



# Selling extinction: The social media(tion) of global cheetah conservation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contextualizes the social media(tion) of global cheetah conservation and examines how representations of extinction are ‘spectacularized’ and used to leverage global money and power. ‘Spectacles of extinction’ flow quickly over social media platforms; specifically, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, gaining support, followers, and funding for conservation efforts in Namibia. This paper draws from thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Namibia and two years of online data collection and examines the chasm between spectacularized extinction online and conservation realities in Namibia, pointing to the problem of mediating conservation politics over social media. The Namibia-based cheetah conservation NGOs in this study focus their efforts at the international level. Their global marketing campaigns to #SaveTheCheetah are circulated over mass media, social media, and other communication platforms and technologies to engage global audiences and mobilize attention to cheetahs’ global #RaceAgainstExtinction. This paper argues that by mediating conservation politics online, cheetah conservation NGOs conflate and confuse raising money and awareness with effective action. Framing extinction as something that can be solved by global audiences over social media reinforces economic, informational, and power asymmetries in conservation.

## 1. Introduction

Screen culture and new visual media, communication platforms, and technologies are making it easier to access and communicate environmental crises at the global scale. Cheetah conservation NGOs in this study use social media to mediate conservation politics globally by circulating ‘cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction.’ Over social media, these NGOs use language intended to provoke fear to ‘act now or lose the species forever.’ And it is effective. Revenue from the US alone for one conservation NGO in Namibia was close to three million US dollars in 2018 (Muehlhausen et al., 2018). These NGOs leverage global fears of extinction to gain support, followers, and fund conservation efforts in Namibia, calling on global audiences to act, either through donating to the NGOs and/or by sharing, posting, and tweeting cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction. This paper argues that the way conservation politics is mediated over social media conflates and confuses raising money and awareness with effective action. This paper is not a critique of social media itself, rather, it will examine what Odell (2019) describes as “the invasive logic of commercial social media, and its financial incentive to keep us in a profitable state of anxiety, envy, and distraction” (xii).

While the urgency of cheetahs’ global #RaceAgainstExtinction is circulated daily, it might come as a surprise that in Namibia, not only is the extinction crisis narrative missing but cheetah populations are considered stable<sup>1</sup>. Cheetahs’ global #RaceAgainstExtinction and the absence of their local status in global narratives makes cheetah conservation in Namibia a particularly unique case for analysis. This paper examines the chasm between spectacularized extinction online and the political realities of conservation in Namibia, pointing to the problem of mediating conservation politics over social media. When cheetah conservation NGOs in Namibia mediate conservation politics over Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, they are selling extinction.

The intent of this paper, to be clear, is not to minimize extinction (risks) but to examine the spectacularized representation and circulation of extinction. Global extinction, in theory and in practice, elicits emotional responses which, more often than not, foreclose critique. So, to understand how extinction—a word—can evade meaningful critique, I draw upon Arnold’s (1988) depiction of the emotive power of the word famine.

“Famine is one of the most powerful, pervasive, and arguably one of the most emotive, words in our historical vocabulary, and that in

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<sup>1</sup> Namibian cheetah populations, according to respondent interviews and personal communications with experts in the field, are considered stable. This does not mean that they are not at risk in Namibia and/or globally or could be in the future, simply, at the time of this research, cheetah populations in Namibia were regarded as stable. Respondent data is used here, however, (Fabiano et al. 2020) does discuss stable trends in cheetah populations in Namibia.

itself makes it all the more difficult to isolate its meaning and wider significance” (5).

Extinction rivals the pervasive, emotive power of famine that Arnold (1988) described. Consequently, the emotive power of extinction draws attention away from varied political, economic, social, and historical contexts across cheetahs’ full range as well as its meaning and wider significance in conservation capitalism. Because, when extinction is used, and, subsequently, incentivized to engage global audiences in local conservation crises and fund conservation NGOs, narratives of fear around losing a species are increasingly overriding complex local contexts, critical perspectives, and expanding informational, economic, and power asymmetries in conservation. When extinction is sold online, it undermines effective political action and transformative change in conservation.

Why this is of particular importance is that, for cheetahs, it is not the fear of extinction in Namibia per se, rather, it is the fear of losing funding for the NGOs, that dictates how cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction is represented over social media. Cheetah conservation NGOs rely on public support therefore must be “spectacular enough to capture public interest” (Verma et al., 2015: S649). Consequently, it is not extinction, in and of itself, that is incentivized but the status. Cheetah conservation NGOs compete with each other and with larger, more well-known NGOs, other globally valued and threatened charismatic species as well as the continuous flow of information online. In this way, social media platforms incentivize extinction, as spectacle, through market competition, pitting threatened charismatic species against each other for global awareness, attention, and funding. Over social media, attention can be leveraged to amplify and/or draw attention to #extinction but it can also serve as a distraction. Not only is cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction decontextualized from conservation realities in Namibia, but mediating cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction online abstracts from cheetah conservation NGOs’ contribution to global processes that are part and parcel of the global extinction crisis they seek to redress<sup>2</sup>. Cheetah conservation fundraising campaign tactics do not work in isolation from broader structures of global capitalism. Over social media, #SavingCheetahs relies on platforms based on a financial model that requires continued, even accelerated, consumerism by a privileged global class, one whose overconsumption is linked to climate change and associated ecological crises (Holmes, 2012; Hickel, 2020). In the urgency to act on global climate change and mass extinctions, it is important to consider how social media functions to incentivize extinction and integrate global audiences into the spectacular global extinction mode of production in place of effective action.

Media, broadly construed, increasingly shapes how “we – as individuals, cultures and societies – view, perceive, value and relate to our environment” and is central to bringing “environmental issues and problems to public and political attention” (Hansen, 2011: 8). Social media is distinct from media writ large; platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter need to be differentiated from broader media structures in discussions of power and politics in political ecology. As mass - and image - based media has changed, so has conservation’s use of media and media spaces to raise awareness, attention, and funding for conservation, and shape human and nature relationships. Social media creates a global space where conservation politics are visualized, negotiated, and sold as global activism. To act over social media is to share, post, tweet, like, comment, and tag—all actions that engage broader global participation the more they are circulated and are perceived to represent public opinion (Ross et al., 2021). Global claims of #extinction capitalize on what Giroux (2016) describes as ‘stylized political action’ where such likes, posts, tweets, and shares distract global audiences through the ‘theatricality of power’ (Giroux, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> For additional discussion on the environmental costs of social media and associated technologies, see Oyedemi 2019 and Notley 2019.

