

GREEN APARTHEID:

Game viewing in White enclaves

The wildlife economy is flourishing in South Africa; tourists enjoy game-viewing in wildlife parks while more and more people are living on luxury ‘wildlife estates’. These are in effect White enclaves from which Black people are excluded, notes sociology professor Bram Büscher.

TEXT MARIEKE ROTMAN PHOTO ARMANDS PHARYOS / ALAMY



‘Live in a wild place you thought no longer existed!’ So begins the promotional brochure for Zandspruit, one of South Africa’s many wildlife estates. ‘In a spacious villa on Gazelle Street, where a gazelle occasionally turns up at the poolside. Or even a giraffe, if you’re lucky.’ This is the picture the brochure paints of a life in the midst of South African nature. The Zandspruit villa park is located in the village of Hoedspruit, on the edge of the famous Kruger Park. In 2016, South Africa launched a new strategy for combatting unemployment and biodiversity loss while promoting rural development: the wildlife economy, a business model that revolves around

wildlife. The wildlife generates incomes through tourism, organized hunting, game meat production and luxury villas amidst the wildlife. Happy nature, happy people – that’s the idea.

CLEANING

But it is mainly affluent White people who invest in Hoedspruit, where they buy land or a villa. Most of the work of maintaining, cleaning and guarding the area is done by Black South Africans. They don’t live here, but depart every night to return to disadvantaged areas dozens of kilometres from Hoedspruit.

Bram Büscher, professor of Sociology of Development and Change in Wageningen,

and his colleagues Lerato Thakholi and Stasja Koot, published a study earlier this year called *The new green apartheid?* They describe a new phenomenon in this article: apartheid in the wildlife economy. Many in South Africa like to think of apartheid as a thing of the past, but what Büscher and his colleagues saw in Hoedspruit led them to conclude that this is not true. Büscher has been researching socio-political aspects of wildlife conservation in South Africa for about 20 years. His earlier research focused on issues such as the relationship between violence and conservation, in relation to rhino poaching, for example, which is a big problem in South Africa, both in the Kruger Park and in



the private nature reserves around it. These days, both poachers and park rangers are heavily armed, and violent confrontations are a regular occurrence.

SAFE HAVEN

'I had been working in the Kruger Park for a while, and I sometimes drove through Hoedspruit. I saw that the town was growing rapidly and wildlife estates were springing up all over the place,' says Büscher. 'I was curious to know exactly what was happening, so I went there to do some preliminary research with a PhD student and a postdoc. The very first interview we did was revealing. We talked to a wealthy man who had set up several

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wildlife estates. He explained to us that the area was becoming a "safe haven", calling Hoedspruit "unique". There were an awful lot of racist undertones in that conversation: "safe" and "unique" actually meant "very few Black people live here". Pretty bizarre.'

This was the start of a five-year study on the

rapidly growing wildlife industry in South Africa, supported by a Vidi grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO). Büscher, Thakholi and Koot paid a lot of visits to the area, conducted more than 260 interviews and recorded the life histories of a number of older residents, in order to document how the area has changed. >

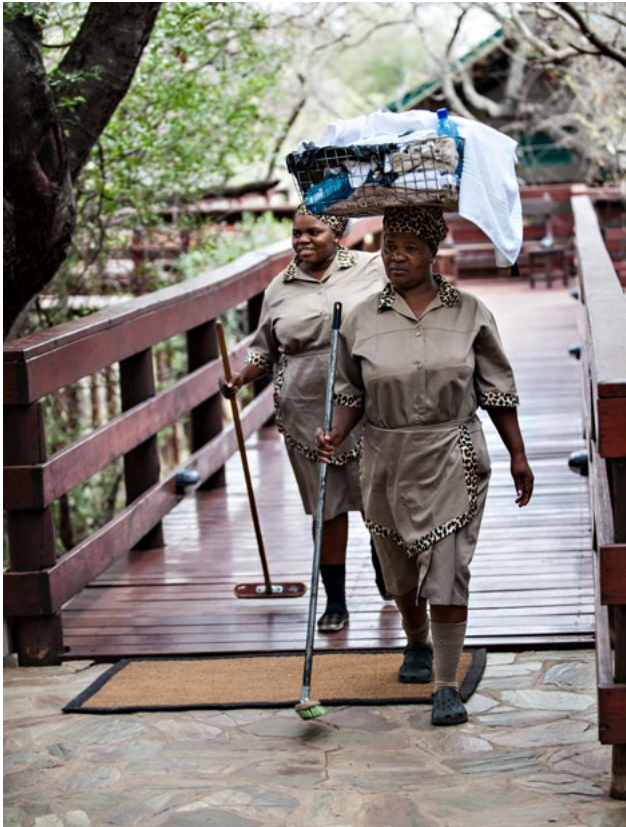


PHOTO ALAMY



PHOTO BRAM BÜSCHER

The construction workers, cleaners, shop assistants and gardeners who keep Hoedspruit going are mostly poor, Black South Africans who have to commute from far or live in the slum known as 'Plastic View' near the railway line.

