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To cite this article: Chantal Elizabeth Wieckardt , Stasja Koot & Nadya Karimasari (2020): Environmentality, green grabbing, and neoliberal conservation: The ambiguous role of ecotourism in the Green Life privatised nature reserve, Sumatra, Indonesia, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, DOI: [10.1080/09669582.2020.1834564](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1834564)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1834564>



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Published online: 22 Oct 2020.



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# Environmentality, green grabbing, and neoliberal conservation: The ambiguous role of ecotourism in the Green Life privatised nature reserve, Sumatra, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

Against the background of neoliberal conservation and green grabbing, this paper investigates an ecotourism initiative through the notion of ‘multiple environmentalities’ (neoliberal, disciplinary, sovereign and truth), which concerns the governance of people for environmental causes. We apply this to the inhabitants of Batu Katak, Sumatra, Indonesia, where the Green Life Project has been established next to Gunung Leuser National Park as a Private Protected Area. An important governance strategy for Green Life is the establishment of volunteer ecotourism to generate funds and to include the local community. We argue that ecotourism can play a crucial role in legitimising the activities and increasing the power of nature conservation organisations, which, in the case of Green Life, is visible in the growth of coercive means to secure protected areas. If ecotourism is the kernel of neoliberal environmentalism at Green Life, the core issue is the prevalence of truth environmentalism, in which nature is often valued higher than people. This valuation led to the strengthening of disciplinary and sovereign environmentalism. Arguably, ecotourism at Green Life will not establish the intended sustainable relations with the community, and this paper functions as an important lesson for practitioners to scrutinise the consequences of their governance strategies.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 February 2020  
Accepted 2 October 2020

## KEYWORDS

Privatisation; environmental-  
ity; green grabbing;  
volunteer ecotourism;  
neoliberal conserva-  
tion; Indonesia

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, Private Protected Areas (PPAs) have increasingly been recognised as an important strategy to conserve nature, including by big international NGOs such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, see Stolton et al., 2014). Despite this increasing recognition, the definition of what exactly constitutes a PPA and what its effectiveness is in terms of biodiversity conservation continues to be subject to debate. Additionally, the total global area that is privately protected remains uncharted (Holmes, 2013). Even though PPAs (insofar recognised as such) make a significant contribution to protect nature in the ‘traditional developing world’ (Holmes, 2013), for example in Africa (e.g. Ramutsindela et al., 2011;

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Spierenburg & Wels, 2006) or Latin America (e.g. Brondo, 2013; Holmes, 2014; Pearce, 2015), PPAs are relatively uncommon in Southeast Asia (Stolton et al., 2014). This paper therefore explores the impact of the privatisation of land for nature conservation within the Southeast Asian context, namely by analysing the Green Life Project on Sumatra, Indonesia, at the border of Gunung Leuser National Park (GLNP).<sup>1</sup> As has been the case more broadly in Southeast Asia, contentions between local inhabitants and conservation agencies have arisen over the establishment of protected areas. These are often related to the disruption of already existing local livelihoods. Conservation agencies often perceive local inhabitants as a threat to the protected area as these people contest the parks' legitimacy and its unilateral imposition of boundaries which disregards their entitlement to access land and natural resources (Li, 2008).

In the case study of this paper, the Green Life Project (see below), civil society actors—a Czech and an Indonesian NGO—are the new owners and managers of the land, instead of the government or the private sector (e.g. an ecotourism company). These NGOs use the strategy of privatising forest land to ostensibly prevent large-scale deforestation in the North Sumatra province (Green Life, 2020a), mostly by the oil palm and paper industry, but also as the result of a demand for tropical wood and rubber (Green Life, 2020b). As such, the Green Life Project presents a clear case of what Fairhead et al. (2012, p. 238) named “green grabbing”, which is “the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends” and which “is an emerging process of deep and growing significance”. Globally, green grabbing has already shown the problematic consequences that land acquisition for conservation may have on local communities (Duffy, 2008; Fairhead et al., 2012; Holmes, 2014; Hutton et al., 2005; Koot & Van Beek, 2017; Mowforth & Munt, 2003). In this paper, however, we move beyond the consequences of green grabbing. Instead, we address the local responses to green grabbing, as well as to the governance strategies environmental NGOs can use to create particular self-regulating ‘subjects’ (cf. Agrawal, 2005; Deutsch, 2020) in order to create a particular ‘environment’ or ‘nature’ on the ground. Our focus is on the ambiguous role of ecotourism in the governance strategies deployed by environmental NGOs through the notion of ‘environmentality’, more specifically we use Fletcher’s (2010) framework of ‘multiple environmentalities’ (explained in more detail below). We thus contribute to the literature on tourism and conservation governance strategies in a context where green grabbing and neoliberal conservation tactics, namely privatisation and ecotourism, are aimed against large-scale land grabs by commercial multinationals.

In this paper, we show that for Green Life ecotourism functions as a crucial livelihood diversification strategy to govern the inhabitants of Batu Katak, a rural village located adjacent to the Green Life Project’s office and reserves, but often without creating the intended support for nature conservation. In fact, ecotourism provides for a discourse to cover up the perceived negative impacts of the project on the livelihoods of the local community, who show a variety of, at times conflicting, responses to the project’s conservation practices. Although most inhabitants from the local community cooperate regarding the project’s ecotourism initiative, this cooperation is ambiguous as these inhabitants also undermine aspects of the larger Green Life Project through the continuation of banned livelihoods and the use of violence and threats towards the project’s management and employees. Most of these responses, however, remain largely unnoticed by the Green Life management. We argue that ecotourism plays a crucial role in legitimising Green Life’s activities including the increase of coercive means employed by Green Life to secure its protected areas. Most likely, such coercive tactics will not establish sustainable links with the community.

