

1 Reinforcing colonial inequalities? New forms of state-led and market- based conservation in Botswana and Namibia

*Luregn Lenggenhager, Frowin Becker, and
Emmanuel Mogende*

Introduction

‘Securing land for conservation through partnership and purchase’, and ‘leading an effective and total war against poaching’, because ‘wildlife is gold’ are three quotes from three very different contexts in today’s Southern African conservation landscape.¹ As diverse as the institutions, people and projects behind the three quotes are, they nevertheless reflect crucial aspects of postcolonial conservation narratives in Southern Africa and point towards authoritarian – or even far right – forms of nature conservation.

Southern African nature conservation is deeply intertwined with the region’s history of colonialism and apartheid, and often perpetuates land appropriation and unequal land distribution (Beinart 2008), private capital accumulation (Büscher et al. 2014; Sène 2023) and violence (Lunstrum 2014; Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016). Progressive, well-intentioned concepts, such as protecting endangered species or distributing natural resources with those living on the land, combined with the high pressure to meet urgent global conservation goals, are often co-opted to advance projects that reinforce entrenched ideologies of racial hierarchies, violent social engineering and economic exploitation. This highlights how conservation and certain conceptualisations of human–non-human relations in Southern Africa often align with ideologies that can be considered authoritarian, capitalist, (neo-)colonial, or far-right. However, a blanket characterisation of the dominant forms of nature conservation in Southern Africa as ‘far-right’ may not always be appropriate for its postcolonial context. This is not because there are no overlaps between conservationist ideology and far-right ecology (Forchtner 2019; Lubarda 2020), but rather because of the complexities of applying the concept of ‘far-right’ to a Southern African, or Global South context more generally, and the different ways in which land, belonging and identity are constructed in (settler) colonies (Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023).

Nature conservation projects and ideologies in the region are highly diverse, evolving from specific colonial and apartheid histories. Based on our collective, scholarly engagement with archival materials, key informants, relevant literature, policymaking and public databases, we will use Botswana and Namibia as case studies in this context. First, we provide an overview of colonial (and apartheid)

conservation policies, showing how they co-created the ideological, economic and geographical foundations for today's conservation practices. In Namibia, which was a *de facto* colony of white-ruled South Africa for most of the 20th century, these historical conditions particularly led to the emergence of capitalist and neo-liberal forms of conservation. These approaches became influential both on white-owned commercial farms and on communal lands in former labour reserves and apartheid homelands. In contrast, Botswana, which gained independence in 1966 and never experienced direct apartheid rule, developed a more state-driven approach to conservation. By the late 1970s, its authoritarian government had identified wildlife as a crucial economic asset to be safeguarded by its military.

Finally, it is essential to understand that even though nature conservation in Southern Africa was, and partly still is, an integral part of the colonial and apartheid project, these projects were never absolute in their control of people or nature. Recent historiography on colonial and postcolonial conservation stresses the importance of also understanding conservation areas as 'Black spaces', where African people managed to manoeuvre, negotiate with and resist oppression (Bolaane 2005; Dlamini 2020; Kashwan et al. 2021; Moore and Lenggenhager 2025). At the same time, increasing attention is being directed towards left-wing (Kiwango and Mabele 2022), African (Mabele et al. 2022) and decolonial approaches to conservation, which advocate for alternative models that are less colonial, less capitalist and less violent (Collins et al. 2021; Kashwan et al. 2021). There have also been efforts to engage more thoroughly with distinctively African ways of fostering just and sustainable forms of human–non-human co-existence (Sène 2024).

Colonialism, apartheid and the emergence of conservation areas in Southern Africa

Nature conservation in Southern Africa, like in many colonial contexts, emerged from meeting colonial needs. These included access to and securing land and wildlife resources, for example, ivory or ostrich feathers (Beinart 2008), control of human and non-human movements (Miescher 2012; Neuman 1998), means to keep local authorities loyal to the colony in contexts of indirect rule (e.g. through favourable hunting regulations) (Mosimane et al. 2023), and the reduction of local hunting to create cheap labour (Ramutsindela 2003). While the colonial administrations introduced Western conservation models to account for these needs, for example, in the form of hunting reserves and national parks, pre-colonial wildlife and nature conservation strategies were also successfully appropriated. These strategies have often been idealised as egalitarian and sustainable, at times echoing colonial tropes such as the 'noble savage' or the 'African as a part of African nature' (Collins et al. 2021). While these claims would require more localised research, it is well-documented that colonial conservation appropriated pre-colonial practices where useful, particularly in hunting regulations and elite access to game, for example, regarding the so-called 'royal game' or 'chief's hunting grounds' (Dieckmann 2023; Hinz 2003; Moore 2005).