This ‘theatricality of power’ is how the NGOs raise awareness, attention, and funding and engage global audiences in the politics of conservation. Raising awareness and attention for cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction, however, does not equate to political power in Namibian conservation governance and that is where decision-making power resides. Dean’s (2005) understanding of politics in communicative capitalism is useful here. The chasm discussed in this paper is in line with what Dean (2005) describes as the “disconnect between engaged criticism and national strategy in terms of a distinction between politics as the circulation of content and politics as official policy” (52–53). My analysis will show cheetah conservation NGOs engage in a “politics that circulates as content” (Dean, 2005: 53) where they must compete for visibility, money, and attention.

Changes in social media platforms have meant that the politics of extinction no longer requires extinction to be central to cheetah conservation in practice in Namibia but is central in the visual demands of amplifying extinction to global audiences. Extinction, as spectacle, creates an abstract power in engaging global audiences in conservation campaigns—perceived power that global audiences can #save cheetahs by engaging through social media and online consumer activism, giving the “illusion of agency” (O’Niell, 2009: 156). Media power, Castells (1996) argues, is the power of the flow and not the flows of power that take precedence over media spaces. In other words, media power is not in who has the power to communicate but who has the power to attract an audience that will pay attention (Zhang et al., 2018). The spectacle of extinction operates in the attention economy that, simply put, buys and sells attention (Odell 2019). Online engagement with #extinction creates what Odell (2019) calls an “arms race of urgency” (59). This construction of urgency fuels competition over and between the platforms using the logic of advertising and clicks (Odell, 2019). The urgency to #SaveTheCheetahs can appear to unite global audiences in (false) collective action, universalizing a privileged position of promising global solutions to local conservation ‘crises.’ In doing so, informational, economic, and power asymmetries are expanded. In effect, social media is facilitating a new kind of political community, one where attention is a key resource and “attention getters, stunts, and spectacles are rewarded” (Tufekci, 2017: 271). Debord’s (1995) analytical approach in *The Society of the Spectacle* is applied here to illustrate how extinction circulates and is circulated over social media, creating a problematic interaction between abstract and concrete/material reality. To explicate this process, literature from political ecology (Igoe, 2010, 2017; Goodman et al., 2016; Büscher, Dressler, and Fletcher, 2014; Büscher, 2021) as well as broader publications on the spectacle (Giroux, 2016) were used. In addition to a political ecology framework, this paper draws from media and communication studies (Castells 1996; Dean 2005; Fuchs 2017; Tufekci 2017; Odell 2019) as social media is fundamental in the production, reproduction, circulation, and amplification of the spectacle of extinction and can be useful to political ecology discourse.

## 2. Spectacle of extinction

In this paper, the spectacle of extinction is theorized based on Debord’s (1995) concept of the Spectacle, illustrating how communication platforms, technologies, and media align in the production, reproduction, creation, co-creation, amplification, and circulation of cheetahs’ global #RaceAgainstExtinction. Debord (1995) explained that “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (12). Debord (1995) saw such mediation of images “as a central feature of late capitalism, in which images become commodities alienated from the relationships that produced them and consumed in ignorance of the same” (Igoe, 2010: 375). Discussed below, changes in the operation of attention over social media means that it is not, merely, content or information conveyed through images that is a commodity, but engagement through sharing, posting, tweeting, and amplifying content to reach broader participation. Spaces opened up by social media are perceived

as facilitating public engagement and are increasingly used in a political context (Stieglitz and Dang – Xuan, 2013). In the “‘cute cat theory’ of activism and the public sphere,” (Zuckerman, as cited in Tefucki, 2017: 20) explains how “platforms that have nonpolitical functions can become more politically powerful because it is harder to censor their large numbers of users who are eager to connect with one another or to share their latest ‘cute cat’ pictures” (20). Cheetah conservation NGOs utilize the hyper-visibility of social media to focus conservation politics globally by circulating news, information, and images with #SaveTheCheetah, #RacingExtinction, #Conservation, and simply #Cheetah, etc. #SaveTheCheetah is not just a statement or straphanger to a post, it is part of the visual politics of raising awareness and is a link to corresponding images, posts, tweets, debates, and conversations online. Increasing online engagement along with the hyper-circulation of politics as mediated content is where the spectacle of extinction diverts from Debord’s (1995) Spectacle and Igoe’s (2010, 2017) conceptualization of the Spectacle of Nature. Section 2.1 reviews social media engagement—illustrating the space(s) where cheetah conservation politics are mediated and showing how extinction is amplified in the attention economy. Section 2.2 looks at the online ‘space(s) of appearance’ over social media and the alienation of politics and power through the social media(ation) of global cheetah conservation.

### 2.1. The politics of Cheetah conservation in the time of the attention economy

In the last decade, new media spaces, communication platforms, and technologies have shown an immense capacity to create a spectacle (Adams, 2019). However, the use of media and technology to produce and circulate spectacular nature in conservation has changed significantly. Conservation has moved from broadcasting spectacular nature over televised programming, magazines, and nature documentaries to circulating it over YouTube, smart phones, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Changes in media platforms have transitioned from specialized communities of users to reach a more diverse globalized public (Giroux 2016; Poster 2001). Consequently, social media has “changed the operation of a key resource: *attention*” (Tufekci, 2017: 30). In the past, mass media operated as the sole mediator of public attention (Tufekci, 2017); now, anyone with a page and/or platform can create, co-create, and circulate content, generate ideas, document events, and spread news as part of the “decentralized structure of the internet” (Fuchs, 2017: 243). Changes in mass media, Tufekci (2017) explained, represent a “radically different mode of information and attention flow” (29). More people on social media, the more useful the platforms are, and for more people as social media platforms harness the “power of network effects” (Tufekci, 2017: 20). And currently, social media platforms have enormous user bases to harness this power. Facebook has 1.84 billion daily active users worldwide (Facebook, Inc., 2021). Instagram has one billion users sharing 500 million stories every day (Iqbal, 2021). And Twitter reports 192 million “monetized active daily users” (Twitter, Inc., 2021). What is important about these numbers is not how many users are on each platform, but the immensity of the space(s) cheetah conservation NGOs work in to engage global audiences and compete for attention and funding. Space that is created through online engagement connects global audiences through the constant flow of images, information, and content across social media landscapes. It is in this space where spectacular representations of politics, agency, and struggles are mediated and where the possibility for the global public to socially, economically, and politically engage and connect for a cause lies.

Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, Odell (2019) argued, “act like dams that capitalize on our natural interests in others and an ageless need for community, hijacking and frustrating our most innate desires, and profiting from them” (xi). Over social media, the production and dissemination of images and knowledge(s) “not only shape people’s perceptions of the world, but mediate social and

human–environmental relationships” (Igoe, 2010: 375). Conservation knowledge, images, and power are produced, negotiated, and sold across “space, place, and at various scales” through “assemblages of science, media, culture, environment, and politics” (Goodman et al., 2016: 678). Growing scientific, political, and global concern over environmental issues, like extinction, raises questions about how social relations with nature are mediated and how contemporary systems of communication are influencing and constructing such relationships and crises (Harrison and Burgess, 1994). This is significant given social media’s propensity to be used as a tool to create fear, both by news media and users alike (Odell, 2019). Over social media, the urgency inferred in cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction is a product of the sites’ need to compete, where the “logic of advertising and clicks dictates the media experience...” (Odell, 2019: 59). What drives this process is not the content or information in social media posts but the engagement (Odell, 2019), in other words, the amount of people reached through likes, posts, retweets, and shares. These hyper-accelerated actions might be for a well-intentioned cause but instead of generating reasoned communication, there is a reactionary response propelled by fear and anger (Odell, 2019). According to Odell (2019), how this is expressed over social media “so often feels like firecrackers setting off other firecrackers in a very small room that soon gets filled with smoke” (60). This describes perfectly how it sometimes feels when #extinction is circulated and shared over social media.

When creating, co-creating, circulating, and amplifying cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction cheetah conservation NGOs are selling extinction and extending the alliance between conservation and capitalism every day. And it is in this way that the spectacle of extinction is a particular productive process in capitalist production. Spectacular claims of extinction necessitate both economic and dramatic performances in order to ‘conjure global finance’ (Tsing, 2005). This is what Tsing (2005) conceptualized in her book, *Friction*, as “the economy of appearances” (57). Economic and dramatic performances over social media are dependent on harnessing and mobilizing the attention of global audiences. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are, after all, in the business of monetizing attention (Tefucki, 2017). Attention, in and of itself, is a scarce commodity (Nixon, 2020) as it relies on global attention spans easily distracted by the continuous flow of information online. Global ‘fear’ of extinction plays on the emotions of global audiences by using dramatic imagery and urgent calls for action, attempting to harness global attention, funding, and support. Extinction is incentivized and turned into capital, in part, through its global creation, co-creation, circulation, amplification, and hyper-visualization over social media. In this way, social media and new technologies are continuously (re)shaping how social relationships and human–environmental relationships are perceived and spectacularized in new processes of accumulation, circulation, and control (Debord, 1995; Giroux, 2016). In the continuous flows of information over media spaces, capital works as a unit in images and representations; that are subsequently, realized, invested, and accumulated in the sphere of circulation (Castells, 1996). Attention, Nixon (2020) noted, is a source of value as well as a limited commodity. The power to harness and maintain attention is “power over consumption” (Nixon, 2020: 75). According to Nixon (2020), power over consumption can be realized by both consumers (global audiences) and advertisers (cheetah conservation NGOs) alike. Media power is power over attention. The spectacle of extinction draws on this idea of media power, attempting to harness global attention to focus on the NGOs and cheetahs’ #RaceAgainstExtinction. The following section will explain how the power to enact such politics in Namibia is the abstraction.

### 2.2. Cheetah conservation online: activism, politics, and power

If/when the spectacle of extinction gets attention, it can appear global audiences are acting collectively through a shared responsibility towards the planet. The appearance of collective action over social

media is part of the logic of the platforms. Media power is fetishized and believed to influence public opinion and hold weight in policy decisions and debates (Ross et al., 2021). Calls for global participation in cheetahs' #RaceAgainstExtinction are imbued with assumptions about political power over social media. Assumptions that more information, awareness, and attention to environmental issues over social media will lead to effective change. For example, in Conservation Biology, an editorial on the benefits of Twitter, described how “engaging with Twitter can be a powerful way for conservation scientists to reach journalists, policy makers, and the general public” (Parsons et al., 2014: 300). Twitter, Parsons et al. (2014) claimed, can “provide a platform for scientists to directly reach decision makers (or their staff) with conservation messages” (300). Harrington et al. (2018) maintains, public awareness of conservation “can be hugely important in instigating, driving and supporting remedial action, largely through influences on policy change and funding” (108). The politics of technology, however, is “entangled with the politics of public space and of the environment” (Odell, 199). Dean (2005) argued that the fantasy of activity or participation is “materialized through technology fetishism” (54). In the attention economy, Zhang et al. (2018) explains, “attention shifts the conversation from who has the power to communicate to who has the power to attract an audience that will pay attention” (3162).