In what follows, we first provide the necessary background on ecotourism and the neoliberalisation of nature, which is followed by the conceptualisation of ‘environmentality’. Next, we provide an overview of the case study, after which we describe our methodology and data analysis. We then present our empirical findings, first by describing how Green Life has constrained the local community of Batu Katak, and second by showing how the inhabitants from Batu Katak respond to ecotourism initiatives and benefits, and third by exposing how the inhabitants from Batu Katak respond to Green Life more generally. In the discussion that follows, we relate our

findings to green grabbing and neoliberal conservation, and the local responses specifically to the multiple environmentalities. Last, in the conclusion, we wrap up and iterate our main argument.

### ***Ecotourism and the neoliberalisation of nature***

The establishment of ecotourism is firmly embedded within a larger global movement of neoliberalising nature. In fact, “green grabbing operates [...] in ways that are enabled, structured and shaped by the neo-liberal logics of commodification and appropriation” (Fairhead et al., 2012, p. 248). Neoliberalisation, in this context, means “a political-economic project which advocates, first, a strong free-market economic system, [...] and, second, the use of the market as a model for other areas of political and social life” (Farrell, 2015, p. 256). As such, it is “a political ideology that aims to subject political, social, and ecological affairs to capitalist market dynamics” (Büscher et al., 2012, p. 5). These definitions allow us to emphasise the ideology, practices and governmentality that attempt to reproduce capitalist market dynamics in the public and social spheres, creating an “on-going process of *neoliberalisation*” (Farrell, 2015, p. 256), in which various crises are addressed, including the global biodiversity crisis (Büscher et al., 2012; Fletcher et al., 2014).

In this ideology, (eco)tourism has always played a crucial role as a market-based incentive that further spreads neoliberal capitalist mechanisms and values, and that creates ‘environmental subjects’ (Agrawal, 2005; Carrier & West, 2004; Duffy, 2006, 2008; Fletcher, 2010, 2011). As such, ecotourism promises “to promote environmental consciousness for Western consumers” (Igoe & Brockington, 2007, p. 434), but also among the local hosts: under neoliberalisation, ecotourism should generate income for the local groups in and around protected areas, based on the rationale that it will make local people support conservation because they now receive benefits from this (Brockington et al., 2008; Duffy, 2008, 2013; Fletcher, 2011). Thus, the *financial* value of a commodified nature is centralised, instead of intrinsic values, changing local inhabitants’ attitudes towards and connection with nature (Serhadli, 2020). This is also subject in our focus on ecotourism, since we analyse how the local population of the rural village Batu Katak responds to the project, thus contributing to the above debates by placing the emphasis “on agency *within* rather than on analysing the broader structural political economy of neoliberal conservation” (Matose, 2014, p. 67). Generally, such agency received little attention in the literature on neoliberal conservation (Matose, 2014), and it is thus highly relevant to explore how people are governed, and how they respond to this, which we do by applying the concept of ‘environmentality’.

### ***Multiple environmentalities***

We investigate Green Life, and particularly its ecotourism activities, through the notion of ‘environmentality’. Environmentality finds its origin in Foucault’s work on ‘governmentality’, which today has become a generic term for “various particular modes of [...] ‘conducting conduct’” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 173). As such, governmentality often serves to indicate the governing of human behaviour through a variety of modes. Since the late 1990s, the neologism environmentality has gained a foothold in academic literature, especially with the works of Luke (1995, 1999) and Darier (1999). Environmentality aims to understand the ways in which governmentality can be applied to analyses of the environment and environmental governance. In such an analysis, the environment is an object of knowledge, about which certain ‘truths’ can be constructed. These ‘truths’ necessitate the regulation, management and governance of the environment (Rutherford, 2007).

In order to better understand the different modes of environmental governing, Fletcher (2010) developed a ‘multiple environmentalities’ framework in which four types of environmentality can be discerned. First, *disciplinary environmentality* aims to create ‘environmental subjects’

who internalise particular norms and values, e.g. through environmental education. Second, *neo-liberal environmentalism* aims to prevent environmental degradation “through the creation of incentive structures intended to influence individuals’ use of natural resources by altering the cost-benefit ratio of resource extraction” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 176; cf. Deutsch, 2020). Third, *sovereign environmentalism* aspires to conserve nature through “top-down creation and enforcement of regulations” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 178), for example through the establishment of protected areas—and patrolling these areas. Last, *truth environmentalism* dictates appropriate behaviour based on certain conceptions of the “fundamental nature of life and the universe” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 176; cf. Montes et al., 2020). These modes and rationalities of governance are not solely top-down, but rather are renegotiated by those who are ‘governed’, especially in nature conservation projects that bring with them a set of ideas and ideologies that often differ from those of local actors.

## Case study

The Green Life Project borders GLNP in the Bohorok district of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Starting off as several nature and wildlife reserves initiated since 1934, GLNP was established in 1980 as an amalgamation of these reserves. After several expansions, the park comprised 838,872 hectares in 2014, and it is estimated that today around 690,000 people live in or adjacent to GLNP. In 2011, UNESCO enlisted GLNP as part of the Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra, a Natural World Heritage in-danger, based on increasing poaching activities, illegal logging, agricultural encroachment, road construction, pressure on surrounding forests to change them into crop plantations, oil palm plantations and refugees from Aceh Province (Purwanto, 2016). Historically, conflicts between nature conservation and local inhabitants have existed within and around GLNP (cf. Li, 2008), predominantly because conservation limits livelihood possibilities, e.g. to benefit from export-oriented agriculture (McCarthy, 2006).

