 at the first census, to over 80,000 in the 1984 census. These numbers are likely to have been unprecedented, what did they do to the environment?

Official responses to the presence of cattle are interesting here. They had long decried the numbers of cattle and called for de-stocking. But there are two contradictions in these stances. First, the number of cattle present were likely to be within these official stocking rates, at the same time as pastoralists were accused of exceeding them. Second, despite official predictions of impending desertification and collapse of productivity, the cattle populations continued to thrive, and more people sought to migrate to the plains.

One possible explanation for the failings of official assessments of the carrying capacity of the rangelands is that they were based on flawed, equilibrial understanding of the ecology of drylands which saw cattle numbers as being in balance with vegetation. It may however be more accurate to see vegetation as responding to rainfall in the first instance, rather than herbivory. Disequilibrial theories of rangeland ecology suggest much higher stocking rates are sustainable (Behnke *et al.* 1993; Gillson & Hoffman 2007).

This does not mean that the livestock had no effect. Analyses of satellite data show that there were areas of bare ground following the presence of large numbers of cattle (Brockington 2005). However these are not associated with the areas with the longest history of residence in the Reserve. These appear to have good systems for controlling the management of rangelands. Moreover these analyses also show that vegetation recovered reasonably quickly from the effect of cattle.

The point here is that the complete removal of cattle from the ecosystem had been an environmental imperative. People and their livestock were thought to be destroying Mkomazi. But the evidence for that is simply thin.

And what of the human consequences of eviction? First we need to note that the restoration and rehabilitation of the Reserve after the removal of residents did not result in a new influx of tourists. There are no permanent tourist lodges and relatively little revenue or employment opportunities. Mkomazi is a wet-season dispersal area for wildlife, nor a dry season concentration area. Therefore there are few waterpoints where tourists can be guaranteed a sighting of wildlife in the dry season, and in the wet viewing game is hard because of the abundant vegetation and dispersed wildlife. In exploring the costs of eviction therefore the issue is made starker by the absence of compensatory activity arising from new tourist business.

In this absence, what did the removals do to pastoral residents? The livestock censuses show that herd sizes collapsed from over 350 to around 70. These had been wealthy cattle herders. These averages however conceal highly skewed distributions, with a few relatively prosperous herders, and many more much poorer families.

The lack of cattle, and therefore milk, has attendant consequences for diets and women's income. Milk supplies, and their disposal, is determined by women and they often sell milk to provide their own income, spending it on beads and children's clothes and education. However with not enough cattle to sell to buy maize, milk has to be exchanged for food on a daily basis. In some instances women have to change roles completely, and become itinerant medicine sellers, travelling long circuits with collections of medicinal plants which they sell in regional towns.

The absence of cattle also hit the local economy. One cattle market collapsed, and there are fewer cattle sold in the region than before. Moreover the type of cattle sold has changed. When the Reserve was occupied most of the cattle sold were males, as one would expect from pastoral societies. Female cattle are the nucleus of the herd, providing milk for food and calves ensuring future survival. Selling female cattle is a sign of stress, and after the eviction period the ration of males:females sold declined from around 3:1 to close to unity.

Clearly pastoral livelihoods suffered as a result of the eviction. And the evictees protested as vigorously as possible to the misfortune these policies imposed on their lives. They protested to district and regional leaders, to their MPs, to the party headquarters (when Tanzania was still a one-party state), to the Catholic Church and finally to local and international NGOs ultimately culminating in an court case challenging the legality of the evictions. The court found that the evictions had not been carried out in a legal manner because of the violence they involved and the failure to pay compensation. But they ruled, bizarrely, that because the plaintifs were deemed to be 'Maasai' that they had no long term history of residence in the Reserve.

Thus far it should be plain that Mkomazi presents a fairly clear case of conservation injustice. Flawed notions of history and ecology have underpinned policies which have resulted in the eviction, exclusion and impoverishment of former Reserve residents. But unfortunately that is not the whole story. There are two more turns of the screw which makes Mkomazi particularly significant in the record of conservation mistakes.

First, the pain, impoverishment and injustice matter most not because of the anguish that they signify, but because of the way in which they have been so effectively and comprehensively ignored and over-written by the international representations of Mkomazi

in conservation and fund-raising circles. Consultants who investigated the suitability of the reserve as a black rhino sanctuary declared that

> 'There appears to be limited resentment towards the Mkomazi Game Reserve by the Msaai (*sic*), as they were well aware that their permission to graze within the reserve was only a temporary one.'

International fundraising publicity insisted that the evicted pastoralists had not been 'indigenous to the area', thus cleansing the reserve of the problem of not respecting the rights of indigenous people. This is further reinforced by publicity which makes no mention of the problems eviction has caused and ignores the rich and complex history of use of the area by people.