Social media creates new spaces for the global public to come together over what appears as public space (Fuchs, 2017). In a sense, this follows what Arendt argued in *The Human Condition* “all political acts require a ‘space of appearance;’ people appearing collectively defines politics and the public realm: ‘it is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the world’” (Merrifield, 2015: 289; Arendt, 1958/1998: 198). Arendt’s thinking about power is useful here. For Arendt (1958/1998), the political realm is created out of acting together in the sharing of “space and deeds” (198). Subsequently, power, Arendt (1958/1998) argued, is what “keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking [men], in existence” (200). Odell (2019), described Arendt’s ‘space of appearance’ as the place to be addressed, understood, and challenged. It was the physical space where “we gather, we say what we mean, and then we act” (Odell, 2019: 177). Social media spaces, however, challenge what Merrifield (2015) and Arendt (1958/1998) understood as public space and political ‘spaces of appearance.’ Mobilized engagement gives the appearance of people appearing collectively. The online ‘political realm’, consequently, is constructed out of engagement, in other words, the creation, co-creation, amplification, and hyper-visualization and -circulation of images, information, and content to reach broader participation. Consequently, power in cheetah conservation is not situated in the cheetah conservation NGOs themselves, but in their constant need to circulate and amplify the extinction crisis to raise global awareness, attention, and money. Image-making, Castells (1996) stated, “is power-making” (476). Over social media, political actors “exist in the power game through and by the media” (Castells, 1996: 476). Namibia-based cheetah conservation NGOs practice political power in conservation through awareness raising to amplifying media/public responses that influence rather than ground political power in the realm of policy, or, rather, the political realm. It is ultimately the separation of power and politics in local and global cheetah conservation practice that presents the main contradiction analyzed in this paper. This contradiction follows what Debord (1995), Marx (1867/2013), and Igoe (2010, 2017) theorized as processes of alienation.

Alienation, to quote Igoe (2010), is “a general loss of control by people over the conditions that shape their lives and their ability to express themselves in creative ways” (378). Igoe (2010) gave an example of this as the severing of “social relationships and detachment from place” (378). Social media(tion) is not only the detachment from place, but the severing of both social and political relationships. The ability of social media to create the illusion of agency to act politically online, is the alienation of politics and political power that the social media(tion) of global cheetah conservation represents. By mobilizing

attention through mediated communication, Giroux (2016) argues that the spectacle offers the “populace a sense of unity that serves to integrate them into state power” (p. 21). The spectacle of extinction here is operationalized outside of state power through non-state, private conservation actors by engaging spaces opened up by social media platforms and growing international concern over biodiversity loss and extinction. Extinction is both a pedagogical tool and a deliberate strategy used by cheetah conservation NGOs to leverage social, economic, and political relations over global social networks and critical in narratives of global awareness raising and action. Giroux (2016) argued that the spectacle is transforming the very nature of politics; particularly, how the spectacle is central in legitimizing social relations “in which the political and pedagogical are redefined in ways that undercut democratic freedom and practice” (19). Over social media, what is promised as a democratic space (Amedie, 2015), not only creates and engages new spaces for the global public to come together, connect, and interact collectively; but, more critically, space for economic, political, and cultural power structures and asymmetries (Fuchs, 2017).

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

This paper examines the politics of cheetah conservation in Namibia and the mediation of spectacular representations and circulation of extinction and conservation politics over social media as an embedded case study. This research design offered a strategy for understanding the dynamics of the extinction spectacle and the local, national, global, and media spaces of the politics of cheetah conservation (Cohen et al., 2000). Case study design is bounded by time, space, and activity and accommodates multiple units of analysis within a single study (Yin, 2003). The bounded nature of case study design enabled the researcher to frame and manage contextual variables during thirteen months of fieldwork in Namibia and two years of online data collection to produce thick descriptions of the following units—cheetah conservation NGOs and their actors (voluntourists and researchers), social media content, other conservation NGOs in Namibia, and Namibian conservation policies and practices that intersected with the politics of cheetah conservation in Namibia.

#### 3.2. Sites and participants

This study focused on conservation NGOs in Namibia working in similar capacities in local, national, global, and media spaces. Several NGOs are included in this study but, for the purposes of this paper, are identified as ‘the cheetah conservation NGOs’ to protect the identities of the respondents. Cheetah conservation in Namibia is a small community; therefore, it was necessary to maintain the anonymity of NGOs and all respondents. This paper is focused on the politics of cheetah conservation, subsequently, is not intended to be a deep dive into cheetah conservation and/or the work of each NGO. Important for this paper is that the NGOs all have similar practices: pose solutions to the same conservation issues, part of the private sector, regulated by the state, have captive cheetahs on-site, and all use social media to promote their mission. The only substantial difference is that one NGO does not have a voluntourism program where voluntourists pay a significant fee to participate. The NGOs have locations across Namibia, and all are located on privately-owned land. Conservation work is mainly done on-site, through voluntourism and ecotourism. Important to also mention is positionality, both the author and most, but not all, respondents at the NGOs were from Western countries. The NGO actors in this study were mainly researchers and voluntourists who had traveled to Namibia to work and/or volunteer.

### 3.3. Data collection methods and analytical framework

This embedded case study of cheetah conservation in Namibia and the global extinction spectacle was organized and selected on the basis of known attributes and distinctive features which allowed for the collection of a variety of data and sources resonating with a theory-led methodology. This paper develops and employs an analytical framework from [Debord's \(1995\)](#) concept of the Spectacle to contextualize the conditions and processes of selling extinction over social media platforms as well as the concrete/material realities of the politics of cheetah conservation in Namibia. There are multiple and complex material-technological relationships that produce or circulate commodified images and material impacts of digital technologies and infrastructures, however, these material-technological relationships/impacts were not the focus of the analysis. Rather, this analysis focused on the continuous (re)shaping of social relationships and human-environmental relationships over social media, focusing on power and politics in cheetah conservation and the spaces where cheetah conservation politics are mediated online.