Green Life aims to prevent large-scale deforestation by the oil palm and paper industry in the North Sumatra area (Green Life, 2020a, 2020b), and to curb “the illegal encroachment of poachers, loggers and plantations” (Green Life, 2020a). They claim that GLNP is not properly protected, since “it consists almost entirely of government forest land, one third of which can be legally logged or cleared for agricultural use” (Green Life, 2020c). Their response was to establish a PPA as “a network of properly monitored, privately owned reserves on the border of the National Park”, which they consider the best way to preserve nature, to provide an undisturbed habitat for wildlife, and to deter poachers (Green Life, 2020d).

Currently, Green Life consists of three geographical areas that they have named Reserve I (87.3 hectares), Reserve II (9 hectares) and Reserve III (11 hectares), totalling 107.3 hectares (Green Life, 2020a) (see Figure 1). The light green areas on Figure 1 indicate the current size of the Green Life reserves, whereas the dark green areas and the yellow lines indicate the project’s future vision for expansion. The river flowing from north to south is the Berkail River, the one flowing south of Reserves I and II is the Sembelang River and past Reserve III flows the Sekelam River. These rivers originate in GLNP.

Since it is forbidden by law for foreigners to own land in Indonesia (Green Life, 2020a; USAID, 2010), the three smaller reserves that together comprise the Green Life reserves are “owned by [the] Indonesian conservationist and chairman of the NGO Yayasan Hutan Untuk Anak” (Green Life, 2020a). Subsequently, these lands are rented to the Czech NGO Forest for Children for 50 years, with the option to renew the contracts. Together, both NGOs manage these lands, and they have the ambition to ultimately own and preserve 700 hectares of rainforest (Green Life, 2020f). Green Life buys the land from local landowners, claiming to give them a very good price for land of little value.

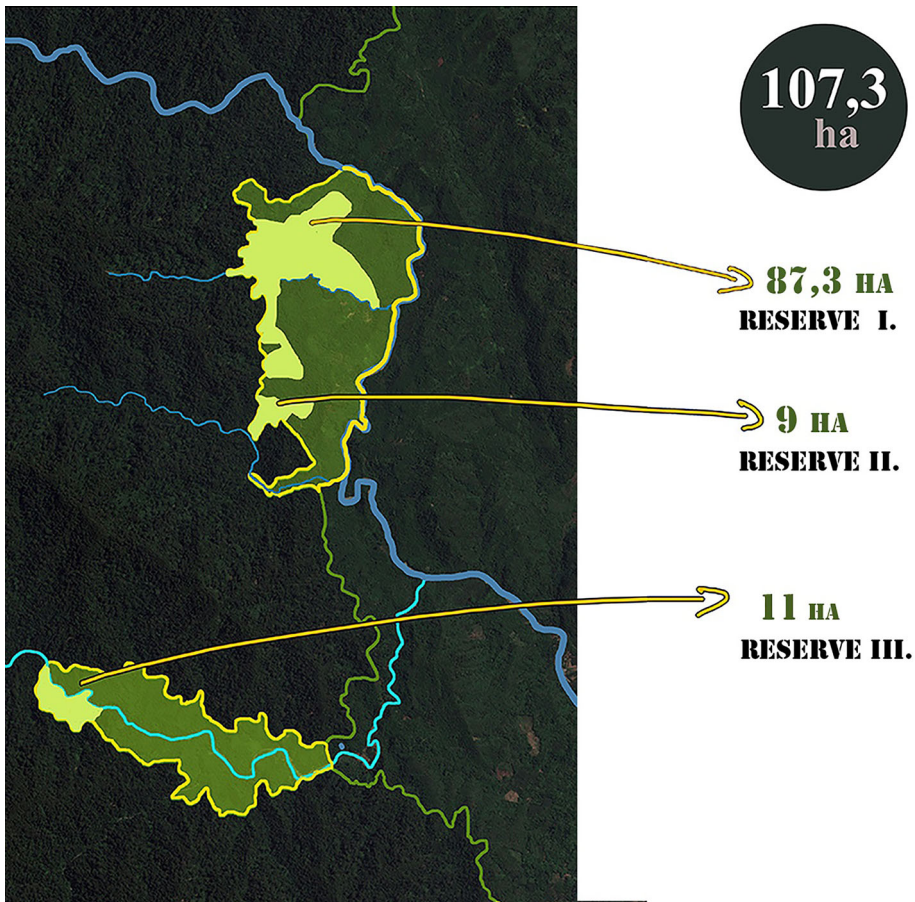


Figure 1. The Green Life reserves, Source: Green Life, 2020e.

The 'locals' Green Life is referring to emanate from Batu Jong Jong, a village comprising of several sub-villages, of which Batu Katak is of specific interest to the project due to its accessibility by road and its location close to one of the entrances to GLNP. Batu Katak is situated along the riverbank of the Berkail River about two kilometres southwest of Green Life's Reserves I and II. Many inhabitants have long been, or still are, dependent upon small-scale agriculture, especially rubber and subsistence fishing. About half the population owns land and those who do not often work on other people's land, either cutting rubber or transporting blocks of rubber by motorbike. However, as a result of rubber price reductions, several farmers have decided to grow oil palm trees instead. These are less labour-intensive and hence demand for labour has decreased, leaving especially young men searching for jobs.