In Namibia, early German colonial nature conservation mainly served strategic and economic purposes, securing white commercial farming and controlling movement between the indirectly ruled communal lands in the North and the so-called Police Zone, the directly controlled settler areas to the South of it (Dieckmann 2001; Miescher 2012). After South Africa annexed Namibia following World War I, it kept German conservation policies in place, including the three large German game reserves. One of these later became Etosha National Park, which formed part of the Red Line, a key veterinary and settlement boundary, helping to turn the area north of it into an underdeveloped labour reserve and, under apartheid, a homeland (Miescher 2012). Only since the 1950s, nature conservation in Namibia has gradually shifted towards ecological and, later, touristic objectives. Influenced by emerging ideas of protecting ‘pristine nature’, this approach excluded human inhabitants (Dieckmann 2007), while still aligning with the broader aims of apartheid South Africa’s occupation. In the late 1950s, the last residents were removed from the area that became Etosha National Park in 1967.

Despite limited attempts to promote wildlife tourism and nature conservation in the communal lands north of the Red Line, the creation of conservation areas was focused on the Police Zone and the securing of its borders.² An exception was the designation of the already established livestock-free zone, the Caprivi Game Park, in 1965 (Boden 2003; Taylor 2012). However, just a year later, the area was declared a closed military zone (Lenggenhager 2018). More broadly, nature conservation in the North was closely aligned with the security, military and strategic objectives of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in its efforts to suppress Namibia’s liberation struggle. It also formed part of South Africa’s ‘Winning the Hearts and Minds’ (WHAM) policy, aimed at securing loyalty – particularly of chiefs – while controlling access to weapons and regulating hunting. The protection of specific animal species only later gained some importance (Bollig and Vehrs 2021). In the final year of South African occupation, the outgoing administration hastily declared several additional national parks on north-eastern communal land (Lenggenhager 2018; Vehrs and Zickel 2023).

Shifting our focus further east, it was in Botswana where one of the first formal colonial Game Law Act was introduced by the British colonial government, as early as 1885. Like most Southern African colonial contexts, the legislation’s main goal was to sustain healthy wildlife populations for future hunting and trading (Gupta 2015). Until at least the 1930s, the Bechuanaland Protectorate was mostly governed by Tswana chiefs, and there had only been very limited direct British influence on wildlife and conservation policies.

Emerging from this colonial context, Bolaane (2005) identified two key particularities of Botswana’s colonial conservation history. First, in areas reserved for African occupation, tribal authorities kept legal rights to benefit from and manage wildlife. Despite game being state property, the chiefs received a share of hunting concession fees. Second, Botswana, at least in some areas, lacked the strict racial segregation seen elsewhere. Hence, the wildlife conservation efforts in the early 1960s – such as the creation of Moremi Game Park in the Okavango Delta and the founding of the Fauna Preservation Society – emerged from local initiatives

involving chiefs, white hunters, and both African and European traders. From the outset, conservation in north-western Botswana's communal areas aimed to promote economic development through tourism, particularly for so-called tribal authorities and local entrepreneurs (Bolaane 2005).

While economic and touristic initiatives were also crucial in the development of Chobe National Park in the Northern Crown Lands, land there was directly controlled by the British colonial administration, hence early conservation was aligned more tightly with a growing political and financial influence of the British on the Protectorate at the time (Lenggenhager and Mogende 2024). Even though the initial game reserve of the 1930s, as well as British financial support for similar projects, vanished during World War II, new plans for a Chobe Game Reserve came up in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Jackson 1999). This time it was an even more overt economic development project, planned by the British colonial government and supported by local and international businesspeople (Campbell 2004). Like the Moremi Game Reserve (1963), Chobe Game Reserve (1960) was designated a conservation area shortly before Botswana's independence in 1966 and became a national park soon after.