Moreover the creation of the rhino sanctuary was deliberately conceived as a means of putting the reserve on the map, of raising its profile internationally. It was a political project from the start, and the misleading publicity and reports that surround it are entirely concordant with those political ambitions.

Again, I must stress that the omissions, misrepresentation and falsehoods here are not the most important point. Yes it is wrong in many ways, but the point is that, despite these problems, it is highly successful. It works. And this is the final twist. For the fundraising for Mkomazi has brought in millions of dollars. The rhino sanctuary is thriving, with a breeding herd and remains secure despite the recent upsurge in poaching. It is performing a vital role in the broader species' conservation plan. Mkomazi continues to enjoy favourable publicity in elite circles with ongoing corporate sponsorship and celebrity and royal endorsements. The image of the place is secure against the bad news these problems I have described above should imply.

This is why Mkomazi makes such a valuable case study. It demonstrates how strong conservation fortresses can be despite their unreality and falsehoods. Being wrong is no impediment to being powerful.

We can put this point in a slightly different way. Fortress conservation is a remarkably creative force. Just notice what is happening at Mkomazi. It is not preserving these threatened, mediagenic landscapes and species – it is creating them. Conservation at Mkomazi has entailed the creation of wilderness by evicting people from lands they had occupied for decades. It has imported charismatic species from reserves in South Africa and zoos in Europe. It has dealt with the problem of local belongings by proclaiming that evicted peoples were not indigenous to the area.

Fortress conservation is strong in part because of its creative power, because of its ability to produce new places which require, or at least appear to require, new fortresses by which they can be conserved. Fortresses, then are not shoring up a dwindling supply of pristine wildernesses and valuable species, they are proliferating across landscapes and growing in number, not declining (as the growth in protected areas should make clear).

The Reasons behind Fortress Conservation's Enduring Power

The case of Mkomazi captures a number of the reasons why fortress conservation policies have such enduring power on the continent. There are five we must discuss here.

The first derives from the enduring power of the myth of wild Africa in western mindsets. Many years ago Adams and McShane published a popular book debunking this myth and showing how ill-suited it was for the realities of ecology, history and human environment interactions that dominate the continent (Adams & McShane 1992). They concluded that, because the myth was based on falsehood it was a poor basis for conservation policy.

Unfortunately the authors were only partially right. The myth of wild Africa is ill-suited to many African contexts and a poor guide to equitable conservation policy. But, as we have seen at Mkomazi, that myth can create its own realities. It may be misguided and ahistorical, but it can persist despite these flaws (Carrier 1998; Igoe 2010).

One of the reasons for its persistence is its appeal to large communities in the global North. The myth of wild Africa creates landscapes Americans and Europeans want to go to as tourists. It is a myth perpetrated in natural history documentaries which persistently portray landscapes without people as the proper, normal and right condition for African wild places.

Because of its popularity therefore, and because of the opportunity it provides for (white) westerners to conserve Africa, and because of the ready model it provides for them to do so, the myth of wild Africa remains a powerful pillar supporting fortress conservation models on the continent. Simply put, this model works because it raises money. But how does this popularity, and the money resulting, reach conservation projects on the ground?

In part the answer is because of the influence and activities of conservation NGOs. There are hundreds of these organisations which were channeling, we estimated, some $200 million to conservation causes on the continent (Brockington & Scholfield 2010). This is as much as all of the hunting industry contributes (Lindsey *et al.* 2007). Conservation NGOs are incredibly diverse however. Few of them will devote funds to support fortress conservation, many of them are much more interested in community-focused work, or policy initiatives. Indeed we can be certain that many conservation NGOs are simply not supporting protected areas. This is clear from the fact that only 37% (by area) of the more strictly protected areas

(ie IUCN categories 1-4) are currently protected by NGOs. It would, however, be possible fully to protect 92% of these protected areas (by area) with only $60 million. The fact that they are not spending their money in this way suggests that many conservation NGOs have other priorities in mind. Nevertheless the point remains, conservation NGOs are a vehicle by which fortress conservation practices can be funded.

More important, however, than the influence of overseas organisations is the role of African governments themselves. They are another of the means by which tourists' desires have influence. Simply put, African states are happy to create spaces where tourists can go to. Tourists are good revenue earners. They are much better at paying taxes than the rural residents whom they displace. In that respect Mkomazi is unusual because it secured strong governmental support in the absence of strong tourist revenues.

More than that, tourists' myths are happily in accord with many states' visions of what a good modern state should look like. National parks provide a means of removing and modernizing indigenous peoples who are perceived as primitive and backwards by their governments (Colchester 1997). A well run system of protected areas is also perceived to be a good in itself, an recognized measure of progress that is enshrined as one of the indicators of success of the millennium development goals. Wild protected areas may be a colonial invention, but they are one which has been enthusiastically embraced by independence governments whose new protected areas ensured that Africa led the world with respect to conservation estate for at least a decade after independence swept the continent.