Since the arrival of Green Life in the area in 2009, nature conservation organisations and ecotourism initiatives have sprouted in Batu Katak. Green Life has not established any collaborations with these organisations at the time of fieldwork, but it "welcomes the move towards ecotourism by the Batu Katak community" (Green Life, 2020g), as is also shown through the promotion of Batu Katak as an ecotourism destination on the website [ecotourismbatukatak.com](http://ecotourismbatukatak.com).<sup>2</sup> Though written from the perspective of the Batu Katak community, this website carries the Green Life logo, promotes the Tiger House (described further below) and sells a range of tours, including a Tiger Trekking tour with Green Life (Ecotourism Batu Katak, 2015). In order to coordinate the increased (eco)tourism activities in Batu Katak, a local tourism organisation, Lembaga Pariwisata Batu Katak (LPBK) has been founded by some members of the Batu Katak community, separately from

Green Life.<sup>3</sup> The LPBK aims to “assist the local community with an alternative livelihood program via ecotourism, and to prevent illegal practices in the National Park” (Raw Wildlife Encounters, 2020). The LPBK has 21 members and is involved both with local and international tourism, playing an important role in the distribution of guiding jobs for the different organisations active in the village.

## Methods and data analysis

The paper is predominantly based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in Batu Katak (with a population of approximately 250 inhabitants, see Sumatra Ecoventures, 2019) by the first author between January and March 2018, during which she conducted 22 semi-structured interviews, most of them with the help of a local interpreter. These semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of inhabitants, including farmers, (often self-proclaimed) tour guides, and employees of Green Life, as well as with the Indonesian manager of the project. Earlier, in February 2017, the second and third author together conducted an open, exploratory interview about Green Life with both the Czech and Indonesian managers, after they had heard about Green Life’s existence and were triggered to investigate the project due to its distinctive approach for nature conservation in Southeast Asia. The Czech manager of the project has not been interviewed again in 2018, as he was not responsive to the researcher’s interview requests at that time. Interviewees were selected by purposive sampling and by using a snowball method, until answers became repetitive at its core and a certain level of ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) had been achieved in combination with observations and informal conversations. The selection of interviewees aimed to include a diversity of perspectives present within Batu Katak, revealed to the first author during participatory observation. Participatory observation has been key to build up trust with the community more broadly, and to get a sense of the key issues at stake. Importantly, participatory observation complemented the semi-structured interviews with informal conversations on more sensitive topics. In fact, often the most valuable stories were told to the first author while spending time with community members and while assisting informants during their day-to-day work, as well as during a guided tour with one of the farmers/guides into GLNP, and a one-day hike inside GLNP with the Tiger Commando (the Green Life anti-poaching unit) together with a small group of volunteers at Green Life. The semi-structured interviews and first-hand fieldnotes of participatory observation were systematically analysed using thematic content analysis; identifying common themes and patterns (including activities such as fishing, small-scale agriculture, but also perceptions of local people of the Green Life Project) as well as inconsistencies within and between informants’ stories by annotating and coding the data, and segment them into categories (such as the continuation of banned livelihoods, the use of violence and threats). The categories, in turn, have been used to inform and structure the results section below.

Ever since the first interview in February 2017, the third author, who is a native speaker of Bahasa Indonesia, maintained contact with the Indonesian manager, which included telephone calls and social media messages. She also conducted interviews in GLNP headquarters in Medan with government officials of GLNP who commented about the Green Life Project, as part of her larger PhD research, for which she has conducted fieldwork in North Sumatra and Aceh Provinces between January and March 2017, and between October 2017 and January 2019. This research took place in the buffer zone of GLNP and focused on the dynamics of, and the tension between, smallholder agriculture and nature conservation.

Additionally, we have analysed various publicly available websites, most prominently the Green Life website, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In CDA the analytical focus is “*on the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance* [which is] the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural,

class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality” (Van Dijk, 1993, pp. 249–250). It is essential to acknowledge that such dominance appeals to “the relations between power and discourse” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 249; see also Fairclough, 2012). In our case, the information from the Green Life website has been an important addition to the ethnographic fieldwork because it showed some discrepancies with the fieldwork findings that are essential in our analysis.

## Results

In this section, we first outline Green Life’s connections with ecotourism and nature. Next, we show how certain activities constrain people’s lives, and subsequently zoom in on the ecotourism projects. Last, we describe how people respond to these activities.

An important issue for Green Life is the prevention of illegal practices, for which they have set up the ‘Tiger Commando’, an anti-poaching unit. Furthermore, they monitor their reserves using camera traps (Green Life, 2020h). According to Green Life, the Tiger Commando has the authority to arrest people that enter Green Life’s reserves without permission, and hand them over to GLNP rangers. Moreover, the project shares its camera trap data with GLNP rangers, who can subsequently arrest trespassers. In addition to the Tiger Commando, Green Life also established the ‘Tiger House’ that aims to “provide information to tourists and local people about conservation issues, sustainable forest use, and safe and appropriate behaviour in the forest” (Green Life, 2020i). They have established an English teaching programme for the children of Batu Katak, for which they hired a local woman as teacher. Ideally, the Tiger House is also used to inform inhabitants from Batu Katak and other villages about poaching and illegal wildlife trade, and to encourage them to inform Green Life if they have suspicions about poaching (Green Life, 2020i). Moreover, Green Life puts up posters and sign boards that list all forbidden activities inside GLNP and on Green Life’s reserves.

To establish a good relationship with local inhabitants, connect to global audiences, and to raise funds, a crucial activity is ecotourism, which is presented by Green Life as an income-generating opportunity through guided tours, to ensure that “local people protect nature because it has become valuable to them” (fieldnotes, 13 January, 2018). Ecotourism is done with volunteers who are interested in nature conservation, thereby generating a steady source of income for the project, and through the involvement of the inhabitants of Batu Katak by supporting the establishment of community-based tourism to create employment.