A third famous conservation area in today's Botswana, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR), had been declared a game reserve by the British colonial power in 1961. Covering about ten percent of the country's land, it was initially created to protect both wildlife and what the British described as an 'unspoiled hunter-gatherer society' (Mbaiwa and Thakadu 2022). Similar to Etosha in Namibia, the so-called San population was initially allowed to remain in the CKGR, due to colonial racial ideologies that saw certain indigenous groups as part of the local fauna to be protected. Their low numbers and lack of firearms also made them seem non-threatening to wildlife. However, this changed in the 1990s, when Botswana's government forcibly removed these communities, citing improvements in social services, while making way for mining and tourism (Marobela 2010).

Botswana's 'authoritarian' wildlife conservation strategy

Despite its militaristic and authoritarian conservation policies, Botswana has been applauded as a 'green' state and as a role model for conservation, both on the continent and globally (Henk 2007; LaRocco and Mogende 2022). Social scientists have described such militarised conservation as the deployment of armed forces, military-style tactics and technologies and state-sanctioned violence to manage and protect biodiversity (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016; Duffy 2016; Lunstrum 2014). Social, economic and political interests, along with ecological rationales, are often used to justify the defence of conservation territories, aggravating existing socio-economic inequalities, racial injustices and human rights abuses.

Botswana's deployment of its military in nature conservation dates back to at least the late 1980s. The involvement of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) in protecting nature is historically linked to the decolonisation process in Southern Africa that destabilised and militarised the region in the 1960s and 1970s (Lenggenhager and Mogende 2024; Mocheregwa 2021). Liberation wars in neighbouring countries

posed a security risk to Botswana, as freedom fighters and civilians from apartheid South Africa and Namibia sought refuge there. White minority governments therefore viewed Botswana as an enemy (Mgadla 2008). As a result, Botswana's security was compromised, with apartheid operatives entering the country to track refugees and carry out kidnappings and killings (Henk 2007; Mocheregwa 2021).

During this period, Botswana's conservation area along the Chobe River, serving as both a conservation frontier and an international border, emerged as a hot-spot for cross-border crime, including commercial poaching. This also threatened the growth of wildlife-based tourism, which had become vital to the country's economy. In response, Botswana's government took action in 1987 by deploying the military to protect its wildlife and the emerging tourism sector. Within months, the BDF was able to re-establish 'a perception of security among a population once very sensitive to armed poachers and among a jittery tourist clientele' (Henk 2007: 281). However, at the same time, the BDF's anti-poaching unit executed dozens of suspected poachers in the Chobe conservation zone, without investigation or legal proceedings (Mocheregwa 2021). In 1990, the mission expanded, with around 1,000 soldiers deployed every three months in Chobe, leading to ongoing harassment and even killings in the border region (Lenggenhager and Mogende 2024).

The militarisation of conservation intensified in the late 2000s across the African continent, for several reasons, including the growing role of private companies and mercenaries in conservation securitisation, the use of protected areas as hideouts by state and non-state armed groups and the testing of new weapons and warfare technologies within these areas (Dkamela and Nguiffo 2022). Within these increasingly violent conservation contexts, the government of Botswana followed suit by onboarding additional security apparatus, such as the country's intelligence unit and a paramilitary unit of the police. Simultaneously, conservation organisations increasingly adopted militarised rhetoric, framing conservation as a 'war for biodiversity', where poachers were seen as enemies of the state, and a 'war by biodiversity', linking conservation goals to global security concerns (Duffy 2016).

Violence linked to Botswana's militarised conservation includes extrajudicial killings and property destruction in the name of protecting state and private wildlife assets (Henk 2007; Ramutsindela and Büscher 2019). Given wildlife conservation's contribution to the economy, the BDF has enforced a shoot-to-kill policy, which has intensified in recent years (Mogomotsi and Madigele 2017; Mogende 2020). This policy permits the killing of suspected poachers, leading to violent clashes with and the extrajudicial killing of often unarmed farmers and fishermen. The government defends this strategy as essential for deterring poaching in conservation zones, and has been openly celebrating such killings. In the words of a high-ranking official: 'Yes, God will judge poachers, but it is up to us to arrange the meeting' (Matota 2016).