They conclude that the Hoedspruit residents who benefit from the wildlife economy are generally affluent White people. The construction workers, cleaners, shop assistants and gardeners who keep the area running are mainly poor, Black South Africans who are underpaid and cannot afford to live in Hoedspruit. 'We don't claim that it was the intention of the White people in and around Hoedspruit to implement an apartheid system, but we must conclude that the effect of their activities and of the wildlife economy is that many of them are part of this new green apartheid,' write Büscher and his colleagues.

PRIVATIZING NATURE

The researchers are not alone in their findings. South African writer Sizwe Mpfu-Walsh writes in his 2021 book *The New Apartheid: 'Apartheid did not die; it was privatized.'* Racial segregation may not have been government policy since 1994,

but privatizing things like conservation and making them a business model has sustained big disparities in who has access to what, he writes. Mpfu-Walsh's book was also the inspiration for the title of the article by Büscher and his colleagues. 'We were looking for a term that could express what we were seeing. The term "green apartheid" has been used before by researchers looking at the locations of parks in South African cities. They are nearly always in White neighbourhoods, to which Black people still have little access except when they go there to work. We go further in our use of the term; primarily to assert in no uncertain terms that apartheid has not been eliminated, and that the country and people's rights are no less systematically unequal than they were before. What we didn't know yet was how the popular wildlife economy plays a role in that.'

The dominance of White, wealthy residents in Hoedspruit is seen by many of them

as something that must be maintained, the researchers write. The local council has made several attempts to launch the construction of social housing in the town, but this has been blocked by local parties and investors. Wealthy landowners told Büscher and his colleagues that they would rather not have the predominantly Black people who work in Hoedspruit move into town, for fear that would change its quiet, safe atmosphere. 'Poverty creates criminality,' one of them said. The article even speaks of a worsening of apartheid compared to the days of the apartheid regime, because in Hoedspruit the systems of inclusion and exclusion are largely invisible.

STRUGGLE FOR LAND

The researchers also state in their article that there is still heated debate about who the land actually belongs to. Dozens of land claims have been lodged in and around Hoedspruit, through which Black

residents are trying to regain their land. Black communities were driven off the land in the late 19th century, explains Büscher, so that white colonists could start farms there. Since the early 20th century, many farms west of the Kruger Park have been turned into wildlife reserves, which are still managed by rich White residents. In the new wildlife economy strategy, those reserves must not only be protected but also make money. And then the early 21st century saw the rise of wildlife estates: White gated communities.

Büscher explains that ever since the late nineteenth century, wildlife management has been used as an argument to give White communities access to lands that were already used or occupied by others. ‘That happened in North America too, and in other African countries such as Tanzania and Kenya. In many places, a lot of people have been chased off the land or turned into labourers. And that still happens.’ It is often difficult to do anything about it, he adds. ‘Because there is still a strong belief in the importance of creating protected areas where no people live.’

LIE DETECTOR

The inequality that is still so visible in Hoedspruit made a deep impression on Büscher. ‘For example, how readily they subjected people to lie detector tests. Rhino poaching is a big problem in this area, and armed guards drive around the reserves continuously. Many of them are Black South Africans too. A lot of employees are put through a lie detector test by their supervisors, to check that they are not infiltrators passing information to poachers.’

Büscher was particularly shocked by how systematic minor incidences of racism were. ‘At our first interview, the real estate magnate asked his servant to pour some more coffee. He called her Lerato, which

was not her name, but that of my WUR colleague. She commented on that, but he replied that it didn’t interest him. We saw many similar incidences, subtle things that implied that some people don’t matter. It reminded me of David Hughes, who wrote that disregarding others is also form of racism too.’

SOCIAL JUSTICE

What is the solution, according to Büscher? ‘We wrote a book about that: *The Conservation Revolution*. Nature conservation needs to be combined more effectively with social justice. In our view, labelling business models like the wildlife economy as sustainable seriously undermines the legitimacy of nature conservation, while perpetuating inequality.’

‘We are trying to think together with local Black South African wildlife managers and scientists about what would be the best options in this area for both biodiversity and local communities. One of the promising ideas, as far as I am concerned, is “convivial conservation”. Instead of keeping nature away from local people, we need to go beyond fence-building and look for ways in which people can live with nature better, shaping a new and equitable approach to nature conservation. We are now doing research in South Africa, Brazil, Finland, America and Tanzania in order to learn more about this.’ ■

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BRAM BÜSCHER

Bram Büscher has been professor of Sociology of Development and Change in Wageningen since 2015. He is also a visiting professor in Johannesburg and a visiting researcher at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He has been researching the socio-political aspects of conservation since 2003. Büscher has previously conducted research on the rise of rhino poaching and the militarized response to it, with a Veni grant from the Dutch Research Council, NWO.