

Nature reserves sustain inequality

Private game reserves in South Africa protect not only wildlife, but also social inequality, says Lerato Thakholi in her PhD thesis.

Thakholi investigated the distribution of land use and labour in and around private game reserves in northeastern South Africa, near Mozambique and the Kruger National Park. These reserves are located near villages where about two million black South Africans live under harsh conditions, characterized by limited access to clean drinking water and high unemployment rates.

In a historical analysis, Thakholi shows that the apartheid state granted land to white farmers in the 19th century. Some black people were detained and made to work for free, while many others were expelled to areas adjacent to these new white farms. Livestock farming proved challenging in these areas due to low meat prices and predators from the nearby Kruger National Park. That is why the area

was converted into a game reserve in the 1960s.

The local population did not benefit from this development, says Thakholi, even after the end of the apartheid regime in 1994. One of the reasons for this was the Game Theft Act of 1991, which turned wild animals into private property and effectively assigned more value to them than to the lives of black people.

Today, Western tourists stay in 5-star lodges, while the black guards, maintenance and hospitality workers are poorly paid and live in shabby staff housing. To reduce this inequality, all employees in the private nature reserve should be paid at least a minimum wage, Thakholi says. But to really reduce inequality, the land needs to be distributed more fairly. 'There is a land redistribution programme, but so far the local authorities and the powerful private landowners have managed to thwart this programme.' ^{AS}

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