Several aspects tie such militarised conservation to far-right ideologies. First, the majority of people that have been killed under these draconic laws are foreigners, being citizens of neighbouring countries, including Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The killing of suspected poachers is presented as a means not only to prevent wildlife crimes but also to eliminate foreign intruders, thereby protecting

the nation's borders, wildlife and economy. Maano Ramutsindela (2016: 165) argues that 'it is this foreign element that is seen as a security risk' that results in the killings.

Second, Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016) argue that these militaristic policies seek to create spaces of exception where the rule of law no longer applies to everyone and where the military can decide who has the right to live and die, and what life is worth protecting (de Jong and Butt 2023). This hierarchisation of species and people perpetuates colonial and right-wing narratives of dehumanising the colonised (and non-white), prioritising the interests of certain non-humans, like charismatic wildlife or white tourists, over the lives of some humans, such as Black people or certain foreigners (Mavhunga 2011).

Militaristic and exclusionary conservation policies are also reflected in the creation and management of Botswana's protected areas. As noted, the creation of protected areas during colonial times was a racist and oppressive project that disregarded indigenous rights. However, local people continue to be criminalised and treated as 'poachers', 'illegal occupants', 'foreigners', or 'smugglers' on their own land (Lunstrum 2014; Weldemichel 2020). A well-known example is the violent, forced eviction of the Basarwa from their ancestral lands in the CKGR.

In 1997, Botswana decided to relocate all Basarwa from the game reserve, labelling their traditional lifestyle as primitive and backward (Good 2008; Mbaiwa and Thakadu 2022) and the people as 'stone age creatures' who had no place in the modern world (Sapignoli 2015). Meanwhile, the forced relocations were also meant to prepare the reserve for potential ecotourism and mining activities (Marobela 2010). State officials brutally suppressed the Basarwa through various forms of violence and deprivation to facilitate their eviction (Kiema 2010). In 2006, Basarwa representatives successfully challenged their relocation in court, which finally allowed them to return to the CKGR (Sapignoli 2015; Good 2008). Nevertheless, the government still denied a family the right to bury a relative in his ancestral land in 2021, claiming he was no longer a CKGR inhabitant (The Gazette Newspaper 2022). His body remained in the morgue for three years until a change in government in 2024 finally allowed his burial inside the reserve.

As put forth by Maano Ramutsindela et al. (2022), it is the 'denial of the humanity of others that accounts for the abuses of indigenous populations in areas designated for the protection of nature and that their violation of their humanity is predicated on the assumption that they are subhuman'. Dehumanisation and violence in the name of conservation continue to deepen existing inequalities between some humans and some non-human animals, as well as between groups of people.

Capitalist conservation and private land ownership in Namibia

Like Botswana, Namibia is today widely lauded for its progressive approach to conservation, based primarily on the devolution of wildlife usage rights. These rights have been devolved to communally run institutions, as well as private landowners. While a lot of the focus has been on the communal dimension (Foyet 2024; Gargallo 2015; Jones 2010; Mosimane et al. 2023; Nuulimba and Taylor 2015),

the entanglement with private land ownership warrants more critical examination. In the following section, we offer a different perspective on private farmland and conservation in Namibia, and how their commercialisation is reimagining colonial legacies (Koot et al. 2022; Spierenburg and Brooks 2014; Sullivan 2023).

The formal privatisation of wildlife-based land uses in Namibia can be largely traced back to the early 1950s, when wildlife usage rights were conferred to private landowners (Kalvelage 2023; Moore forthcoming). This essentially transformed most wildlife into tradable goods, while also consolidating private property through the incentivisation of fence-building. This, in turn, allowed private landowners to diversify their use of the land and manage their wildlife populations according to more commercialised practices of sustainability. Following Namibia's independence in 1990, an amendment to this legal scaffolding extended the same rights to organised entities on communal land, which constitutes the legislative foundations of Namibia's community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) model.³ However, the discourse on conservation tends to focus on the CBNRM dynamics, while downplaying how it differs on private farmland.