Green Life’s activities are based on several underlying assumptions about human-nature relationships. Although they perceive “nature and animals as equal to human beings” (Green Life, 2020j), in their perception there are two different types of humans: “an ethical human society” and “characterless and greedy people” (Green Life, 2020j). Humans and nature, especially wildlife, can no longer peacefully co-exist and thus nature needs to be separated from “the greedy, spiteful, stupid, or characterless people who, around us, commit crimes against nature” (Green Life, 2020j). In order to do so, the project initially focused on buying and redeeming land and managing these lands through the implementation of strict rules and regulations, barely engaging with the local community. This changed when the project tried to obtain a license to extend the range of the Tiger Commando and to gain authority to patrol against illegal activities inside GLNP. To receive this license, the Indonesian government requested Green Life to involve the surrounding communities. This resulted in them employing around 25 people, mostly men, from the surrounding villages: four people (two from Batu Katak) became a member of the Tiger Commando and the others became mostly irregularly employed in tourism.

In an interview with the Green Life management (14 February, 2017) the threat of large-scale oil palm companies was contradicted: it was explained that the specific tracts of land that Green Life buys are often not attractive for such large-scale commercial companies, as the hilly land is inaccessible for cars or motorbikes. In fact, various Green Life employees and enthusiasts,



including the management, considered people living around GLNP as the biggest threat to nature, especially poachers from the neighbouring villages who “haven’t been confronted yet” (Green Life, 2020b). In response, Green Life actively tries to govern local people’s behaviour. This became particularly evident when the first author wanted to interview a member of the Green Life management, who refused and disregarded the local communities’ voices, explaining that interviewing community members would be “useless” because they would “just tell you what you want to hear [...] You have to *teach* them [about nature conservation]” (fieldnotes, 26 January, 2018). Thus, a clear discrepancy became visible between public communication, such as the Green Life website, and the local discourse, particularly in relation to the inhabitants of the area.

### ***Green Life’s constraints to local livelihoods***

Since its arrival in the area of Batu Katak, Green Life has been buying up small-scale rubber and oil palm plantations on the border of GLNP, increasingly reducing agricultural opportunities. Although Green Life states that the inhabitants from Batu Katak can buy land that is located closer to the village, one young tour guide claims that there is no land available there, while another tour guide and a farmer, as well as the Green Life management itself, claim that the price of land has risen near Batu Katak since the arrival of Green Life. Green Life thus strongly affects agricultural practices that are central to people’s livelihoods.

Furthermore, several respondents from Batu Katak explained that they consider *access* to the Green Life reserves and GLNP a serious threat, since this has become increasingly restricted over time. Several farmers explained that accessing small-scale plantations on the border of GLNP has become difficult, as they are no longer allowed to cross Green Life’s reserves to enter their own land. This happens intentionally, as the management explained that many locals use the river to access GLNP, and by cooperating with the government and placing camera traps, Green Life tries to prevent this (interview, 7 February, 2018). If someone gets caught on camera crossing the reserves, Green Life summons this person to their office to justify their ‘trespassing’. Accessing GLNP for guided tours with tourists from the other NGOs in the village, or to collect leaves for traditional medicines, becomes increasingly difficult as well, according to one of the tour guides, as Green Life’s reserves function as a strictly monitored border around GLNP. However, this was contradicted by one of the rangers of GLNP, who claims that locals can still “easily access” GLNP but are solely prevented from buying and logging on the land at the border of GLNP (interview, 13 February, 2018).

Hunting as a livelihood strategy is also actively discouraged by Green Life, who consider it poaching. Almost all farmers and tour guides we spoke to claim that most inhabitants from Batu Katak have stopped hunting wildlife, both for consumption and for the market, although they acknowledge that there are a few exceptions of people who continue to catch songbirds in order to sell them. However, according to Green Life ‘poaching’ also includes fishing, which is officially forbidden inside GLNP and no longer allowed by Green Life in or close to its reserves either. Yet, many inhabitants from Batu Katak are at least partly dependent on fishing for their livelihoods. Access to, especially, the Sembelang River has become a sensitive matter between Green Life and the community. Green Life actively patrols the area around this river, trying to enforce a strict no-fishing policy. People who are seen entering GLNP carrying fishing equipment are, according to the management, caught and brought back to the community to “pay a minimum of 5 million rupiah and they have to put little fish back in the river” (interview, 7 February, 2018). Whether Green Life has the authority to fine locals for fishing in GLNP remains unclear, although it seems as if Green Life is offering the fine as an ‘alternative’ to being handed over to GLNP rangers, who are supposed to treat fishing as “illegal” and thus “a criminal act” (interview, 7 February, 2018). In practice local employees of Green Life have a

'softer' approach to fishing, at least on Green Life's reserves; inhabitants first receive two warnings and will be informed about the consequences of fishing on the fish population (interview, 7 February, 2018). The rangers of GLNP are not as strict on fishing either, as one of them explained that most locals would only fish when they do not have enough money to buy fish. As long as local inhabitants fish with a fishing rod or a small net that is not left overnight, the rangers will not act. Only if locals use poison or electricity to fish, GLNP rangers will take action (interview, 13 February, 2018).