The final reason behind the enduring success of fortress conservation is because of the weakness of the local opposition to it (Brockington 2004). Fortress conservation can thrive despite the fact that it is unwelcome. It can be imposed because rural Africans lack the firepower, organisation, cohesion and skills to take on skilled and well-equipped ranger forces.

This is a controversial argument, and must be handled cautiously. The renewed poaching crisis demonstrates that rural Africans can effectively take out valued species despite strong protection. But they can do so in small groups, acting in effect as guerilla forces, and this is a very different thing from opposing, en masse, the impositions of fortress conservation.

Alternatively there may be instances where parks' neighbours lifestyles and livelihoods is intimately opposed to conservation practice in every detail. They herd livestock within protected areas, collect thatching grass, building poles, fuelwood and they hunt as well. However they do so on a scale which cannot match the fecundity of the conserved lands ability to regenerate. Illegal use persists, but not to an extent which threatens most aspects of the conservation areas existence.

More generally it has been for many years asserted that conservation has to have local support if it is to succeed (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2002). This was one of the reason why conservationists began moving away from fortress conservation in the first place. They feared that, by alienating their neighbours, conservationists were storing up trouble for themselves in the future. Again this is true in many cases. Conservation is replete with stories of how hostile locals have undermined, if not attacked wholesale, the nature that it had been trying to save (Western & Wright 1994). But my point here is that it is not always true. There can be instances where conservation can be imposed despite local opposition (Holmes 2013).

This has certainly been the case at Mkomazi. The misfortunes of eviction have been imposed on a relatively weak minority. Most of the park's neighbours experienced only limited difficulties because of the evictions. The absence of tourism within the Reserve and revenue and benefits affects them as little as the exclusion and eviction. By concentrating the problems on a marginal group, fortress conservation can persist.

In sum then, fortress conservation can persist in Africa because it is creates places which are so appealing to western tourists and armchair conservationists, because of the particular NGOs who are able to move their funds to support these places, and because these western visions are so well-tuned to African governments' needs and ambitions. All this provides the means and the motive to establish more conservation fortresses. In addition, however, the local politics of fortress conservation also means that they can be stronger than the discontent they cause might otherwise suggest. Where the costs are shared unequally, and concentrated on minorities, then these costs, or even the mere absence of benefits, can be tolerated.

Conclusion: what prospects for Community Conservation?

If community conservation faces these powerful forces, what might enable it to succeed? If the analysis above is correct then it faces significant hurdles if it is to become widespread practice. Indeed in many of the measures to empower communities we can see these obstacles at work.

Perhaps the most significant is the opposition community conservation faces in policy decision-making and on the ground from the entrenched interests of elites and particularly the state. At its heart community conservation entails the devolution of power over natural resources, and the revenues they can yield, to rural groups. This entails state agents in central and local government ceding that power, and revenue, to others. Not surprisingly therefore the many studies of community conservation in practice and the devolution it entails describe cases of partial or stymied devolution, where powers are not properly ceded (Ribot 2002; Ribot 2004). Alternatively they described cases of elite capture where

local elites are able to dominate the decision-making over these resources. Or, they report cases where unelected and unrepresentative bodies (such as local NGOs) end up controlling affairs to the detriment of majority interests.

These cases put the strengths of fortress conservation I discussed above in a new light. Absent the northern support for wild Africa, and the visions of armchair conservationists, and still the tendencies leading to fortress conservation remain strong. Another way of putting this is that African politics could produce fortress conservation policies all by themselves. They do not need myths of wild Africa to do so. Nonetheless these myths present a disabling external environment, which will make it harder for community conservation measures to flourish.

For all these reasons, therefore, community conservation faces significant hurdles. But it would be too easy to end on this depressing note. We have to recognize that there is a slow shift away from fortress conservation – that indeed is why it is interesting to examine its strengths. The norms are changing. Fortresses no longer dominate the high ground of ideal conservation practice. They remain a weapon in the conservation armory, and a widely-used one at that, but in policy discourse and international expectation, community-based conservation has become increasingly important.

Second, there is what happens on the ground. Conservation practice, whether fortress or community-based, are heterogenous, diverse and continually changing. Analyses of community-based conservation focus on their continual lively politics over the distributions of fortune and misfortune they produce. So it is with fortress conservation. Although the spaces that these policies provide for action, resistance and contestation are small they do exist.

If the injustices and impositions of fortress conservation matter, then they matter not because of the abstract principles of justice that they breach, but because of the material violence they do to local livelihoods, and because of the transformations they bring to the ecologies of wild lands. So too therefore we need to understand precisely what fortress conservation entails in particular places. For the realities on the ground, from place to place, vary enormously.

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