It is worth noting that the commodification of huntable game has facilitated the conflation of conservation and wildlife-based land uses – a widely accepted equivalence that has largely gone unquestioned in the case of Namibia. This is, however, essential to understanding how conservation on Namibian private farmland (and elsewhere in southern Africa) is interpreted and practised. Wildlife subjected to the commodifying process has been restricted to only an ultimately small ('usable') subset (Nature Conservation Ordinance 4 of 1975), which sets relatively clear parameters for what species are considered of value and worth conserving. While proponents would claim this mode of conservation to have an 'umbrella effect', helping to conserve ecosystems, habitats and landscapes at large, very little research has been undertaken to support this claim, particularly in the context of Southern Africa. Relevant legislation is also geared towards hunting, especially trophy hunting, which has become an increasingly popular form of consumptive ecotourism and, by extension, land use in Namibia. Its popularity has largely been driven by more favourable profit margins and resulted in the practice's institutionalisation in the 1970s (see Moore forthcoming). Trophy hunting in Namibia primarily caters to Western clientele paying high fees for hunts in 'Africa's wilderness'. While this includes high-value species like elephants, most hunts focus on smaller, less threatened species, predominantly on privately owned freehold farmland, where also most revenue is generated (MacLaren et al. 2019; Sullivan 2023).

Privatised use of game species can also take on non-consumptive forms, which has become an equally popular form of ecotourism on privately owned farmland. This is underpinned by tourists' willingness to pay to view and photograph wildlife, which tends to focus on large and/or charismatic mammal species (big cats, elephants, etc.). Both consumptive (trophy hunting) and non-consumptive (photo tourism) ecotourism, however, share a substantial and arguably disproportionate (in relation to other land uses) reliance on the investment and creation of capital.⁴ Pre- and post-Independence Namibia's commercial agricultural sector has been livestock-centric and the conversion to wildlife-based land uses has varied in scale.

Often, different land uses are now practised concurrently, but where a transition to ecotourism has been absolute, land is a key determinant. Due to the widely drawn equivalence between area-based conservation and ecotourism, the demand for land is particularly salient, with the underlying premise being that the more land is being converted to ‘conservation tourism’, the better.

While the state can and does own freehold farmland, most freehold land in Namibia is under private ownership and remains subject to diverse colonial legacies (Lenggenhager et al. 2021). These include, perhaps most prominently, the racially disparate ownership of land (Melber 2019; Namibia Agricultural Union unpublished data; Namibian Statistical Agency [NSA] 2018). Today, freehold farmland makes up more than forty per cent of Namibia’s territory (Amoo 2001; Amoo and Harring 2009; NSA 2018). White Namibians, now constituting roughly two percent of the country’s entire populace, have retained control over more than two-thirds of freehold farmland (NSA 2018) – despite land reform efforts. Importantly though, in Namibia’s current socio-economic landscape, such disparities remain symptomatic of wider inequalities (World Bank 2022). The interplay between private property and wildlife-based land use in Namibia can therefore be seen as intensifying inequalities and perpetuating the position of White, well-off Namibians as a ruling class.

Reducing game and land to economic units in a neoliberal structure, has resulted in not just conservation’s co-opting of privately owned agricultural land in Namibia, but also in foreign capital as a facilitative force. Fundamentally, this involves the establishment and expansion of private game reserves, through the acquisition and accumulation of commercial farmland through foreign investment (Becker and Holmes 2026). In instances where such territorialisation is coupled with ecotourism, attempts to ensure economic feasibility through the enhancement of exclusive guest experiences relies on foreign currencies. This process commonly results in a socio-economic filter that renders the land in question inaccessible to most Namibians. Access by Namibians is usually only possible by means of labour (Murima and Shereni 2023), with inequalities in wage structures also subject to scrutiny (Lapeyre 2011). Protectionist attitudes and incentivising policies have also heightened securitisation of property and wildlife commodities, which subjects all on-site activities and labour to equally heightened control. Under the banner of conservation, however, these structures are often presented as an avenue to social welfare (e.g. through job creation).⁵ This becomes an increasingly nebulous proclamation though, when we consider neoliberalisation as a facilitative force of prevailing inequalities (Holmes and Cavanagh 2016). Within the private conservation nexus in Namibia, land accumulation, securitisation and socio-economic stratification are contributing to a reimagination of fortress-style conservation.