### ***Tourism-based employment and Batu Katak***

Green Life thrives on the contributions of so-called 'visitors' or 'volunteers' under their 'Visitors Project' (Green Life, 2020g), originating almost exclusively from the Czech Republic. These volunteers are a source of revenue for the project, help to maintain the camps and reserves, and shy away poachers by their presence in the forest. In order to support the local community, volunteers can also go on excursions with local guides from the LPBK in Batu Katak. As such, people working in tourism in Batu Katak do so mostly for Green Life's volunteers, not only as tour guides, but also as porters of food to Green Life's camps in the forests, as assistants to do shopping, or as drivers to the airport in Medan. New forms of (irregular) employment have thus emerged from Green Life's volunteer programme, diversifying the livelihood strategies of the inhabitants from Batu Katak. Working as a tour guide for one day can earn someone a wage that sometimes equals a week's work on a rubber plantation and is therefore a popular job. However, excursions are optional in Green Life's visitor's programme, limiting the stability of this type of employment.

As such, the employment opportunities offered by Green Life are a sensitive issue in the village. As Green Life's requests for tours are irregular, an often heard complaint is that Green Life is not involved with the local community. As a respondent from Batu Katak explained: "Tourists that are coming only go to Green Life. Green Life does not give jobs to the community. The tourists only work on the project and not on the community" (interview, 30 January, 2018). The employment opportunities are also a sensitive issue as some inhabitants have been able to gain more benefits out of the project than others, thus changing socio-economic structures. The extent to which inhabitants have been able to benefit from Green Life depends on their social and human skills and knowledge (e.g. speaking English), and on their financial situation and assets (e.g. possession of a car to do grocery shopping or airport pick-ups).

Another, often heard complaint is that Green Life does not work through the LPBK to employ tour guides for their volunteers, but rather asks one of the inhabitants of Batu Katak to distribute the guiding jobs. According to a GLNP ranger who was involved in the establishment of the LPBK, Green Life initially cooperated with the LPBK. However, after the government transferred the ranger to another area, he could no longer be involved in the LPBK, and the cooperation between Green Life and the LPBK came to a halt. The Batu Katak village head claims that Green Life consequently approached him to distribute the jobs, while one of the LPBK members also claims this. However, today a different man distributes Green Life's guiding jobs. He explained that Green Life wants to cooperate with the LPBK, but that it is currently not possible due to "problems within the organisation" and the fact that they are "not organised" (fieldnotes, 8 February, 2018). During our fieldwork, the LPBK indeed was not active in the village. Although most members of the LPBK confirm this, they still consider it rude that Green Life does not collaborate, and some members even argue that Green Life does not cooperate in order to "grow their own business", disrespecting the local culture (interview, 30 January 2018).

### ***Local responses to the larger Green Life Project***

Altogether, cooperation between the inhabitants of Batu Katak and Green Life has proven fragile. In fact, most locals who also occasionally act as a tour guide for Green Life or carry food to Green Life's camps, simultaneously continue livelihoods that are now banned, especially fishing (with the exception of those people who have obtained a more permanent position with Green Life). They explain that they now go fishing when the Green Life employees or volunteers are not around, or they fish at night, as a way to sustain their "tradition" (interviews, 12, 15, 24 and 26 February, 2018) and livelihoods. Moreover, although it is forbidden by law inside GLNP and by Green Life on their reserves, many also continue to fish with tuba roots (poison), describing it as "the way we fish" (fieldnotes, 7 March, 2018). It might be for this reason that Green Life has stepped up its activities and has put up signs around the village that aim to stop fishing with tuba roots.

A similar issue is the continuation of hunting. According to one of Green Life's longer-term volunteers, local people who continue hunting have been caught on Green Life's camera traps, yet the rangers of GLNP refuse to act on these images. Green Life's own employees do not arrest these people themselves, as they explain that they are afraid of retributions. This fear is grounded: some inhabitants from Batu Katak and the other sub-villages of Batu Jong Jong have responded to Green Life and its employees with violence and threats in the past, often anonymously. For instance, there have been anonymous phone calls and threats to burn down Green Life's camps on their reserves. Furthermore, camera traps have been stolen and damaged and some of Green Life's signposts have been demolished. It might be for this reason that Green Life employs coercive tactics today to protect their reserves, for example by finalising their application process to obtain a "Smart Patrol Licence" that allows the Tiger Commando to patrol inside GLNP, by sharing all data on their camera traps with the GLNP Administration in Medan (Green Life, 2020k), and by becoming a member of the International Ranger Federation (Green Life, 2020l).

Such responses by the community obviously undermine Green Life's conservation practices and goals and are interpreted by the Green Life management as evidence that local communities do not know (yet) how to live with, or protect, nature. This is emphasised by the Czech manager, who claims that local people

are angry because a white foreigner comes here to buy the land and then does nothing with it. We use it for nature only. They don't understand and think that we are just here to make money. Because that is what land and nature means to them, money. (fieldnotes, 26 January, 2018)

This quote shows how the manager's and community members' perceptions of the value of land and nature differ. In contrast to what the manager seems to conclude, the valuation of land and nature by the local community seems to be more complex and is not necessarily valued in terms of money only, but also in terms of livelihoods and intrinsic value (cf. Montes et al., 2020; Serhadli, 2020). From such a perspective, establishing a nature reserve to which the local community does not have access might therefore seem illogical and wasteful to the local community itself. Even though most of the threats and complaints were also targeted at the Indonesian manager of the land, he takes a more moderate stance, explaining that the Green Life management believes that protecting nature and separating it from human beings is also in the (long-term) interest of the local community. Moreover, there are many different views and interests that Green Life needs to take into account, including those of the government and the locals. Balancing these views and interests is not an easy job: "It is difficult, you know. You need to be friendly with the locals and cooperate with the government. You cannot be too strict, or they won't like you". He therefore tries to support the village and wants to establish good relationships with the locals, but "it is not easy. [Some others in the management do] not understand why I spend all the money buying everybody food and drinks. [...] We have a different

approach. [These others care] about the locals, but in a different way" (interview, 7 February, 2018). However, one of these other managers of Green Life bluntly stated: "I am not interested in the people, I am interested in the nature" (fieldnotes, 26 January, 2018).