Empirical data was collected in Namibia through ethnographic fieldwork from September 2017–October 2018. Cheetah conservation 'in practice' was conducted predominantly on-site at the NGOs in Namibia. Cheetah conservation strategies at the NGOs in this study ranged from tourism, voluntourism, research, and on-site animal interactions/viewing. What was important in this study was to understand how cheetah conservation politics was framed at these organizations and how it is understood by all actors involved. Information was collected from private conservation organizations (the NGOs), Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), local community members and officials, tourists, international voluntourists, and researchers in the field. Respondents were organized into three different categories (Researchers, Namibian Officials, and Voluntourists) in order to protect the identity of the respondents. So as not to confuse readers, Namibian officials is the combination of government and conservation officials that work directly in Namibian conservation governance and researchers consisted of researchers both at the NGOs and other NGOs with knowledge and/or connection to cheetah conservation. Data collection methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, volunteer journals, and questionnaires. Interviews were used when speaking with researchers, Namibian officials, and a small selection of voluntourists and were recorded and transcribed. Participant observation at the NGOs meant taking part in conservation activities and research mostly on-site. Conservation activities ranged from animal/carnivore feeds, cheetah walks, research, and game counts. During participant observation, the voluntourist journals (52) were filled out by voluntourists who agreed to participate. The journals documented their experiences and how/if their understanding of conservation changed over the course of their stay at the NGOs.

Data was collected over social media for a period of two years. Data analyzed in this paper consisted of screenshots taken of the NGOs' and affiliate organizations' social media content. The data used in this paper does portray the global status of cheetahs, not the local status in Namibia, which at the time of this research was considered stable. Namibia's stable cheetah population was only revealed during interviews and personal communications with respondents in Namibia and generally not a topic of conversation among international voluntourists and tourists or documented online. All posts quoted in this paper are from the NGOs in Namibia. Data analysis did include affiliate organizations of the same name but different country (for example: WWF, WWF UK). All social media content refers to cheetah conservation in Namibia only. All media data in this paper was collected from public pages/accounts and not from personal and/or individual social media pages and will also be kept anonymous. Hashtags were monitored but no individual pages/posts are identified.

## 4. Contextualizing the #Extinction Spectacle

The following analysis serves to contextualize extinction; specifically, the disjuncture between the abstract and concrete/material reality of cheetah conservation politics in Namibia. What is important to keep in mind is that cheetah conservation at the NGOs' is done mostly on-site, on privately-owned land. Conservation in Namibia is through the state, whereas cheetah conservation is in the private sector and outside of state-sanctioned conservation in Namibia. The NGOs in this study have established cheetah conservation as their business model, and this has particular implications for structures of politics and power imbricated in land ownership and rights. Specifically, the NGOs location outside of state-sanctioned conservation on privately-owned land means that the NGOs are regulated, and therefore, do not have the political power in Namibian conservation governance that is promised in the social media posts examined in this paper. The following is a discussion of my findings: (4.1) the power and politics of selling extinction, (4.2) cheetah conservation politics #online, and (4.3) cheetah conservation politics offline.

### 4.1. Extinction: the irony of our time

What emerged from the data collected both in Namibia and online is that extinction was used as both a pedagogical tool and deliberate strategy by the NGOs to leverage global attention and funding. It was the general consensus in interviews and personal communications with respondents based in Namibia that cheetah populations in Namibia were stable. Outside of these personal communications, however, cheetahs' global status was the reference point at the NGOs and for tourists and voluntourists visiting Namibia if/when extinction was discussed. Cheetahs may be under threat when looking at the global context, but, as a Namibian official stated, "in Namibia, it is just not so."<sup>3</sup> In an interview, the Namibian official explained, "the irony of our time, is that we incentivize extinction." Downlisting species, the official continued, "threatens the direction of many of these organizations as they must keep things rare so that they can get funded." Because of this, the official added, "there is no incentive to take species towards being common... if your species is not extremely threatened, you're not getting money."<sup>4</sup> In regards to globally threatened species, the official noted, people tend to want a global solution to environmental concerns when wildlife management options vary depending on the context. This was the case with cheetahs and the global #RaceAgainstExtinction. Extinction, another Namibian official responded, "needs to be contextualized."<sup>5</sup> Because, the official explained, extinction claims serve a particular agenda depending on who is making the claims, "if it is an NGO whose life depends on saving the cheetah from extinction and that is how it has raised money for twenty, thirty, or forty years, the cheetah will be at the brink of extinction."<sup>6</sup>

The cheetah conservation NGOs in this study have been working on cheetahs' #RaceAgainstExtinction for thirty plus years. The NGOs' ongoing efforts have adapted to changes over social media by incorporating visual politics (e.g., #SaveTheCheetahs) in raising awareness for cheetah conservation. Political action to #SaveTheCheetahs means spreading the word and embedded in the social media posts and content is the idea that you are part of a shared goal. A voluntourist explained, "conservation has to get spread so more people know about it, with movies, social media, and so on.... find a way to make it fun and interesting!"<sup>7</sup> In an interview, a researcher described that over social media; environmental education, awareness of extinction, and other

<sup>3</sup> Interview 10/11/18

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Namibian official, 10/11/2018

<sup>5</sup> Interview 9/27/18

<sup>6</sup> Interview 9/27/2018

<sup>7</sup> Volunteer Journal

environmental concerns can “go straight out from the images, it’s very exciting.” As another researcher discussed, social media “is great for promoting things and for getting the message out there because everybody’s always on social media... If you want to bring awareness or something like that, it’s a fabulous tool.”<sup>8</sup> For one voluntourist, extinction was something “the world should know more about it and everybody should fight against it.” Voluntourists’ and researchers’ fears of extinction and ideas about conservation reflected a global perspective. Conservation, a voluntourist argued, is “a global issue, or at least ownership of the problem lies with the world, not just the hosting countries, e.g., cheetah conservation should matter to, and be addressed by, the whole world, not just Africa... If a species ceases to exist, it effects the whole planet.” Another voluntourist believed, “as a society we must work together to prevent this [extinction] from happening.”<sup>9</sup> These perspectives appeal to this abstract global unity and action over social media; monolithic ideas of what should be done to solve the crisis as opposed to looking critically at what is being done by cheetah conservation NGOs locally, globally, and online. As a researcher noted in an interview, “there’s so much misrepresentation and fake news and angled exposure that it just doesn’t give the complete picture for a lot of things.” And this is important when looking at the NGOs’ efforts to #SaveTheCheetah.

