

When Tourists Cross Boundaries and Peasants Don't:

Scale-Making and Exclusion

in the Great Limpopo

by

David McDermott Hughes

Department of Human Ecology
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
55 Dudley Road
New Brunswick, NJ 08901 USA
Tel: +1-732-932-9153 ext. 361
Fax: +1-732-932-6667
Email: dhughes@aesop.rutgers.edu

Abstract

Southern African conservation restricts the mobility of black peasants and enhances the mobility of white tourists. Nowhere is this inequality more evident than in plans for a vast, transboundary conservation area known as the Great Limpopo. The scheme would open borders for animals and visitors while confining smallholders to small locales. How have well-meaning conservationists come to promote such a biased, structurally racist set of ideas? Disguising this bias, the Great Limpopo relies upon convoluted assumptions regarding space and time. For space, supporters of the Great Limpopo have elaborated two scales for planning and social intervention. The scheme conjures a Cape-to-Cairo bioregion and landscape of leisure, the African scale for tourists. For peasants, the same planners – especially in Zimbabwe - have crafted an intensive, place-based model of development. White tourists will expand across the African continent whereas black smallholders should involute in “communities.” Yet, *within its geographical scale*, each group will gain in freedom and power. This false sense of equality extends from space to time. Southern African bioregional thinking looks to the future, imagining wildlife ranges and profitable hotels where neither currently exists. In anticipation of unseen growth, policy-makers open borders for the tourist trade. Meanwhile, the same planners ignore the obvious peasant future of growing populations. Assuming stasis, planners close boundaries and enclose the landscape. Such untenable notions have already been overtaken by events, especially in Zimbabwe, where tourists are now afraid to travel and para-military bands destroy fences. It is time to rethink transboundary conservation in the Great Limpopo and elsewhere