## Discussion

### *Neoliberal conservation versus corporate power?*

Green Life is a project that uses neoliberal strategies to 'save nature', which is its prime concern. Its practices reveal 'conventional' neoliberal ideologies to save nature (Büscher et al., 2012; McAfee, 1999), specifically through privatisation and the implementation of market-based ecotourism for community development. As is well-known today, such strategies do not always deliver the expected results and they contain problematic elements, including the creation of local elitism, the implementation of externally driven agendas, homogenisation of local groups, the perpetuation of neo-colonial relations and the prioritisation of nature over local people's interests (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Carrier & West, 2004; Dressler et al., 2010; Fletcher, 2011; Mowforth & Munt, 2003). At Green Life, all these problems have been exposed in different degrees. Nonetheless, the project has the intention to challenge the expansion of global corporate power, in particular oil palm and paper multinationals. This is part of the legitimisation of the project and its activities, by arguing that their 'good' privatised project is a response to 'bad' privatisation. From a conservation point of view then, Green Life's proposition makes much sense. What clearly needs more attention though, is how they relate to community development.

The appropriation of land areas for conservation purposes comes with changing power relations in which ownership, user rights and control over resources are transferred from generally poor people into the hands of the powerful (Fairhead et al., 2012). In the instance of the Green Life Project the land and its resources are changing ownership and control, into the hands of an individual, who leases it to an overseas nature conservation NGO. For the primary goal of nature conservation, privatisation thus plays a pivotal role, and so does ecotourism, which legitimises the project by fulfilling the requirement to involve community members, and which provides important revenues.

However, our results also question Green Life's lands' suitability for large-scale oil palm plantations and Green Life's arrival in the area has meant an increase of land prices. This is a more general problem globally where green grabbing takes place: there is less land left for others because it concentrates into the hands of a few, thus creating novel forms of commodification and valuation and new markets, actors and alliances (Fairhead et al., 2012). Thus, Green Life's own legitimisation does not hold. What is prevented by this project, are expansions and establishments of (new) small-scale plantations, instead of large multinational activities. From Green Life's point of view and with their conservation interests in mind, it makes sense to curb these small-scale plantations but to not communicate this publicly, because to contest large oil palm multinationals sounds much better in marketing and public discourse than constraining local people's livelihoods, particularly for volunteer tourists who provide critical funding for the project.

From the perspective of the inhabitants from Batu Katak, what matters most are the constraints and benefits that come with Green Life. However, the benefits that some inhabitants receive also mean that the socio-economic dynamics of the village change substantially. There is a combination of acquiescence and resistance (cf. Koot & Van Beek, 2017). Initially, Green Life had little interest in the local communities and wanted to create an area in which they would avoid local people. However, government pressure *forced* them to collaborate, which they did not do out of their own interests, despite a long tradition of community-based conservation in Indonesia (see for example Eghenter, 2002; Wadley, 2002). Moreover, the colonial style implementation of fortress conservation (Duffy, 2008; Hutton et al., 2005) instigated militarisation, most prominently through the Tiger Commando anti-poaching unit, but also the camera traps and sharing that information with GLNP rangers and government officials can have strong social

implications such as creating fear and infringing privacy (Sandbrook et al., 2018). Overall, militarised approaches carry the danger to *exclude* local people from nature conservation and to create *negative* attitudes towards conservation (Duffy et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2015), which is of course the opposite of what Green Life aims for. Such a negative attitude already starts to show in some of the responses by the local inhabitants, who use anonymous threats and violence, who steal camera traps and who demolish sign boards to express their discontent with some crucial elements of the larger Green Life Project.

### ***Ecotourism and multiple environmentalities***

Green Life's reliance on tourism is not uncommon globally, in particular when nature conservation and ecotourism are established close to or together with 'local communities' (Agrawal, 2005; Brockington et al., 2008; Dressler et al., 2010; Koot & Van Beek, 2017; Mostafanezhad et al., 2016; Sullivan, 2002; West, 2016). Ecotourism provides employment for the local communities, a process that resembles Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation'; through primitive accumulation, wealth and power get concentrated in the hands of a few while drastically reducing livelihood opportunities for most others. Human labour power is transformed into a commodity and property becomes privatised, increasing dependency and inequality (Marx, 2013). As such, ecotourism "is a never-ending form of accumulation by dispossession" (West, 2016, p. 60; cf. Harvey, 2003). Buffer-zone protected areas often show a strong focus on participation and community development, but in reality end up implementing more coercive strategies, often based on (negative) stereotypes of local inhabitants (Neumann, 1997). Market-based development mechanisms such as ecotourism function within a limited understanding of community development and are set up to prioritise nature above people. In the case of Green Life, it masks their initial lack of interest in the local community, as well as some of its difficult aspects, such as the ethical questions regarding the prioritisation of nature above people (see also Dressler et al., 2010; Sullivan, 2002). Green Life attempts to alter local people's behaviour to act in such a way that they contribute to, or at least do not obstruct, its conservation ideology. These attempts are, all in their own way, informed by the four different types of environmentality we described above (namely disciplinary, neoliberal, sovereign and truth environmentality). The case also shows how these different types do not stand apart, but continuously influence each other (cf. Deutsch, 2020).