In Namibia, one voluntourist reacted to the horror of extinction: “I wish people would care more, instead of wasting time on politics.”<sup>10</sup> This statement illustrates the central issue addressed in this paper—the problematic interaction between the abstract and concrete/material reality of conservation politics and the way money and power is leveraged through global claims of extinction. The voluntourist’s frustration at ‘wasting time on politics’ indicates this disjunction and comes from the voluntourist’s experiences at the NGOs where urgent conservation actions were hindered by government regulations. And it is clear from the voluntourist’s statement whose interests should be prioritized. ‘Wasting time on politics’ infers that conservation is not political and is ultimately in service of the greater good, thus should supersede local political processes that are viewed by voluntourists as impeding the NGOs conservation efforts. Voluntourists, however, were not generally informed about Namibian conservation policy and practice, only the hurdles the NGOs must go through in order to carry out their conservation agendas. This voluntourist’s sentiment is one among others reflecting apolitical views of extinction that gloss over how asymmetrical power relations are created and reinforced through extinction narratives. Social media posts mirrored the voluntourists’ sentiments, reflecting ideas that social change can be realized if there are more people caring about conservation, more awareness of the issues, and more attention to the NGOs. The idea that political action for cheetahs can be done over Twitter or through global awareness of the issues provides a singular and privileged view of the complex reality of on-the-ground conservation politics in Namibia. Not only is this problematic but it confuses online ‘likes’ and ‘activism’ with effective on-the-ground political action and involvement.

Changes in social media have created new political communities online, and, in so doing, offering an increasingly larger space for cheetah conservation NGOs to mediate conservation politics and influence larger global audiences. In mediating conservation politics and, in extension, extinction online, power resides in the ability to harness and maintain both attention and money for cheetah conservation. As a Namibian official explained “many times they [NGOs] have the power because they have the money.”<sup>11</sup> This calls attention to questions about the flow of money and power in cheetah conservation and its influence in Namibia. One Namibian official spoke with me at length about politics,

power, and money in conservation. The official recounted tensions inherent in conservation when political relationships develop around environmental resources. The political part of conservation, according to the Namibian official, is that we have a common responsibility for the planet, similar to the common responsibility detailed in voluntourists’ sentiments on extinction. With that common responsibility, the official explained, political relationships have developed around these resources, as they have with cheetahs. While there is a common responsibility for the planet, the official noted, the responsibility is differentiated. What brings tension, the official continued, is what role the species has locally. The official asked, “if you bring in foreigners to manage or conserve a particular species, how is that perceived locally?” This question is important to ask in regards to global extinction narratives and cheetah conservation practice at the NGOs in Namibia and, in particular, voluntourism programs. Explaining how “power relations stems from information asymmetry,” the official went on to say:

There are different power relations that comes to play due to the information asymmetry in this equation, but also to the flows of money. They say money is power. So, if I’m the holder of grant to do conservation work, I also then have certain bargaining power. Is that with the community or the government or somebody else? Then comes the policy power. In that policy power, of course, can make or break a project. If you’re not aware of the policy issues and implications of your project you are not working within the realm of the policy... So, I think one is to be aware of these relations between power and information and all. And also, then that’s the question, who has enough power to sit in the circle of influence?<sup>12</sup>

Questions of power and power relations is of particular importance when looking at how cheetah conservation NGOs are circulating and amplifying the #RaceAgainstExtinction across the globe. The social media(tion) of global cheetah conservation, discussed in the following section, and the conservation experiences described by the international voluntourists visiting Namibia, work in tandem to shift political power from state to non-state, private conservation actors.

#### 4.2. Cheetah conservation politics #Online

On International Cheetah Day December 5, 2018, an informational photo was posted on Instagram. It implored followers to “please help spread the word, learn and share to #CelebrateTheCheetah.”<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, a purring cheetah video directed Instagram followers to enjoy the “fun clip” and “share and tag your friends to raise awareness for the plight of the cheetah.”<sup>14</sup> At that time, there were over 13,039 views of the post. It was one of many others claiming the cheetah “still needs our help if it is to survive and win the race against extinction.”<sup>15</sup> These posts offered a glimpse of what was circulating over Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter by the NGOs and amplified by global audiences in one day. While #InternationalCheetahDay draws more attention to cheetahs online, cheetah conservation NGOs are active daily over the platforms. Posts depict content ranging from global events to on-the-ground conservation efforts at the NGOs. Efforts that include feeding captive wildlife, baboon walks, and cheetah/carnivore feeds. Audio-visual representations show current research, voluntourist experiences, cheetah merchandise, global collaboration, and corporate sponsorships. The same social media posts directed global audiences to act by donating, posting, tweeting, and sharing. The focus of this section is on the spaces over social media where cheetah conservation NGOs engage the politics of extinction and compete for global attention and funding.

Social media is a tool cheetah conservation NGOs use to further their

<sup>8</sup> Interview 9/25/2018

<sup>9</sup> Volunteer Journal

<sup>10</sup> Volunteer Journal

<sup>11</sup> Interview 6/14/2018

<sup>12</sup> Interview 6/14/2018

<sup>13</sup> Cheetah conservation NGO in Namibia, screenshot by author 12/5/18

<sup>14</sup> ibid

<sup>15</sup> ibid

mission and broaden their user base. All cheetah conservation NGOs in this study are active on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and all circulate the spectacle of extinction. Cheetah conservation NGOs have their main page as well as pages for other locations, business ventures, and foci, both in Namibia and globally. Social media use varies between the NGOs; however, all have shared images and narratives of cheetah conservation and the extinction crisis over the platforms. While all NGOs have significant global reach, one stands out. This NGO in Namibia has affiliate groups and organizations in most US states as well as in multiple countries in Europe, Japan, Australia, and several in Africa. Most, but not all, of these chapters/affiliates have social media sites as well. Affiliate and voluntourism organizations/locations link to the main website(s) for information, content, and donations. Some of the sites include fundraising pages so anyone can support the NGO's mission by helping raise money on Facebook. These fundraisers are linked from personal Facebook pages to the NGO's main page and anyone can check and see how much money each fundraiser has made. For example, on March 9th, 2021, seventy-four online fundraisers collected \$80,636 US dollars for one NGO (accessed 3/09/21). Social media is also used across Namibia. Many groups and pages engage with local environmental matters, policies, and concerns, occasionally some also include information on cheetahs.