While the ‘fortress conservation’ model is historically rooted in excluding poor and racialised people from strictly controlled national parks (Brockington 2002; Dieckmann 2007), and widely regarded as ‘outdated’, Namibia’s market-based approach to conservation on private farmland applies exclusionary principles along a socio-economic axis that invariably aggravate and fortify persisting inequalities. Racial regimes of economic control (including land) fuelled by colonial ideations of non-human nature and its preservation, are being leveraged to create new capital

for Namibia's private agricultural landowners by assimilating the country's game and land to the global free market (for comparable context, see Thakholi 2021; Thakholi and Büscher 2021; Thakholi and Koot 2023). This has been accompanied by hardening boundaries and microcosmic regimes of authoritarian control on private farmland. Namibia's constitution draws a clear link between biodiversity conservation and social welfare (Article 95[1]), stating that ecological preservation and natural resource use should benefit all Namibians (present and future). However, the wildlife economy's unfolding contours with colonially derived inequalities in capital control as a template, calls such a link into question.

Conclusion: conservation, capitalism and violence

We highlighted how conservation in Southern Africa has never been a left-wing or progressive project. When green leftist movements in Europe emerged in the 1970s, Namibia was under South African apartheid rule, and Botswana's authoritarian government was mostly concerned with protecting its territory and economic assets (i.e. wildlife). Conservation in both countries is therefore not only rooted in colonial histories but still upholds and reproduces inequalities through authoritarian and capitalist means.

In Namibia, conservation is intertwined with private property, neoliberal politics and racial hierarchies. Conservation's reinforcement of inequalities in private land ownership is driven by both market forces and narratives of White environmental stewardship. This continues to exclude and marginalise Black Namibians, while consolidating the wealth and power of White landowners. Under this system, land and wildlife are treated as commodities, where private land owners exercise near-total authority over both people and animals. Property rights and individual profit-making, combined with colonial ideas of White supremacy, align closely with right-wing ideologies, reinforcing capitalist and racialised control over land and its resources.

Botswana's conservation model, on the other hand, is defined by direct state power and militarisation. The government heavily pursues conservation goals through its military, which includes a shoot-to-kill policy rooted in dehumanisation and xenophobia. This nationalist and exclusionary approach not only criminalises poor, foreign and minority communities but also represents a broader right-wing logic in which security, border control and economic interests override ideas of equality and human rights.

In both cases, conservation functions as a vehicle for control, exclusion and exploitation – whether through private capital in Namibia or state violence in Botswana – demonstrating its deep, albeit sometimes subtle, entanglement with authoritarianism and far-right ideologies.

Notes

- 1 Promotional material of the Orange River Karoo Conservation Area (ORCKA), a huge private conservation area in Southern Namibia; former advisor to the Botswana Defence Force, Interview done by one the authors, 2.3.2011; Late Prince George Mutwa of the Basubia Traditional Authority and co-founder of the Salambala Communal Conservancy in North-East Namibia (<https://irdnc.org.na/>).

- 2 See for plans for the homelands the report of the ‘Komitee van Undersoek na Toerisme en Verwante Aangeleentheit in die Bantoegebiede van Suidwes-Afrika’, also referred to as the Frank Commission: National Archives of Namibia (NAN), Nature and Tourism Board (NTB), 22/2/1, Report Natuurbewaring en toerisme in Bantoetuislande, July 1969.
- 3 Communal conservancies in Namibia have been extensively researched, but a thorough engagement with the extensive literature is beyond the scope of this article. For recent overviews, see Gargallo (2020) and Mosimane et al. (2023).
- 4 Commercial farming in most of Namibia though is a generally capital-intensive exercise.
- 5 Private landowners in Namibia are incentivised to erect and register game-proofed fencing to enjoy greater game usage rights.

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