When looking at the project from a truth environmentality point of view, Green Life has shown rather explicit ideas about the separation of humans and nature, as if humans are a threat to nature, acting from 'outside' of it, instead of a part of nature. This ontological assumption is crucial in informing the project's disciplinary and sovereign environmentality strategies. Sovereign environmentality has been put to work by restricting local people's access to GLNP, the Green Life reserves and increasingly the rivers. Official government rules on fishing that are not strictly implemented by the rangers themselves are now enforced by Green Life and its Tiger Commando. Moreover, camera traps play an important role too, increasingly monitoring people's activities in the forest. Disciplinary environmentality techniques have been advocated by both NGOs: 'teaching' local communities about the project and nature conservation at the Tiger House and putting up sign boards and posters suggests that people need to be 'educated' in order to live harmoniously with their natural surroundings. This confirms the idea that local inhabitants are considered people who still need to 'learn' what 'proper' nature conservation is (Neumann, 1997), essentially framing them as a threat to nature.

Neoliberal environmentality has been put to work, most importantly, by establishing a volunteer ecotourism project which aims to change people's (mostly monetary) incentive structures to act in certain ways, resulting in a variety of socio-economic consequences. Indeed, the volunteer ecotourism programme at Green Life offers the inhabitants of Batu Katak the opportunity to diversify their livelihood strategies by offering alternative occupations in (eco)tourism, which is

considered an important attribute to cope with and adapt to different stresses (Scoones, 2015). However, such alternative occupations have in many places delivered elusive results, both in terms of conservation as well as in terms of socio-economic development (Sene-Harper et al., 2019). Other mechanisms that strengthen the neoliberal, disciplinary and sovereign governance strategies employed by Green Life are, for example, fining whoever is caught fishing inside GLNP. This is not only a form of top-down regulation of rules and a form of punishment, but the fines are also economic incentive structures that aim to alter people's values and behaviour, in order to withhold them from fishing altogether. This also leads to what West (2016) calls the "dispossession of sovereignty", which entails a lot more than only material dispossession and a restriction of access to particular natural resources. As she explains, sovereignty is

multifaceted with aspects connected to power or authority, the ability to self-govern (in the state-related political sense as well as in the sense of rights to make decisions about self, land, family and future), as freedom from domination and control, and as the ability to assert autonomy through daily practice and action. (West, 2016, p. 35)

The ecotourism discourse, together with the public discourse that Green Life prevents large oil palm multinationals, masks an exclusionary and protectionist conservation practice, in which the (monetary) benefits of volunteer ecotourism largely go to the project itself. Such a practice is not only counterintuitive to the idea of buffer-zones protected areas in which community participation and development are central, but consequently results in several, at times conflicting, responses by the inhabitants from Batu Katak. Such responses should be seen both in the light of resistance against losing access to particular resources (the forest and the rivers) (see also Holmes, 2007) and a way to survive. As such, Green Life is an example of what Giddens (1984) called an 'enabling constraint': structural properties in social systems can be considered as enabling and constraining at the same time. In the case of Green Life, however, the ecotourism benefits (enablements) do not seem to polish off the overall project's constraints and costs for the inhabitants of Batu Katak.

## Conclusion

Green Life's volunteer ecotourism project has resulted in conflicting responses by the Batu Katak community: some people actively cooperate with the project's volunteer ecotourism initiative, while others, and sometimes the same people who support the ecotourism initiative, undermine the project through the continuation of banned livelihoods and the use of violence and threats towards the project's management and employees. Moreover, volunteer ecotourism is used to cover up the project's negative impact on local livelihoods and the challenges the project faces with regards to community involvement, while positively highlighting the larger project to obtain the necessary licenses and goodwill from government institutes. In addition, global corporate multinationals are also part of the discourse as threats to nature, which of course they often are, although it is ambiguous whether the physical terrain of the Green Life reserves would indeed be suitable for such multinationals.

Although the privatisation of land by civil society actors is a relatively new strategy to protect nature in Southeast Asia, the outcomes of the project on the ground are not completely new. Our argument is that the (volunteer) ecotourism discourse can play a crucial role in legitimising the activities and increasing power of nature conservation organisations, which, in the case of Green Life, is visible in the growth of coercive means to secure its protected areas. If ecotourism is the kernel of neoliberal environmentality at Green Life, the core issue is the prevalence of truth environmentality, in which nature is valued higher than people at times. This valuation has led to the strengthening of disciplinary and, especially, sovereign environmentality. However, as Matose (2016, p. 312) already found in southern Africa, "without resolving property rights in the form of rights and access for local people at the same time, such projects do not yield the

intended outcomes". Arguably, in its current form, ecotourism at Green Life is unlikely to establish the intended sustainable relations with the community, necessary for long-term conservation success. This paper thus functions as an important lesson also for practitioners to scrutinise the consequences of their governance strategies.

## Notes

1. Green Life is not the first PPA on Sumatra: we are aware of two more privatised nature reserves, namely Harapan Rainforest and Tambling Wildlife Nature Conservation (see Buergin, 2016; Tambling Wildlife Nature Conservation, 2020 respectively).
2. Last visited on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020. As of June 2020, this website was not functioning.
3. The exact year in which this community-based tourism organisation was established differs in various interviews, ranging from 2012 to 2014.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers whose valuable contributions allowed us to improve the initial version of this paper. We would also like to thank the Green Life Management and employees, our interpreter Ruddy, host family and interviewees in Batu Katak for sharing their knowledge and experiences with us.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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