While the NGOs' global reach isn't incredibly large per se, the platforms do provide the opportunity for those numbers to expand if a post grabs attention and/or is amplified. This is why, over social media, attention is both a source of value and a limited commodity. In an interview a researcher stated that drawing attention to conservation is important, because, as the researcher explained, attention "will move on." The researcher discussed how "lion numbers, cheetah numbers, all of those things, again, can have these moments where they're hot topics, and then they kind of disappear and come back again." To the researcher, what was important was that there was a message to send out. Another researcher spoke to this from experience: "social media is one of the most powerful tools right now... one of the most powerful marketing tools."<sup>16</sup> Social media platforms have incredibly large user bases (see section 2.1) and provide increasing opportunities for the NGOs to reach broader audiences. The researcher quantified the global reach of one of the NGOs, explaining that "the average number of people that we reach per week is anywhere between 20,000 and 25,000 people." The researcher continued, discussing how the global reach depends on the images posted, if that week "we post more images of animals, baboons, cheetahs, or even the lions, that number normally does better... between 20,000 and 50,000 people." However, "when you do basically a mixture of both humans and animals, it's normally between 15,000 and 19,000 people per week." Not all researchers at the organizations knew how to use social media but it was explained that the photographers who came to the organizations did. What was nice about having photographers, a researcher noted, was "some of the people have got like two million followers on Instagram and Facebook...they're the ones putting the story up for us...it's amazing."<sup>17</sup> Another researcher mentioned working with film crews from BBC and National Geographic among many others. From data collected online, this can be said for all of the NGOs in this study. It is not only professional photographers that share cheetahs' story, tourists, voluntourists, researchers, celebrities, news organizations, and the global public share social media content as well. What links the stories and fundraising efforts are the hashtags (e.g., #SaveTheCheetah, #RaceAgainstExtinction, #Cheetahs, #Conservation etc.). People sharing the story can reach an exponentially larger audience the more shares, tweets, likes, and engagement by people and organizations with more followers, like National Geographic. Discussed in 2.1, this is possible through changes in social media and the operation of attention as a key resource. Cheetah conservation NGOs engage in the

politics that circulates as content where they must compete for visibility, money, and attention. As the next section explains, the Namibian political system functions independently of online cheetah conservation politics discussed here.

#### 4.3. Cheetah conservation politics offline

'Doing cheetah conservation' at the NGOs in Namibia can mean walking with baboons, cleaning enclosures (e.g., poop-based labor), going on game counts, caring for goats, and feeding resident carnivores (e.g., tossing raw meat over enclosures). Conservation work that also included luxury lodges, merchandise, various business ventures, and tourist activities (e.g., carnivore feeding, cheetah walks, cheetah runs, etc.). All are activities that help support and fund the work of the NGOs. Conservation practices can easily be justified to young multi-national voluntourists excited to get the chance to work closely with charismatic species. Voluntourists were generally uncritical of their experiences at the NGOs and the immersive structure of daily conservation work-work that ran up against government regulations. Through my own experiences at the NGOs, conservation work was all encompassing. Daily activities and regular conservation emergencies legitimized the NGOs' conservation narratives. All day, every day, the 'reality' of conservation at the NGOs was explained to the voluntourists while doing what the NGOs defined as conservation. While extinction wasn't a topic of daily conversations, the urgency of conservation was. In the journals, voluntourists detailed a singular, all-encompassing view of conservation, only to be complicated by offline conservation 'realities.' These conservation realities meant having to work within a regulatory framework instituted by the Namibian government. Voluntourists expressed their surprised at how much politics was involved in conservation. "It's very political" one voluntourist put in a bullet point. Another voluntourist argued: "conservation is not just going out and [saving] a single animal once in a while and then things will get better... It is hard work with politics and changing people's minds." A voluntourist wrote: "being in Namibia made me realize that conservation might be more complicated than it seems," explaining why: "it can be hard to find a solution that will make everyone (wildlife, farmers, government etc.) happy." Another voluntourist stated that conservation "should not be (but it is) up to governments to decide on."<sup>18</sup> The international voluntourists were quite explicit on where they think political power should be located and whose agenda should be prioritized in conservation in Namibia.

Government regulations were viewed as an impediment to conservation efforts at the NGOs by both the voluntourists and researchers. One voluntourist concluded:

...I've realized not only the importance of cheetah conservation (and conservation in general), but also the hard work behind it. I now not only see the challenges we have with the locals and poachers, but also with the state/government that also have other interests than conservation on their minds. A lot of interests has to add up and are unfortunately often in conflict and has to be worked out.<sup>19</sup>

Despite many conservation challenges facing cheetahs and Namibia's wildlife, some voluntourists argued the need for the cheetah conservation NGOs and the work they were doing. Another voluntourist wrote that the NGOs "will always come up against hurdles, money, legislation, and politics but we need projects like this." One of the hurdles that shaped voluntourists' and researchers' experiences with conservation politics was when immediate actions for conservation were thwarted by the MET. Actions that, for example, required the immediate translocation of wildlife rescued from persecution on private/

<sup>16</sup> Interview 11/22/2017

<sup>17</sup> Interview 9/3/2018

<sup>18</sup> Volunteer Journal

<sup>19</sup> Volunteer Journal

commercial farms. What might sound like good conservation work by the NGOs and a win – win for conservation, however, demands a bit more scrutiny. Translocations are a zero-sum game finding where rescued animals can be released, or if they can be released. Cheetahs, for example, often don't stay in national parks ranging predominantly on private/commercial farms. Rescuing one from one site usually means trouble for another, even if released on NGOs' property. The alternative is captivity or worse. Cheetah conservation NGOs have a bad reputation in commercial/game farming communities for releasing wildlife without notifying nearby farmers. Commercial farmers are not financially compensated for livestock lost to predation nor do they have voluntourists paying to help them. These challenges with locals, and MET's work to regulate the NGOs, frustrate multi-national voluntourists eager to participate. And acutely felt when researchers and voluntourists were denied the permits necessary to proceed. Translocating wildlife without a permit is illegal in Namibia.

Cheetah conservation NGOs must follow Namibia's laws regulating what can and can't be done on-site and off, regardless of the urgency. Subsequently, the voluntourists' understanding of politics picked up on the tensions between public and private conservation interests. What the voluntourists weren't aware of, when describing their frustrations dealing with politics, is that conservation at the NGOs is privatized and considered an economic activity by the government. Voluntourists are not generally provided information about Namibian conservation policy and practice, only the NGOs' conservation agenda. What is not explained to voluntourists is that Namibia, as one of the first countries in Africa to put conservation in its constitution, has put considerable effort into conserving its endemic species in the wild. Something Namibian officials take great pride in. Because the NGOs are private actors in conservation, this perspective is absent in voluntourists' statements. The NGOs' location on private property and in the private sector means institutional conservation practices are regulated by the state. The regulations, however, are not intended to impede the NGOs' conservation efforts. The MET does bring in the NGOs when their services are needed. But the NGOs are regulated for a reason. Namibian policy for large carnivores, in which cheetahs are included, is meant to monitor all organizations with captive animals on-site. All NGOs in this study have captive cheetahs and various other economic activities throughout Namibia. A Namibian official related that when the organizations "organize themselves as non-government organizations and they run volunteerism programs they say they are supporting conservation"<sup>20</sup>. The Namibian official explained that at the NGOs, that "is what goes into conservation work." The NGOs, the official continued, are "linked to a business entity, either on their farm or somewhere else." Subsequently, the NGOs in this study are considered "income generating sources"<sup>21</sup> and part of Namibia's private sector, not state-sanctioned conservation. When it comes to decisions, particularly regarding conservation policy, conservation organizations are consulted by the MET, but, at the end of the day "most of the laws are meant to regulate them."<sup>22</sup> The private sector attends meetings and workshops and can provide feedback but nothing in terms of directly influencing policy. Stated in one of the principles (2,3,4) of The National Policy on Conservation and Management of Large Carnivores in Namibia (Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2016), "the State recognizes civil society, including the private sector and Non-Governmental Organizations, as important stakeholders in the long-term conservation of large carnivores and shall consult, where necessary, with civil society to ensure the long-term survival of large carnivores" (7). A Namibian official explained, "scientists and researchers are not really policy-makers."<sup>23</sup> The official discussed that "some places they do a very good job if the organization is focused on

conservation of these animals." But, as another Namibian official said, there are "people hiding behind conservation to make money."<sup>24</sup> The Namibian official stated that there is a "fine line between what is said in the narratives and conservation."<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned previously and detailed in this section, cheetah conservation NGOs have established cheetah conservation as their business model. On privately-owned land in Namibia, any form of business practice can be carried out, barring any illegal activities of course<sup>26</sup>. And this does include conservation. Cheetahs are a huge "draw card"<sup>27</sup> for the voluntourists and for tourism; but, also for global audiences afraid of 'losing the species forever'. Raising awareness for cheetahs' #Race-AgainstExtinction draws both voluntourism and international funding to the cheetah conservation NGOs in Namibia, however, not political power or a seat at the table in decision-making processes in Namibian conservation governance. In an interview, a Namibian official brought up an important question regarding the role(s) of the private sector in conservation, in which cheetah conservation NGOs are a part. The official asked rhetorically "if there was equity in conservation?" Particularly, if the private sector is brought to the table, into this conservation conversation in Namibia, and the sector starts to make money, does money go to the community or does the money flow out of the community?<sup>28</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Social media and new technologies are continuously (re)shaping how social relationships and human-environmental relationships are perceived and spectacularized in new processes of accumulation, circulation, and control (Debord, 1995; Giroux, 2016). In discussing social movements, Tufekci (2017) explained that attention, rather than information, is the vital commodity. And in the struggle for power, it is attention that is the prize (Tufekci, 2017). The invasive logic of commercial social media platforms, Odell (2019) argued, keep us "in a profitable state of anxiety, envy, and distraction" (xii). And it is in this way extinction, as spectacle, is incentivized over social media. The NGOs engage in political power through awareness raising to amplifying media/public responses to influence rather than ground political power in the realm of policy, or, what Arendt (1958/1998) understood as, the political realm. It is ultimately the separation of power and politics in local and global cheetah conservation practice that presents what Debord (1995), Marx (1867/2013), and Igoe (2010, 2017) theorized as processes of alienation. In this paper, social media(tion) is the alienation of politics and political power.

In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1998) wrote: "when the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist" (20). What happens, then, if cheetahs' #Race-AgainstExtinction is no longer tweeted, posted, shared, or otherwise, circulated? What happens if global audiences stop paying attention? Will cheetahs be 'saved,' or will they have lost the #race? And, what happens in conservation if extinction loses its emotive power? The problem with mediating conservation politics over social media is that perceived action only works to integrate global audiences into the spectacular global extinction mode of production and not effective action in conservation. The emotive power of the word extinction in conservation draws attention away from important political contexts, critical perspectives, and expanding informational, economic, and power asymmetries. As this paper showed, the reality of cheetah conservation is that it is a business regulated by the state and extinction is both a pedagogical tool and a deliberate strategy used to leverage social,

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Interview 9/27/2018

<sup>22</sup> ibid

<sup>23</sup> Interview 10/11/2018

<sup>24</sup> Interview 10/11/2018

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Interview 9/27/2018

<sup>27</sup> Interview 6/14/2018

<sup>28</sup> Interview 6/14/2018



economic, and political relations over global social networks. The illusion of agency to act over the platforms does more than just funnel money into the NGOs, it circulates misinformation and pits globally threatened species against each other for visibility, attention, and funding. When the emotive power of extinction is used and, subsequently, incentivized to engage global audiences in local conservation crises and fund conservation NGOs, narratives of fear around losing a species are increasingly overriding narratives of social and ecological justice. At the same time, the urgency to #SaveTheCheetahs obfuscates the connection between conservation fundraising campaigns and broader structures of global capitalism, a system that is ultimately responsible for biodiversity loss and climate change.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Suzanne Brandon:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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